

The Round Church at
St Andrew the Great
Cambridge



10p

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 5th December 2004
by Mark Ashton

Daniel chapter 8

Lord of all history

“I was appalled by the vision; it was beyond understanding.” (v 27c)

I hope Daniel’s own verdict on his vision here in Chapter 8 will not also be your verdict on my sermon. Although the clergy are supposed to be well practised in being invisible for six days a week and incomprehensible on the seventh, I’m going to pray that you won’t find the next 20 minutes appalling and beyond understanding!

1. The Vision – Animal Farm (v8-12)

That dates Daniel’s vision to just about when Cyrus was uniting the Medo-Persian empire in preparation for its successful assault on the Babylonian Empire led by Belshazzar; and Susa locates the vision significantly in one of the capital cities of Persia, not in Babylon, where Belshazzar ruled and Daniel served him. There is about to be a major shift of power in the ancient Near East.

Three times we are told this is to be a vision. Visions are to be looked at; they are not to be solved. Forgive me a bit of repetition: but, if we treat some parts of the Bible as if they are a page from a puzzle book to be solved, we miss the point. Beware the ‘Here’s the key to understanding this passage’ attitude to Daniel 8. Other passages in the Bible (Ezekiel, Zechariah, Isaiah) can help us, but it is at least partly beyond understanding; just as we can’t interpret a great painting like Salvador Dali’s ‘Metamorphosis of Narcissus’ with a paragraph of prose. It can’t be done because it is not meant to be done.

So let’s look at this vision:

³I 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. ⁴I watched the ram as he charged towards 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.

⁵As 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. ⁶He came towards the two-horned ram I had seen standing beside the canal and charged at him in great rage. ⁷I 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. ⁸The 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 towards the four winds of heaven.

Once again we need to resist our prosaic, scientific desire to tie up every detail of the vision. Even with a comparatively simple drawing, we lose all sense of the picture when we examine the detail too closely. No, this was essentially a vision of power and movement, violence and conflict, of change and succession. There has been no hint that one of these animals was good and the other bad. But, as horn succeeds horns, the vision becomes both more puzzling and more sinister. *⁹Out of one of them came another horn, which started small but grew in power to the south and to the east and towards the Beautiful Land. ¹⁰It 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. We can picture a ram and a goat fighting to the death, but a horn growing until it reached the heavens, throwing down some of the starry host, and then trampling on them...that we cannot picture. But we can sense the escalating threat it implies: 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 his rebellion, the host of the saints and the daily sacrifice were given over to it. It prospered in everything it did, and truth was thrown to the ground.* And that must be bad indeed.

But the concern felt on earth at such a vision was reflected in heaven: ¹³*Then I heard a holy one speaking, and another holy one said to him, "How long will it take for 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."* Now, the moment we come across a number, don't let's forget everything we have said to ourselves about visions, and start getting all literal again. Apocalyptic literature is not about precise periods of time. It is not appropriate to use it for date-setting. It is about symbols and images. The march of human history presents a display of violence and change, of human vanity and arrogant ambition, such that even in heaven they cry out, "How long?" and the answer comes back, "Not forever." I was struck to hear Barbara Sherwood say in her talk to the women here after the incident in Nigeria when she was raped and her husband, James, was shot through the head, she found she could not watch the English TV news, knowing by experience the truth of what was being reported. "How long?" "Not forever." ¹⁴*He said to me, "It will take 2,300 evenings and mornings; then the sanctuary will be reconsecrated."* Not a promise, notice, that the little horn will be thrown down, but a promise that the sanctuary will be restored and reconsecrated. The sanctuary in the Temple, the Holy of Holies, symbolised that place where humans meet God. It was our meeting place with God. In some religious buildings they still call a part of the building the 'sanctuary'—it is thought to be the specially holy part, God's part. So a visitor might see a sign like this:

**Visitors Welcome –
But please respect the
Sanctuary.**

It is a place they don't want any old casual spectator just to wander into. But, of course, if it was really the place where humans could meet God, it is the place you would want to get everybody to go. You'd put up a sign like this, wouldn't you?

**Visitors Welcome –
Please be sure to enter the
Sanctuary!**

Squeeze everybody into the sanctuary! Now, of course, there is no longer any building or part of a building where we can meet God like that. The Old Testament temple was a picture of Jesus, and this verse finds its ultimate fulfilment in Him: ¹⁴*He said to me, "It will take 2,300 evenings and mornings; then the sanctuary will be reconsecrated."* The end of time is not going to be an event. It is going to be a Person. We'll return to that in a moment.

2. The Meaning – Gabriel's Explanation and Daniel's Struggle to Understand (vv15-26)

¹⁵*While I, Daniel, was watching the vision and trying to understand it, there before me stood one who looked like a man.* The vision needed explanation, and this time it was provided without Daniel having to ask for it. 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.

Daniel was overwhelmed by the thought that the living God was addressing him. I wonder if you and I ever sense that same terror when we open our Bibles? Daniel knew it was no light thing to be allowed to peep into the purposes of God.

