

Sermon Given by

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Daniel 8 - "A bad night's sleep"

27 I, Daniel, was exhausted and lay ill for several days. Then I got up and went about the king's business. I was appalled by the vision; it was beyond understanding.

I'm hopeful that the effect of this vision on us will not be the same as it was for Daniel... that we will be exhausted by it and struck down ill for several days.

I suspect that the last little bit of the chapter we can easily echo; is there any one here, who if we were all being absolutely truthful, might admit that they are 'appalled' by the vision and find it 'beyond understanding'?

You will know that old adage about clergy that we are supposed to be six days invisible and one day incomprehensible. Well – I am praying that even without all the loose ends being sown up we will somehow be spared Daniel's conclusion by the time twenty minutes have passed.

Perhaps our necessary brevity will actually be a help to us... Because it stops us thinking that we will be able to get what Daniel saw taped. Maybe you noticed how in the first two verses of the chapter we are three times told it is a vision.

1 In the third year of King Belshazzar's reign, I, Daniel, had a vision, after the one that had already appeared to me. 2 In my vision I saw myself in the citadel of Susa in the province of Elam; in the vision I was beside the Ulai Canal.

That ought to guard us from thinking that we will crack a puzzle here in this chapter. No – visions are to be seen, not solved. So we shouldn't feel a pressure to find exact correspondences between the dates and times of Daniel 8 and our view of historical reality.³

I rather like that story about the rich man who once commissioned Picasso to paint a portrait of his wife. But when Picasso presented him with a cubist masterpiece, the horrified husband declared: 'That isn't how she looks at all.' Picasso nodded and asked if the husband could help him get a better understanding of the subject. The man took a passport photograph of his wife out of his wallet and gave it to Picasso. After studying it briefly, the artist handed it back and said: 'Small, isn't she'.

We can't look at a cubist masterpiece and interpret it adequately in a paragraph of prose. It can't be done and it isn't meant to be done.

And we can no more reduce Daniel 8 to simple prosaic proportions – it is at least partly beyond understanding. We are being called on to allow the big bold brushstrokes of the vision to move us as we see what Daniel first saw.

So let me read verses 3-8 again.

I looked up, and there before me was a ram with two horns, standing beside the canal, and the horns were long. One of the horns was longer than the other but grew up later. ⁴ I watched the ram as he charged toward the west and the north and the south. No animal could stand against him, and none could rescue from his power. He did as he pleased and became great.

⁵ As I was thinking about this, suddenly a goat with a prominent horn between his eyes came from the west, crossing the whole earth without touching the ground. ⁶ He came toward the two-horned ram I had seen standing beside the canal and charged at him in great rage. ⁷ I saw him attack the ram furiously, striking the ram and shattering his two horns. The ram was powerless to stand against him; the goat knocked him to the ground and trampled on him, and none could rescue the ram from his power. ⁸

The goat became very great, but at the height of his power his large horn was broken off, and in its place four prominent horns grew up toward the four winds of heaven.

There isn't much sense in analysing it too closely – we aren't given at this stage any moral steer as to whether one of the animals is good or bad.

It's just a raw account of power and violence and conflict and upheaval. And as it continues it becomes even more bizarre, in verses 9-10.

⁹ Out of one of them came another horn, which started small but grew in power to the south and to the east and toward the Beautiful Land. ¹⁰ It grew until it reached the host of the heavens, and it threw some of the starry host down to the earth and trampled on them.

Maybe we can visualise a ram and a goat fighting to the death, but a horn growing until it reaches the heavens, throwing them down and trampling on them – that surely is not something we can conjure up in our minds eye with any accuracy.

It's very clear in verses 11-12 that it is bad news

¹¹ It set itself up to be as great as the Prince of the host; it took away the daily sacrifice from him, and the place of his sanctuary was brought low. ¹² Because of rebellion, the host of the saints ^[a] and the daily sacrifice were given over to it. It prospered in everything it did, and truth was thrown to the ground.

Unmistakably bad – but Daniel isn't the only one who struggles to grasp the precise meaning.

¹³ Then I heard a holy one speaking, and another holy one said to him, "How long will it take for the vision to be fulfilled—the vision concerning the daily sacrifice, the rebellion that causes desolation, and the surrender of the sanctuary and of the host that will be trampled underfoot?"

¹⁴ He said to me, "It will take 2,300 evenings and mornings; then the sanctuary will be reconsecrated."

If I've been right so far on how apocalyptic literature works, then we must resist the urge to get out our calculators and work out what the 2,300 days means.

Well, we've done our best to see the vision, not to solve it – just by listening afresh to the dramatic content that flashed across Daniel's eyes.

But we can't leave it there because of the second half of the chapter – headed as it is in our version: The Interpretation of the Vision:

There is a heavenly interpretation to what Daniel saw. And I want to spend the rest of my time on two aspects of it. **The end to come and The animal to come**

¹⁵ *While I, Daniel, was watching the vision and trying to understand it, there before me stood one who looked like a man.* ¹⁶ *And I heard a man's voice from the Ulai calling, "Gabriel, tell this man the meaning of the vision."*

¹⁷ *As he came near the place where I was standing, I was terrified and fell prostrate. "Son of man," he said to me, "understand that the vision concerns the time of the end."*

¹⁸ *While he was speaking to me, I was in a deep sleep, with my face to the ground. Then he touched me and raised me to my feet.*

¹⁹ *He said: "I am going to tell you what will happen later in the time of wrath, because the vision concerns the appointed time of the end."*

²⁰ Twice it comes – if you want a meaning for the visions, verse 17. **The vision concerns the time of the end.** Verse 19 **the vision concerns the appointed time of the end.**

