

DANIEL 8 CBC 6.12.2020

Welcome back to the book of Daniel. Last time we were in ch.7 where God gave Daniel a remarkable vision of world history, climaxing in the rule of our Lord Jesus Christ. Today, in Dan 8, God zooms in on part of that history and unpacks it in more detail. Why? To equip Daniel to live well – and through Daniel, to equip us. Preparing people for what they'll face in the future is a wise thing to do – we've all done it (e.g., preparing a child for their first day at school). That's what God is doing in Dan 8 – telling us what to expect in a fallen world so that we won't be surprised by the things we encounter. This is God saying, *"Don't panic"* – and showing us why we can trust Him.

So let's look at Dan 8, which, like ch.7, is in two parts: a vision (vv.1-14) and then the interpretation (vv.15-27) given by Gabriel – the angel you probably know from the Christmas story.

Read Daniel 8 ...

A look at the past

Perhaps you're wondering what on earth you've just been looking at. Simple: ancient history! Isn't that exciting? NO?? You say you have too much on your mind to cope with a history lesson? OK, I'll try to keep it simple.

In his vision, Daniel is whisked off 200 miles east of Babylon to Susa, the capital of Persia (v.2) – modern day Iran. And he sees a ram with two horns, one bigger than the other – and a horn in scripture is regularly used as a symbol of POWER. This ram charges west, north and south and is totally dominant. And then a goat with one prominent horn charges from the west, moving so fast his feet don't touch the ground, and he smashes the ram. But at the height of his power, his horn is broken off and is replaced by four lesser horns.

And we don't have to puzzle about the meaning because it's given to us in vv.20-22: the two-horned ram represents the empire of the Medes and the Persians – a horn for each, with the bigger horn representing the Persians as the bigger partner. And their empire did indeed expand to the west, the north and the south (v.4). And the goat represents Greece (v.21), which smashed the Persian empire. And now we see why the goat had one prominent horn: Alexander the Great, whose empire expanded incredibly quickly – he'd conquered the world of his day by the time he was 26. And then, at the height of his power, he died aged 33 – the horn was broken off. And his kingdom was divided between four of his generals. This is what happened in history, and secular historians focus their attention on these things.

But God has different priorities. Neither the Persians nor Alexander get top-billing in Dan 8. That goes to someone who emerges further down the line, a sinister figure who is described in v.9 as "another horn which started small but grew in power ..." and as "a fierce-looking king, a master of intrigue" (v.23). That's where God puts the spotlight.

The reason is found in what this horn does – he grew in power *"towards the Beautiful Land"* (v.9) – the Promised Land. That's why the little horn is significant – he attacks God's people with demonic hatred.

Now let's pause for a moment to answer a question that may be occurring to you if you were with us last week. We saw then in Dan 7 "a little horn" who represented a figure opposed to God *at the*

end of history – the one who’s described in the New Testament as “the antichrist.” And you may be wondering if the little horn in Dan 8 is the same person – and the short answer is NO.

But why then does Daniel use the symbol of a little horn for two different people? It’s because they share the same characteristics – the same spiritual DNA. Remember that when the apostle John speaks of THE future antichrist, he reminds us that many antichrists have *already* come (1Jn 2:18). And in Dan 8, we’re looking at one of them.

You can see his style in vv.10-12 (read). By common consent, this refers to the Syrian king Antiochus IV, who ruled from 175 to 164 BC. You get an idea of his character from the name he gave himself: “*Epiphanes*” – God made manifest. And that arrogance worked itself out in his behaviour. He attacked the holy land and massacred thousands of Jews. And he tried to eliminate Jewish religion and to enforce paganism. He burned the Scriptures; killed anyone who had their children circumcised; trampled on the Sabbath; and especially attacked the worship that took place at the temple. In 167BC he stopped the morning and evening sacrifices that were offered as a way of saying “*We love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength*” – Antiochus wasn’t having that! He set up an image of Zeus in the temple, and sacrificed a pig on the altar. And it was such a blasphemy it became known as THE abomination of desolation. It provoked the Maccabean revolt – read the book of Maccabees if you want to know what happened. And eventually when the temple was cleansed they set up the festival of Hanukkah which is still celebrated today.

And Daniel sees that Antiochus’ attacks on God’s people are actually an attack on God: the little horn “*reached the host of the heavens ... and trampled on them*” (v.10) – because when believers are hurt, heaven is hurt.

In the face of such evil, no wonder the question is asked (v.13), “*How long?*” And the answer? v.14: “*2,300 evenings and mornings*” - that roughly corresponds with the length of the persecution under Antiochus, and then he died. But don’t let the figure of 2,300 mesmerize you and cause you to miss the point: it’s a period which is rather long but *limited*. When you’re living through such terrible days, you fear they’ll never end. But God is saying to us: “I’m always in control.”

See how this is underlined in v.24: this little horn “*will become very strong, but not by his own power*”; and v.25: “*He will be destroyed, but not by human power.*” It’s by the power of God that it’s permitted, and by the power of God that it’s destroyed. God is in control. The powers of darkness aren’t able to exalt themselves without the mysterious permission of God. And even though they seem to triumph for a while, God brings them down in His own time and by His own means. (Think of the cross of Christ: the powers of evil hurl themselves against God’s Anointed – and under God’s sovereignty they simply engineer their own downfall, as Christ redeems His people and is enthroned as King).