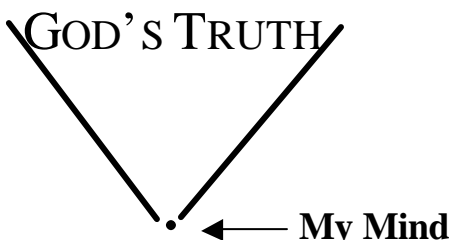
¹⁹*He said: “I am going to tell you what will happen later in the time of wrath, because the vision concerns the appointed time of the end.* ²⁰*The two-horned ram that you saw represents the kings of Media and Persia.—That was the empire that was about to bring Babylon to an end.* ²¹*The shaggy goat is the king of Greece, and the large horn between his eyes is the first king.—That would be Alexander, who conquered the entire Persian empire and so much more in his 20’s (I can’t wait for the film—with no Lord of the Rings and no Harry Potter this Christmas, Alexander is about all we’ve got to look forward to) (another unworthy aside). At his death, in his early 30’s, in 323 B.C., Alexander’s empire was divided among 4 of his generals: 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... Now we’re jumping two centuries to a ruler of one of those four kingdoms—Antiochus IV, Antiochus Epiphanes, who was a particular persecutor of the Jews. ^{23b}*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.—As must all human rulers be, who take their stand against the Prince of Princes.***

Nevertheless, it was a grim prospect for Daniel. He knew now where history was going—notice that was the target of the vision—¹⁷*“Son of man,” he said to me, “understand that the vision concerns the time of the end.”; ... ¹⁹He 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.; ... 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.”: the vision was to show Daniel where everything was heading (to the reconsecration of the sanctuary—(v.14); in the death of Jesus for our sins on the cross, and to a final judgement by no human power (v.26) of all who exalt themselves against God; that is history’s goal. But the vision also showed Daniel the painful and bewildering course of human history in the meantime with the swift rise and fall of hugely powerful and usually violent human regimes, sometimes indifferent towards God’s people, but often hostile to them (and we may live somewhere between those two here in the U.K. at the moment). No wonder the chapter ends with: 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.* And this is where we are going to say goodbye to this Book of Daniel which we have been studying since the beginning of October.*

Postlude: Farewell to Daniel

It is a sad place to leave him really: 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.* And so just three closing remarks:-

(i) Don’t let’s forget the impact this had on Daniel (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 suggested, when we studied Chapter 7, that apocalyptic writing like this is very important, because it humbles us and forces us to admit the poverty of our own intellects.



I used this diagram to make the point; and I quoted a commentator: ‘Apocalyptic preserves the mystery about ideas that are ultimately beyond our comprehension.’ Please don’t ever let’s think that you and I can get our understanding of God taped. If we think we have understood this vision we had better be careful, because Daniel had not.

(ii) Secondly, Daniel was not just puzzled by the vision, he was appalled by it: 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.*** To begin to know God's mind for human history is a heavy burden for a human being to bear. It made the holy one in verse 13 cry out "**How long will it take for the vision to be fulfilled...?**" And we are bound to take up that cry "How long?" Awareness of where history is going and why the human race exists gives rise to all sorts of dissatisfaction in our hearts. Don't those of us here who are Christians find that as we face another Christmas season? The tawdry commercialisation, the orgy of sensuality and sentimentality that trivialise any vestige of its real meaning—don't they make us heavy-hearted as we face another Christmas here in Cambridge in the midst of a culture that wants every drop of self-satisfaction that it can possibly squeeze out of Christmas, so long as it does not have to face up to the God who sent His son to be the Saviour of the world? Oh, I think we can sense a little of Daniel's dismay. But we should not give way to it, because, thirdly...

(iii) Daniel inevitably had a view of history without Jesus—well, not entirely without: Jesus had appeared for a moment on the clouds of heaven in Chapter 7, and there are hints of Him here in Chapter 8. (Remember it is these later chapters of Daniel that the N.T. writers get excited about, because they find far more of Jesus here than they do in the earlier stories of fiery furnaces and lion's dens. So here at St Andrew the Great we've undoubtedly got this preaching series wrong. None of the N.T. writers could have let us stop at the end of Chapter 8. Good for HUB, and any home group that is persevering to the end of the book!) But you and I (if we're Christian believers) do not have to view history without Jesus. We know that the end and goal of history is not so much an event, as a Person, the One who said, "***I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End***" (Rev 22:13). So we do not have to look on to the end—because we can have an experience of Jesus (who is the end) NOW! He came and dwelt among us at that first Christmas. He will return one day in glory. In the meantime, notice how Daniel got up and went about the king's business in v.27, and so can you and I, inserting a capital K into the middle of the verse (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.***), because we have seen the end. We know Him as a Person. We know the end of everything, even in the midst of a Cambridge Christmas. It is a Person who is actually the reason for the season, a Person you and I can know and serve. So we can be less dismayed than Daniel was!