What follows however is much fairly immediate... verse 20 *The two-horned ram that you saw represents the kings of Media and Persia.* ²¹ *The shaggy goat is the king of Greece, and the large horn between his eyes is the first king.* ²² *The four horns that replaced the one that was broken off represent four kingdoms that will emerge from his nation but will not have the same power.*

²³ *"In the latter part of their reign, when rebels have become completely wicked, a stern-faced king, a master of intrigue, will arise.* ²⁴ *He will become very strong, but not by his own power. He will cause astounding devastation and will succeed in whatever he does. He will destroy the mighty men and the holy people.* ²⁵ *He will cause deceit to prosper, and he will consider himself superior. When they feel secure, he will destroy many and take his stand against the Prince of princes. Yet he will be destroyed, but not by human power.*

Clearly we aren't left guessing here: because Gabriel's explanation of the vision of the ram and the goat focuses on the various different empires which were lining up at the time. Medes, Persians, Greeks and then, as Alexander's empires get split between his successors, four more horns – one of which, Antiochus Epiphanes was to become a byword for his brutal oppression of God's people.

But that reassurance was there he will be destroyed. 2,300 mornings and evenings – and then bang on time: There will be an end...

And yet... there is that puzzling footnote to what he saw in verse 26

²⁶ *"The vision of the evenings and mornings that has been given you is true, but seal up the vision, for it concerns the distant future."*

And I assume that means not just the distant future as in Antiochus Epiphanes' day – but the really distant future – the end, when all the passing human kingdoms will bow the knee to Christ. The

point of recording the grim end-times under Antiochus Epiphanes is because that is **an end to point on to the end.**

So the characteristics of the Anti-God, Anti-Christ figure here are meant to alert us to all his successors – his destructiveness, his deceit, his arrogance, his sacrilege and blasphemy. Indeed, one of the phrases that describes his activity, ‘the rebellion or abomination that causes desolation’, was picked up by Jesus to describe both the end of Jerusalem in AD 70 and to illuminate the last days as well.

These types of evil are recurrent evils that come again and again in human history – and behind them stands the devil himself – the one of whom Jesus said that he ‘comes to steal and kill and destroy.’

It happened in Antiochus’ day and it will happen repeatedly until the end – **the end to come.**

The point is that because it has been predicted, we are assured that God is in control. We are not just subject to a turning wheel of fortune.

The guy who heads up the Christian union work nationwide is a man called Richard Cunningham and he wrote a brilliant editorial not long ago about the intolerance of our age, and the new strident atheism we are seeing. But his big illustration was actually drawn from Marxism.

He told the story of a Marxist at Speakers corner who used to give long speeches on how Marxism would liberate the masses. ‘When you get freedom’ (by which he meant Marxist Government) you will be able to drive cars like that,’ he said pointing at an impressive Mercedes cornering Marble Arch. ‘I prefer my bike’, shouted a heckler. ‘When you get freedom, continued the Marxist, ‘you’ll be able to smoke cigars like that, pointing to an opulent gentleman with a Havana cigar.’ ‘I prefer my fag’ retorted the same heckler as he blew cigarette smoke towards the speaker.

And so it went on, until the Marxist could bear his tormentor no longer: ‘When we get freedom’, he said to the heckler, ‘you’ll do as you’re told.’

But for Richard Cunningham that was an illustration of the sort of thing we are seeing in our own times. ‘Today it is not the old Marxists who are offering utopian freedom, but the new atheists: they sponsor bus adverts, and run children’s holidays – supposedly to promote freedom from religious superstition. And when the secular revolution has done its stuff, and we have freedom from faith-based schools, a ban on religious symbols in the workplace and freedom from all religious proselytizing, it’s the same again: then we will be ‘free to do as we are all told...’

My point is that the beastly empires are all much the same: they come and go – evil re-invents itself in many different guises and will continue to do so. And so if the powers of evil do increasingly assert themselves against us in the future we hold on to this – it won’t be forever. Remember **the end to come.**

And remember too as we begin to think about communion now the **animal** to come.

Because on the throne of God’s universe is not a ram or a goat, or some upstart horn on the head of a beast, but a lamb, looking as if it has been slain. A lamb whose blood is shed, not one who sheds the blood of others.

This vision was supposed to be sealed – and in the last book of the Bible, who is it who can break open the seals and set God’s final rescue plan in motion? It is the Lamb. The one who died as a sacrifice for our sins.

God’s rule, you see – is not with force of arms, where subjects are beaten into submission. It is a rule where the king offers himself in sacrifice for his subjects.

So in the animal parade of our chapter with goats and rams, it’s right for us to remember **the animal to come**, the lamb willingly slain but whom death cannot hold.

Conclusion

Well I wonder how this vision leaves you. Do you feel like Daniel in verse 27?

27 I, Daniel, was exhausted and lay ill for several days. Then I got up and went about the king's business. I was appalled by the vision; it was beyond understanding.

I’ve in fact bypassed one significant phrase there until now. Because the depression was only one aspect, wasn’t it. It is a telling detail that before long, Daniel got up again and went about the king’s business.

We might speculate that Daniel’s response could be – ‘well what does it matter; what is the point if I am a tiny cog in the whole show – why bother?’ But he didn’t think like that - Because he was aware of the end to come, it made every moment count. He went on serving in the court of a pagan king who was living on borrowed time. Significantly we’ve already read in Daniel 5 of the end Belshazzar’s reign. He saw this vision before that happened. And still he went about the king’s business.

Hold on to that to motivate you as you go about your business, whatever it is, tomorrow.

Instead of taking responsibility for running the world we need to leave that to God: it is his business and he does it much better than we do. Leave him to do his business and get on with serving him in our business.

The end to come means that every moment of our lives matters. And knowing better than Daniel did about the animal to come, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, only adds to that.

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)