

The Dream of the Ram and Goat

Daniel 8:1-27

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan](#)

February 8, 1998

I'd invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to Daniel, chapter 8, as we continue our study of this great book. We said last week we've entered into the second half of the book. When we moved to Daniel, chapter 7, the vision has expanded as the first six chapters of the book are basically a biography of Daniel and his friends explaining their own individual contests and conflict with the kingdom of the world. As we move through Daniel 7, all the way to the end of the book, we see a larger picture, the picture that is actually the backdrop to the life of Daniel. And that is the conflict between the forces of evil in this world and the kingdom of God. Let's hear God's holy word in Daniel, chapter 8.

Daniel 8

Father, we again come before You in a perplexing passage. A passage which speaks of great events in cryptic terms. Yet we know this passage is for our spiritual edification. Edify us by Your spirit. Apply its truth to our hearts. We'll give You the praise and the glory. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

What do you do when you are being faced and even overcome by the forces of evil in this world? Perhaps it is through the subtle pressure that you face in the business and professional world that you are combating the forces of evil. Maybe there's temptation to compromise or to downplay your commitment to Christ in order to succeed in your business or your profession. Perhaps you are being taken advantage of or being asked to do what is unethical or perhaps you are being discriminated against in your profession precisely because of your commitment to Christ. Well, perhaps your struggle with evil is in the life of your family. Your spouse is unfaithful, or a parent has disappointed you or a child has strayed from the Lord. What do you do? What do you do when you are faced with evil in this world and it seems to be overcoming you? The wicked seem to be prospering while the righteous are not remembered and are trampled down. What principles and promises do you cling to? Where do you go for guidance and comfort in that setting?

Well, Daniel 8 is a wonderful beginning to an answer to exactly those questions. In the very last chapter, Daniel, chapter 7, we came to the second half of the

book of Daniel and we found that chapter to be both puzzling and exhilarating. And we suggested that it may even be the central chapter of the whole book because in that book Daniel, whose mind certainly is on the restoration, has lived his whole life in the hopes that God is going to restore His people back to their land. He read in Isaiah that the children of Israel who had been sent into exile would be brought back to Israel. And he read in Jeremiah that the time of the captivity would be seventy years. And his whole life looks forward to that moment when God is going to restore His people to the land. Surely that is the big picture in a life in which Daniel would devote himself to public service. Surely at his individual level his great goal was to keep his integrity and to serve faithfully and to be a witness in a pagan land. But the big picture of his life, surely that was to see the people of God restored to their land.

I believe that the whole point of Daniel 7 through 12 is for God to expand Daniel's horizons and to show him that there is a bigger picture than he ever imagined before. Though he thought the big picture of his life was the restoration of the children of Israel to the land, He is going to show Daniel, God is going to show Daniel, that there is something bigger that He is doing in the events of world history. And I think that is precisely why He comes to passages like Daniel 7 and Daniel 8. And we'll see more of these before we're done, as He tells them all these strange stories about kingdoms and empires that come in days after Daniel is long gone. I mean, what does that have to do with Daniel? He's going to be dead and gone before Alexander the Great does his great conquering work over the whole of the earth. He's going to be dead and gone before the Roman Empire is in its place. He's not even going to see the end of the Persian Empire as he knew it at that time. Why tell these things to Daniel unless God wants to reveal something about Himself to Daniel, and something about His plan in history, that is far beyond anything that Daniel could ever imagine. And that means that even when we can't understand the details of this prophesy, it is very practical for us because in it, it will attend to the main messages. We will see God giving us a bigger picture than the specific events of our individual lives.