That’s a great word of encouragement, and it’s why the chapter was written: to remind us of something we see all through Scripture – that those who set out to destroy the people of God will themselves be destroyed by God. He rules.

A distant mirror

But Antiochus is ancient history! What does he have to do with us? Well, notice what Daniel is told in v.17: “*the vision concerns the time of the end.*” And this is repeated in v.19. Isn’t that

interesting? It seems that in Dan 8 we've got immediate history (the ancient stuff), but also a prefiguring of ultimate history. Short term and long term. Clearly what happened in Antiochus' day wasn't literally THE End. But it was a preview of the end, a pattern of opposition to God that will be repeated until it reaches its climax. Those ancient events were shadows of the last battle, when Christ will return and the antichrist will be broken "*but not by human power*" (v.25).

And that's what makes Dan 8 instructive for us as well as for Daniel. It shows us the spirit of antichrist that we'll encounter in varying degrees in every generation. Which means this isn't just ancient history; it's current affairs.

What are these anti-Christ characteristics? Self-exaltation; cunning and deceit; trampling on others; seeking to destroy people's ultimate loyalty to God; regarding truth as secondary to success. These things are anti-God and anti-God's people. And they never really leave the world, so Dan 8 is always a word for today. Every generation needs to ask, Where are the principles of this chapter surfacing today? How is the spirit of antichrist showing itself through political forces, popular movements, lobby groups, cultural trends, etc? We need to think about this if we're to stand against these dark powers and live wisely.

Let me give you a couple of examples of the spirit of antichrist in our world. Notice that he threw truth to the ground (v.12), and caused deceit to prosper (v.25) – because that's what power does. Beware of postmodern tendencies: your truth, my truth, anything but absolute truth. Baseless assertions. No need for evidence. Facts denied. The era of post-truth (the Oxford Dictionary word of the year in 2016). If you relativize truth, in the end *power* will determine what you believe and how you act. This is Daniel 2,600 years ago talking about power throwing truth to the ground – it could have been written this morning.

Here's another example of a very different way in which the spirit of antichrist manifests itself. Antiochus stopped the daily worship of God. What has stopped yours and mine? The spirit of antichrist doesn't always rely on persecution. Sometimes lulling us to sleep is even more effective. Or enticing us with this world's baubles. Or capturing our hearts with some other love that displaces our love for God. Or creating a whole cultural narrative that is suspicious of daily personal disciplines – that sees them as bondage – that believes being free means you only do what you feel like doing, when you feel like doing it. No wonder so many relationships are breaking down, including relationships with God. What has stopped *your* daily worship? Answer that question honestly, and you'll see where the spirit of antichrist is at work.

BUT AGAINST SUCH POWERFUL FORCES, WHAT ARE WE TO DO?

Look at how the chapter ends. v.27 (read). Wouldn't that be something if the sermon affected us in that way? Daniel's life was bound up with the Kingdom of God that he was utterly drained by the sight of how much evil God's people would have to endure. It sent him to his sickbed for several days.

But see where it ends: when God has given you insight into the reality of evil, and the way kingdoms rise and fall, what do you do? You go about your usual business (v.27). You do the tasks God has given you. But you're not the same person you once were. You've seen things, and it changes the way you live. When Daniel was marginalized by Belshazzar, this vision enabled him to have patience – to go back to the office where he'd been demoted and get on with his job as an

administrator. And when the time came for him to confront the king, the things God had shown him made him bold.

And YOU can live that way too, because God gave this vision for you also. That's why it's in the Bible. In the face of all the difficulties you can, with great confidence, go about the King's business.

Because as the apostle Peter tells us, we have this prophetic word made even more sure in Jesus Christ (2Pe 1:16-21).

Five centuries after Daniel, Gabriel was sent by God with another message about a horn. In passages that are read every Advent, Gabriel spoke to Zechariah in the temple, and to Mary in Nazareth (Lk 1:5-38). And the message concerned the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Saviour King that Daniel had already glimpsed in ch.7 – the Son of Man to whom was given God's authority to rule. And later Zechariah praised God saying, *"He has raised up a horn of salvation for us ... to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve Him without fear"* (Lk 1:69,74).

This world has many "horns" – rulers and powers – and they all come to nothing. But God also has a "horn" - a horn of salvation, our Lord Jesus Christ. And His kingdom will never end. And if He is YOUR King, you can face the world described in Dan 8 – the world we live in – and you can go about the King's business with confidence.

PRAYER: Heavenly Father, what a world we live in – but what a Saviour we have in Jesus! In Him there's grace that is greater than all our sin, all our weakness, all our fear. So help us this week by Your Spirit to give ourselves wholeheartedly to the King's business; and to you be all the glory. AMEN.

FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

Where do you see the spirit of antichrist making an impact on

- our society?
- our church?
- your own walk with God?

How does what you are learning from Daniel strengthen you to go about the King's business?