

War of the Gods

Messages from the Book of Daniel

Message 9

Battle of the Beasts

Daniel 8:1-27

Why Predict the Future?

If you knew for sure that at some specific point in the future you would experience terrible suffering, what would help you to endure it? For example, suppose you are going to be in a terrible automobile accident and be paralyzed from the waist down. What will help you to get through such an experience? Having good medical insurance? Having plenty of money to buy a motorized wheelchair and other expensive equipment and provide for all your needs? Having good friends to comfort you? I hope you are thinking that Jesus will be your comfort and support. But you know, Jesus can seem far away and irrelevant. I do not mean that He is. Jesus has promised to be with us always. He has sent us His Spirit who constantly helps and comforts us. But honestly, sometimes we do not *feel* as though Jesus is present. We have been studying the book of Job in the Sayre Park Bible study this semester. Job was a good and righteous man who lost everything – all his wealth, all his possessions, all his children, and even his health. Job had a powerful faith in God. He was sure that God was doing something important by making him suffer so terribly. But not knowing what God was doing made his suffering all the worse. Job's continual cry was, "Why? What is Your purpose in making me suffer so?" He could have borne it more easily if he had known what God was doing.

Tonight's chapter covers the same ground as chapter two and chapter seven. It is a prophecy of the future kingdoms in the Mideast. More detail is added, but by now if you are a careful student of the Bible you may have noticed something about Daniel's prophecies that distinguishes them from those of the other prophets. All the other prophets were mainly concerned to alert God's people to their sin and call them to repentance. Predictions of the future served this larger purpose. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Amos, and all the other prophets warned Israel of God's coming judgment on their sin, and called them to return to God. Daniel does not do this. He simply tells the future. Why is this? Was it simply to titillate his audience? Was Daniel a supernatural version of Isaac Asimov? Is the latter half of this book the ancient equivalent of science fiction?

Some scholars point out that Daniel's success in predicting the future with pinpoint accuracy proves the supernatural nature of the Bible. This is unquestionably true. I do not mean that everyone who reads the Bible believes it. But I mean that the evidence for the Bible's divine origin is so clear and overwhelming, people can deny it only by suppressing the evidence. And of course many people do suppress the evidence. But the problem is not with the Bible – it is with people who made a prior decision not to believe God's word.

But I do not think God's primary reason for including these prophecies is to convince later generations of the trustworthiness of the Bible. A more important reason is to reveal God's nature. As we said last week, God is Lord of history. God is able to predict history because He has planned it. God's claim to sovereign rule includes everything – the good, the bad, the weak, the strong, and the future. As Jesus said just before He ascended to His throne in heaven, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth." Now the fact that Jesus has all authority does not mean that He is responsible for sin and wickedness. Evil men hurt and destroy of their own will. But somehow – I do not know how – God works their evil desires into His plan.

Before Daniel's day, all nations had their own gods, and they believed their gods ruled in their own

territory. Battle on earth was a manifestation of a battle between the gods, and the strongest god won. Nebuchadnezzar thought that by defeating Israel, his god had defeated Israel's God. His problem was that Israel's God kept interfering in his affairs. In the end Nebuchadnezzar confessed that Israel's God was supreme in all heaven and earth. These visions further prove that God rules all nations – not just Israel. God is sovereign over the history of the whole earth.

But I think there is an even greater reason for these visions. In tonight's passage we look more closely at a difficult period in Israel's history. The reason for this vision is to show, when trouble comes, that God is in control, and He will bring the suffering to an end. There will come a day when this vision will sustain God's people through persecution and enable them to remain faithful.

Ram versus Goat

So let us look at the vision itself. This took place in the third year of Belshazzar's reign. This was before the fall of the Babylonian Empire. Daniel was still in Babylon. But in his vision he appeared to be in Susa, one of the capitals of Elam, which is what the Jews called Persia. The Ram represented the Persian Empire. This empire was a combined realm of the old Medean kingdom and the kingdom of Persia. Medea was older, but Persia eclipsed her in power. Medea and Persia are the two horns of the ram, with Persia's the stronger. In 559 B.C. Cyrus the Great came to the throne of Persia. He soon incorporated Medea into his rule, then embarked upon a campaign of conquest. He defeated the Lydian Kingdom of Asia Minor in 546 B.C. and overthrew Babylon in 539 B.C. Cyrus' son conquered Egypt, extending Persian rule from Africa to India. The ram pushed west and north and south, and no one could withstand him.

This vast empire endured for 200 years until Alexander the Great defeated Persia in 331 B.C. Alexander was a military genius who came to the throne in 336 B.C. and conquered the whole civilized world in 13 years. Like a goat flying across the earth, his army swept across the land and into India. The power of Persia crumbled before his onslaught. Then at the peak of his power, Alexander died and his four generals each took part of his empire. The single horn of the goat was replaced by four horns. Cassander took Macedonia, Lysimachus took Thrace and Asia Minor, Ptolemy took Egypt and Palestine, and Seleucus took Syria. These four kingdoms endured for centuries, but neither had the power of Alexander.