In Daniel, chapter 8, the vision that we have recorded here also, just like the vision in Daniel, chapter 7, occurs in the reign of Belshazzar. In fact, it happens just like that last vision long before that fateful feast in which the handwriting on the wall occurred. And by the way, this vision provides a clue to us as to why Daniel could be so decisive and so authoritative when he walked into that hall and saw the handwriting on the wall. Without hesitation Daniel says, 'Your kingdom has been put to an end.' Well we know now, having just read Daniel 8, that Daniel had had this vision before he went into that hall. He knew that the kingdom of Belshazzar was going to be brought to an end. It was just a matter of time. The Lord hadn't told him when it was going to happen, but He had told him that it was going to happen. And when he went in and saw that handwriting on the wall it was like the Lord flashing a neon sign saying "Daniel, now." All he had to do was to say, "This is it, Bubba." And that's precisely what he did in that context. God had promised restoration through Isaiah and Jeremiah, but Daniel

would have his vision taken far beyond simply the events of the restoration to the people to God's land.

As we look at Daniel 8 tonight, I simply want to note that verses 3 through 14 describe for you, they record for you, the vision that Daniel saw. Verses 15 through the end of the chapter, verse 27, record the interpretation of this vision by Gabriel.

Now let me say about this interpretation that the interpretation is short on specifics and it's long on over-arching themes. It's interesting that even those themes Daniel would apparently not have been able to discern on his own without the angel Gabriel himself being sent from God to interpret them. So, we ourselves should be careful about making overdrawn pronouncements about the specifics of this prophecy. If it took Gabriel to explain this to Daniel, then who are we to suggest that we know more specifics of this prophesy than did the angel Gabriel himself. Again, we will aim to look at the big picture tonight as we recall Daniel's vision. God again is clearly concerned not simply to supply Daniel with facts about the future, but to reveal himself to Daniel and to show him the outlines of His great plan in history and to give him encouragement in his own service.

I. The Ram with the Two Horns: the Persian Kingdom

If you'll first look with me at verses 1 through 4 and at the interpretation of verses 1 through 4, which you will find in verses 15 through 20. Here we have the vision of the ram with two horns, and we're told explicitly in verses 15 through 20 that that ram with the two horns is the Persian Empire. The image of the ram represents the Persian Empire. We even know from extra biblical sources that the ram often times depicted Persia in the ancient world. The butting or the pushing or the moving in all directions which the ram is described to do indicates that the Persian kingdom is expansionist. It's all-embracing, it's irresistible. This ram is going in every direction gobbling up people and nations around it. And this vision again explains Daniel's authoritative interpretation of the handwriting on the wall, because we are told this kingdom will be brought to an end. And so it was simply a matter of timing. Not a surprise to Daniel. There is practical application for us even in that story of the ram and the two horns because we ought to speak and act boldly like Daniel spoke and acted boldly. What enabled Daniel to speak and act boldly is that he knew that his God was in control of the events of the world. Daniel was able to look Belshazzar in the eye and face him down because he knew his God ruled. We ought to know that, too, because our God does rule. The key is believing it enough to stand boldly and to act courageously. This is one of the secrets to singing the Lord's psalm in a strange land: believing that He rules the events of history, and remembering that He rules history in righteousness. If we will believe that, we will be able to stand in the day of temptation.

II. The Goat with the Horn between the Eyes: the Greek Empire of Alexander the Great

Notice the second vision, in verses 5 through 8, and then its interpretation in verses 21 and 22. We have a picture of a goat with a horn between its eyes. And that picture is a picture of the great Greek empire of Alexander the Great. The notable horn, the conspicuous horn between the eyes is a clear reference to Alexander the Great. Alexander the Great was a general in the Greek army at the age of 21. He had conquered the world as far as India by the age of 26. You remember the reference to the goat who covered land without touching it? That is a reference to the speed of the conquest of the great king. He was dead after living a debauched life at age 33. The conqueror of the world at 26, dead at 33. This ram described in verses 1 through 4 is overthrown by the goat. That is, the Persian Empire is conquered by Alexander's Greek empire and it's very interesting, if you look at verses 6 and 7, you see the picture of a disastrous defeat sustained by the ram: "The goat came up to the ram that had the two horns which I had seen standing in the front of the canal and rushed at him in his mighty wrath and I saw him come beside the ram and he was enraged at him and he struck the ram and shattered his two horns and the ram had no strength to withstand him." It's very interesting that in 334 B.C. Alexander the Great met the forces of the Persian Empire at the Granicus River. Alexander had 335,000 men. Big army. The Persians had 100,000 foot soldiers and 10,000 cavalry. Alexander rushed them in the river and killed 20,000 Persians and lost 100 of his own soldiers. He absolutely destroyed the Persian army and there we see the breaking of the ram's power.