Then something big happened. It was in "the latter time of their kingdom". So we are still talking about these four Greek kingdoms, successors to Alexander's empire. A little horn arose, but it grew very large. It extended its rule east and south. It gained control of the Glorious (Beautiful) Land. The angel explains this was a shrewd and cruel king. He did not possess great power, but by cunning and treachery he expanded his sway. As his power increased he became increasingly arrogant, even to the point of attacking the host of heaven and Prince of princes. But finally he was destroyed.

This is the heart of the vision, so let us take a closer look at its elements. First, the little horn. Did you wonder if this is the same little horn as the one we read about in chapter seven? They are not the same. Both are kings which arise and do mischief. But the little horn in chapter seven arises from the fourth beast – Rome. This one arises from the third beast – Greece. The angel Gabriel tells us this is a king. He is not a powerful person, but by craft he becomes powerful. He is fierce, sinister, scheming, and destructive. He will be able to destroy the powerful and the holy people. He is cunning and deceitful, and by treachery he expands his rule. Finally he shall attack the Prince of princes.

Next there is the Glorious Land (Beautiful Land). This is a strange term. The only other place it appears in the Bible is in chapter 11 of Daniel. Now there were many beautiful places in the ancient world. Which does this refer to? Considering that this vision came from God, and it came to Daniel, a Jew, the most logical meaning would be the land of Israel. If we are thinking in God's terms, the land of Israel is where He chose to dwell. That is where God's temple was. That would certainly give it preeminence.

Then the horn grew up to the host of heaven and to the stars. At first this might seem to refer to angels and celestial bodies. But we have already established that this little horn is a Greek king ruling part of Alexander's empire. What would it mean for a man to cast down some angels and stars? A better approach is to ask what is a host. This word is used throughout the scripture for an organized band. On earth it is an army, and that is how this word is translated in most Bibles when it is used for human beings. In heaven it is used for angels and stars. But it is frequently used for the army of the Lord. (Exodus 7:4; 12:41) Now note that in Daniel God is called the Lord of heaven. Eight times in this book this terminology is used. In chapter two when Daniel went to Nebuchadnezzar to tell him his dream, Daniel used this name. "But there is a God in heaven who reveals secrets, and He has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days." (Daniel 2:28) In chapter four, after Nebuchadnezzar returned to sanity he said, "Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven." (Daniel 4:37) One of the purposes of Daniel is to show that God is not a tribal deity, ruling over Israel alone. God rules over heaven and earth. This concept is reinforced by speaking of Him as the God of heaven. So if God is ruler of heaven, and His people are His host, then we can speak of them as the host of heaven.

It makes sense to think of this king rising up to attack the people of God. This happened throughout history. Then it also makes sense to see the stars as the leaders of God's people. Then, as now, we use stars as a metaphor for celebrities and high figures. Isaiah and other prophets used the sun, moon, and stars as symbols for leaders of a nation. Putting this all together, we see this treacherous king invading Palestine and attacking God's people and their leaders.

Not content to stop there, this king will attack the Prince of the host, stop the daily sacrifices, and trample the sanctuary. Who is the prince? Is he the leader of Israel? Is he the high priest? Gabriel clarifies this. He is the Prince of princes – in other words, God. An attack on God's people is an attack on God, but even more so an attack on the sanctuary. This can mean nothing other than the temple, where the daily sacrifice was offered. This king will pollute the temple for 2,300 days. Then the temple will be cleansed and restored to its proper use.

There is one last element of this vision – the reason. Verses 12 and 23 tell us that all this happened because of transgression. Apparently God's people grew lazy and careless. Their worship grew cold, so God allowed persecution to come upon them.

The Little Horn

The events described in this vision happened with startling precision. From Alexander's death in 323 B.C. until 199 B.C. Palestine was ruled by the Ptolemaic dynasty in Egypt. All things considered, the rule of the Ptolemies was relatively benign. In 199 B.C. the Selucid king Antiochus III seized Palestine from the Ptolemies. The Selucids were more eager to continue Alexander's plan to establish Greek culture in the whole world. This process of Hellenization was fiercely opposed by some of the Jews who intended to continue their own customs and laws. Other Jews were more accommodating. In 175 B.C. Antiochus IV ascended the throne. He took the title Theos Epiphanes, "God Manifest", and is thus commonly known as Antiochus Epiphanes.

Antiochus Epiphanes pressed ahead with the policy of Hellenization. At that time Joshua was brother to Onias III, the high priest. Joshua, who used the Greek name Jason, bribed Antiochus to depose Onias and make him the high priest instead. Jason then began to accelerate the introduction of Greek customs in Judea. Three years later Jason was deposed by Antiochus and another Hellenized Jew took his place as priest. Jason raised an army and attacked Jerusalem. This turmoil provoked Antiochus to intervene. He robbed the temple, and later set the city on fire. He ordered the death penalty for anyone who worshiped the Jewish God. He erected heathen altars throughout the land, and dedicated the temple to Zeus. His worst atrocity was to sacrifice a pig on the altar in the temple.