But immediately afterwards we are told that the large horn, Alexander, is broken and four horns replace him. These represent the division of Alexander's Greek kingdom. But in this vision immediately the attention shifts to the little horn. The little horn that grows towards the east and towards the glorious land. This little horn is going to represent one of the small kingdoms that comes out of Alexander's kingdom. But it's the focus now of the vision.

Isn't it interesting? Alexander, if we were writing a strict history textbook, would be the person in this chapter that most interested us. He did the greatest conquest, he had the greatest impact. This little horn would not have been our interest. But from God's perspective, that little horn is the focus of the vision and that reminds us that God views history differently than we do. He measures nations by how they treat His people, and this little horn who represents Antiochus Epiphanes and the Syrian Empire were going to do great damage to the nation of Israel and to the people of God. And so it is the focus of the vision from now on. Because what is important in history as far as God is concerned is what is happening to His people.

III. The Little Horn: Antiochus Epiphanes

And so we move to the third vision in the passage, and you will see this described in verses 9 through 14, and interpreted in verses 23 through 27. The little horn represents Antiochus Epiphanes. One of the four divisions of Alexander's Greek empire was Syria, and Antiochus was one of the kings in the dynasty. Let me just give you a description of what Antiochus did to the Jews during his reign. He came to power in 175 B.C. and he gave himself the name, *Theos Antiochus Epiphanes*, which translates 'The illustrious God, Antiochus.' Although there were others in his own day who called him Apemineas, which meant the *madman*. He was power hungry. He sought to expand the dominion of his nation to include Palestine and that brought him into conflict with those who ruled Egypt. In Jerusalem he replaced the high priest with a man of his own choosing. He invaded Egypt and while he was in Egypt a rumor of his death circulated amongst the Jews and there were great celebrations. Efforts were made to reinstate the genuine high priest while he was away. When he came back, he accused the people of rebellion, savagely attacked Jerusalem, and executed tens of thousands of Jews. Forty thousand he killed in a space of three days. Others were taken captive. He entered the holy of holies in the temple and he sacrificed a pig on the altar of the burnt offering. He defiled the temple precincts. He took the furniture and he established a traitor as the high priest. In 168 B.C., after his efforts to take Egypt were foiled, he again vented his rage on the Jews. More than 20,000 of his soldiers massacred the Jews who were assembled to worship on the Sabbath day, the temple was left without sacrifices, religious practices were non-existent, a statue of Zeus was placed in the temple and human sacrifices were made on the altar. Circumcision was forbidden. He made the Jews eat unclean meat and the Sabbath and other feast days were profaned. That was Antiochus Epiphanes.

Now I want you to note three aspects of the vision about Antiochus. First of all, if you'll look down in verses 15 and following it is stressed that it was important for Daniel to understand the vision. But we're told in verse 17 what that means. That doesn't mean that Daniel needed to understand all the details, dates, places and names to which vision referred. Look at the end of verse 17, "Son of man, understand that the vision pertains to the time of the end." What was important, was for Daniel to understand that this vision referred to the end of the days of Antiochus.

Secondly, what did it mean then for Daniel to understand the vision? Is it supposed to entail the days at the end of the time of Antiochus? What did it mean for him to understand the vision? Not to know the dates and the times, but to know the nature of the conflict between the forces of evil and the forces of God and to know the causes of that conflict. Here's what Sinclair Ferguson says, "Daniel's vision will give him some understanding of the nature of evil and the reasons that it must be destroyed if the kingdom of God is to last forever."

Thirdly, Daniel is told that this vision relates to events which are many days in the future. Notice again that Daniel is deeply moved, even when he is told that this will not happen in his lifetime. You remember when Hezekiah was told that his kingdom would be sacked, but it wouldn't happen in his lifetime? His response was great relief. When Daniel finds out that this will not happen in his lifetime, we are told that he became sick for days. This shows you the heart of Daniel. Daniel was not a man about building his own kingdom. Daniel was a man who was concerned for God's kingdom and the thought of God's people existing under this type of persecution broke Daniel's heart. Sinclair Ferguson again says, "What distinguishes Daniel's spiritual leadership from so many spiritual leaders of our own day is very simple. He was seeking to build God's kingdom, not his own." From a personal point of view, he would have been satisfied to live in obscurity so long as the work of God was not obscured. In fact, that was all he really treasured and this explains why he was so distressed in the face of this unfolding vision. His life was physically and emotionally bound up with the lasting prosperity of the kingdom of God. Like Charles Spurgeon he could say, "Let my name perish, but let the name of Jesus Christ endure."

Now that's a great lesson for us at the time of our Missions Conference. You're going to be called upon to pray for and support and give to help Christians that you are never, ever going to meet in this life. And the measure of the grace of God in your heart is going to be seen in how much you care about them. We heard today about a Reformed University Ministry at the University of Washington in, of all places, Tacoma. And yet this congregation of believers, most of whom will never set their feet upon that campus, is giving to support that work. That reflects the spirit of Daniel, and I pray that we're all captivated with that kind of an insight. That we have such a heart for the people of God wherever they are, and whenever they are, that we care about them. We're ready to give of our substance, of our time, of our support and to support them in prayer. And to care when they are persecuted and to care when they need people to preach the gospel to them and to give them pastoral care. That is a wonderful sign of a work of grace and that's exactly the kind of man Daniel was. He heard that the people of God were going to suffer under persecution, and he was sick to his own stomach. That's the kind of Christians we ought to be. Daniel's zeal for the kingdom was not restricted to the time frame in which he would participate.

Let me also point to you one thing that we learn at the end of Daniel, chapter 8. Read with me there in verse 27: "I, Daniel, was exhausted and sick for days. Then I got up again and I carried on the king's business. But I was astounded at the vision and there was none to explain it." Isn't it interesting? He's sick, he's overwhelmed by this vision. What does he do when he's done? Does he go off and have mystical experiences? No. Does he withdraw from the world and wait for the second coming? No. He goes back to work. Daniel's response to seeing what the future holds is to live a holy life and do his duty. John Wesley was asked by a man one day, "Mr. Wesley, if you were to die this time tomorrow,

what would you do in the remaining twenty-four hours?" He pulled out his itinerary in his pocket, he read it to the man and he said "That is what I would do." He would do his duty. Until the Lord came again. Glen Kenecht, the former minister of First Presbyterian Church in Columbia, South Carolina, was approached to contribute a sermon to a book which was a collection of sermons and it was given the title, this collection of sermons, "If I Only Had One Sermon To Preach." And the editor of this volume, a famous preacher said, "Dr. Knecht, would you give the sermon that you would preach if it were going to be your last sermon?" And if you look at this collection by the way, you will see that these preachers clearly pulled out the best sermons that they had ever preached, including him. Glen Knecht, however, pulled out his next Sunday's sermon. He discussed this and prayed over it and talked with his staff and he said well, I guess if that's the sermon that I'm going to preach the next Lord's Day, it better be the last sermon that I'm willing to preach if I'm going to die. It was his sermon on tithing that year. You know, all these glorious sermons on the finished work of Christ and the second coming and the virgin birth, and here's his sermon on stewardship. But what consistency. I guess if that's the sermon I'm going to preach next Sunday, that better be the sermon I'm prepared to preach if it's the last sermon of my life. Duty is the response to seeing God's control of the future. Holy lies. Christian duty in service.