Finally a rebellion broke out among the Jews. An elderly priest refused to participate in the pagan sacrifice. He proceeded to kill a Jew who attempted to do so, along with the king's official, and destroyed the pagan altar. He preached the glories of Jewish heroes of the past and urged revolt. The nation rallied around him. His son Judas led the troops, and against all odds, killed two Greek generals and routed the whole Greek army. Antiochus died one year later. The number of days from the beginning of this turmoil to its end – 2,300!

Lessons of the Little Horn

I hope you appreciated this little history lesson. But I know that most of you, except maybe Dan and Grace, did not come here to learn ancient history. The precision with which this prophecy came true is amazing, but there must be other reasons for it than to dazzle us with future-telling.

The reason for this prophecy was to encourage the faithful Jews in a time of great suffering. Antiochus Epiphanes terrorized the Jews. Imagine the shock and horror of seeing a pig sacrificed on the altar in the temple to holy God. Think how degrading it was to be forced to sacrifice at pagan altars. It was a terrible time. The pressure to act Greek was so strong, some men even undid their circumcision to ease the persecution. What should faithful Jews make of such torment? How should they respond? If you can put yourself into their shoes, it would genuinely seem as though the world was coming to an end. The world was indeed coming to an end, but not just yet. The coming of the Messiah was still over a century away. The faithful would need to hang in there for while longer. It would be much easier to persevere if they knew in advance that God had planned this suffering, that He had planned a fixed time period for it, and that it would end at a specific time.

A large part of Job's suffering was not knowing what God was doing. He did not know if he would suffer for a month, or a year, or a century. He did not know if he would recover or die. And God was not talking just then. It was a great comfort and encouragement to these Jews to know that their suffering was all part of God's plan. That did not make it any more pleasant, but it did make it more bearable. The torment of seeing the temple desecrated could be endured more easily if they knew that God would restore it eventually. So Daniel's visions were key to preserving a faithful Jewish nation for the coming of the Messiah.

There is an important lesson for us here. You can not find anything in scripture which predicts your specific circumstances, but the lesson of this passage applies to all of us. God rules nations and history. Wicked men rise, but God controls them. He limits the damage they do, and He brings their destruction to an end. Someday you may find yourself a hostage in Iraq. Perhaps you will lose your job because you were faithful to your Lord. Maybe you will lose all your possessions in a terrific hurricane. You do not know what the future holds. But you know that God knows. He not only knows, He also plans and controls the future. And the result of history will be your salvation if you trust in Jesus. Paul taught this in Romans 8:28-39.

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose...What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?...For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:28-39)

Learn this lesson. Remember and believe that God loves you. Do not let any sort of hardship discourage your faith in God who died for you.

There is a second lesson in this passage. The cause of this period of persecution was transgression. The prophets warned God's people over and over. From Enoch to Malachi they rebuked sin and called God's people to obedience. Finally God sent the Babylonians to destroy Israel and purge out sin. For 70 years the nation was in exile. Then God raised up Cyrus the Persian to allow the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. But it was a fitful process. They got discouraged and had to be reminded to get a move on. God sent the prophet Haggai to encourage the Jews to finish the temple. Then there was the wall. God sent Nehemiah to rebuild the wall. But he found that the people mistreated each other. They broke the Sabbath and intermarried with the foreign nations. The last prophet was Malachi. By Malachi's time the temple and city were rebuilt and the sacrifices were being offered, but it was all routine. The heart of the people was not in it. They thought that God would bless them for offering the sacrifices, even while they divorced their wives and skimmed on their tithes. Listen to Malachi's warning to these Jews.

“Behold, I send My messenger, And he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, Will suddenly come to His temple, Even the Messenger of the covenant, In whom you delight. Behold, He is coming,” Says the LORD of hosts. “But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner's fire And like launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver; He will purify the sons of Levi, And purge them as gold and silver, That they may offer to the LORD An offering in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem Will be pleasant to the LORD, As in the days of old, As in former years. And I will come near you for judgment; I will be a swift witness Against sorcerers, Against adulterers, Against perjurers, Against those who exploit wage earners and widows and orphans, And against those who turn away an alien – Because they do not fear Me,” Says the LORD of hosts. (Malachi 3:1-5)

Our day is much like Malachi's. Our churches are wealthy, but careless. As long as you love Jesus you can find a comfortable place in church. Sexual immorality is just as rampant in the church as outside it. The divorce rate is the same. The level of giving is scandalously low. Our cities are dying and no one cares. Each person pursues his own pleasure and prides himself on being born again. We are dangerously like the Jews who grew corrupt in Malachi's day and thereafter. We must repent lest God purify us with some catastrophe.

But finally the end came. God sent the Messenger of the Covenant. He took upon Himself the fire that we deserved. He purified Israel and created the church. If you believe in Jesus, you will inherit eternal life. I cannot promise you that you will escape all suffering in this world, but I can promise you that Jesus will never forsake you. So turn from your sin and believe in Jesus.

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