Let me close with a few words of application. One thing that we learn from this passage is that evil always and inevitably has a tendency to overstep itself. First, there is the fall of the Persian Empire. Then there is the fall of the Greek Empire. Then there is the fall of Antiochus in the Syrian Empire. Over and over, evil, no matter how brilliant, no matter how intelligent, no matter how powerful, oversteps itself. Why? Because sin is transgression and transgression is overstepping the law of God. And when you break the law, the law breaks you. And so sin always oversteps itself. It cannot perpetuate and even though it looks like the evil of the world is prospering, it cannot last long. That is the first thing that believers need to do when they are facing evil in this world. Remember that evil cannot stand because evil always oversteps itself. That's our first encouragement.

The second one is this. We see from this passage that the strongest and greatest of men are weak without God. Sin and guilt renders them incapable of self-control and their lack of self-control eventually destroys them. Have you ever read the lives of some of the great musicians? They devote themselves in hours and hours and hours of rehearsal to perfect and to discipline and take absolute control over one part of their faculties. If they are pianists, they have a command over their hands that is unbelievable. If they have different instruments, they develop different capacities and they master those capacities. But isn't it interesting how often those same people who master self-control in one area completely neglect it in another. And their lives are destroyed and eventually their talents are destroyed because they don't have any capacity for self-control in any other area, except the one that they've concentrated on. Same thing happens to politicians. Brilliant, strategic and yet they manifest no capacity for self-control in

some areas of their life. And eventually that area destroys them no matter how talented they are in another area. I will not even draw any points of analogy. We must remember that sin destroys itself. Lack of self-control destroys itself. We must remember that when we face evil in this world.

Finally, we see in this chapter a consistent pattern of Satan's opposition to God's work in His people's lives. Look at verses 11 and 12. There you see what Antiochus Epiphanes did when he took over in Israel. He removed the regular sacrifice, he threw down the sanctuary, and he flung truth to the ground. He drew them away from the regular sacrifice. The sacrifice reminded the people of God, that there could be no fellowship with the living God apart from sacrifice. It pointed to the finished sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ. Isn't it interesting that the very first thing he did to war against the people of was to get rid of that sacrifice. Listen to what Sinclair Ferguson says: "Satan encourages us to conform to different standards, all of which involve the repudiation of the cross of Christ. Beware of anything which purports to be biblical Christianity that doesn't emphasize the necessity of Christ's sacrifice for our forgiveness or teaches a style of discipleship that avoids the daily bearing of the cross. Such teaching does not come from above, it comes from below. The first place that Antiochus began was to take down the sacrifice.

The second thing that he did was to throw down the temple, and in the new covenant the temple is represented in the fellowship of the living fellowship of the people of God. And notice how Satan comes and he attempts to bring disunity by whatever means amongst the people of God so that true communion is broken. He makes one part of the body jealous of another. He spreads dissent and unbelief in one part of the body. He causes people to break out in jealousy and covetousness towards one another. He breaks the fellowship of the body and finally, notice that he introduces deceitful teaching and wrong thinking into the church. He throws down truth, he flings down truth. These are the strategies of Satan. As we face evil in this world, what should we do? We should be on guard for those strategies. He never changes. He's doing the same thing now that he did then. We must be prepared for it. What's our response? In a world of evil, even when we're overcome, even when it seems that evil will triumph, to live holy lives, to do our duty, to remember that God rules in history and to be on guard for the devices of the evil one. Let us pray.

Lord help us. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

©2013 First Presbyterian Church.

This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template.

Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the [First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement](#).

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine*

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).