

Daniel 8:1-27 God is still in control

Introduction

This vision is the third major dramatic vision recorded that encompasses lengthy sections of history within its compass. Daniel chapter two records a vision given to the powerful pagan king Nebuchadnezzar with its incredible image made up of different metals and then clay. Its range covered from the Babylonian empire all the way to God's eternal kingdom indicating that no matter how powerful any human empire may be it is destined to fall and lose its prominence as others did before it and after it. Daniel chapter seven is remarkably similar to chapter two but this vision was given to Daniel a devout believer who is given more explicit detail of God's superintendence of human history and also a second heavenly figure (Jesus) who accompanies the *Ancient of Days* and is central to the carrying out of His purposes for humanity. As we explained at the time the links to the book of Revelation are clear and lead us to the final triumph of King Jesus as His return will draw history as we know it to its close. The vision of Daniel seven was given in a context of great uncertainty as Nebuchadnezzar's inexperienced grandson assumes the throne. In essence God assures His servant that His earlier revealed plans will happen on schedule. Nothing in the bigger picture has changed despite the increasing chaos visible in the Babylonian empire. The vision of Daniel chapter eight took place two years later possibly a few weeks prior to the collapse of the empire. The armies of Cyrus the Persian are on the move and Babylonian forces have melted away like the Iraqi Army disappeared in northern Iraq in 2014 when the small Islamic State jihadis swept across several provinces of that country eventually capturing the major cities of Tikrit and Mosul. What is particularly sobering in Daniel's latest vision is that the Babylonian Empire no longer exists. It has vanished into past history. No wonder he is very shaken and disturbed (Daniel 8:27). In a matter of weeks or a few days the events recorded in Daniel chapter five will take place confirming the end of the Babylonian Empire.

'Can you repeat that slowly so that I can get it clear in my mind'. All of us at some time or other have uttered similar words with respect to information someone has spoken to us on the phone or directly to us in conversation. It might be directions to that person's home in a city with which we are unfamiliar. They have rattled through the instructions faster than we could write it down so we asked for the information to be repeated. Maybe even further clarification is sought but it is simply the quantity of new information to be assimilated that is the issue on that occasion. Here there is something more serious to grasp. A change of ruling empire means war and great uncertainty about how things will affect the lives of individual people. The severity and extent of the violence predicted in the scenes displayed in Daniel eight is enough to disturb anyone. It is not only leaders of nations and armies that will be affected. Ordinary people will suffer a great deal, and especially the Jewish people back in their own land. Is anyone going to be in control? More importantly with all this crazy violence and killing going on in country after country –is God still in control of His world? What is most sobering for us today is that just over 2,500 years later very little has changed with respect to human behaviour. Technology has advanced beyond anyone's expectations, but sin and violence and evil are as pervasive as the era described in Daniel chapter eight –and in the same part of the world as well! Yet the point of Daniel being granted this vision by God was to reassure him that despite what he would see before His eyes God is still in control of His world and His purposes will be fulfilled. His kingdom will be established on time and as He planned it. Do you and I need to hear that today in our generation?

1. The Revelations of the Ram (Daniel 8:1-4, 15-20)

(a)Setting the scene (Daniel 8:1-2) *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.* Daniel is in Babylon but in his vision he was taken to Susa (Shushan), capital of the Persian Empire, 220 miles east of Babylon and 150 miles north of the Persian Gulf in south-west Iran, where in later years Esther and Nehemiah were to live. It was in this place that the plans were drawn up for the destruction of the Babylonian Empire. Here the Ulai canal was built 900 feet wide to link the Choaspes and Coprates Rivers. Here is a significant clue that this dream was written down in the sixth century BC. Greek and Roman historians have consistently noted that from Persian times the administrative boundaries were redrawn and Shushan became the capital of a new province of Susiana and Elam was restricted to the territory east of the Eulaeus River. The earlier cuneiform records show that Shushan was part of Elam province both in and before the Babylonian Empire came to prominence. Liberal scholars who date the book four centuries after the events described need to explain how a second century BC author in Israel could have found out this kind of detailed information. (Dale R. Davis, *Daniel*, p. 106) God's Word can be trusted in big things because it is trustworthy in the smaller details!

Daniel was not the only person transported in visions to another place. Ezekiel his contemporary had a similar experience recorded in Ezekiel 8:1-4: *In the sixth year, in the sixth month on the fifth day, while I was sitting in my house and the elders of Judah were sitting before me, the hand of the Sovereign Lord came on me there.*² *I looked, and I saw a figure like that of a man. From what appeared to be his waist down he was like fire, and from there up his appearance was as bright as glowing metal.*³ *He stretched out what looked like a hand and took me by the hair of my head. The Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven and in visions of God he took me to Jerusalem, to the entrance of the north gate of the inner court, where the idol that provokes to jealousy stood.*⁴ *And there before me was the glory of the God of Israel, as in the vision I had seen in the plain.* This kind of experience is exceptional and is not something we should be seeking. However, God works in extraordinary ways to accomplish His work and we must acknowledge that He is free to operate outside our comfort zone! What is important is that there is no context so unpromising on earth that God cannot be at work by His Spirit. We must, therefore, never neglect to pray and expect God to work in situations of concern, even if we have no idea how it may be possible for our prayers to be answered.

(b)The dramatic revelation (Daniel 8:3-4) *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 it charged towards the west and the north and the south. No animal could stand against it, and none could rescue from its power. It did as it pleased and became great.* The ram was the symbol of Persia and was found on coins from that era and on sculptured pillars in Persapolis. Initially the alliance of Medes and Persians was dominated by the Medes but gradually under Cyrus the balance of power shifted decisively to Persian control. In 550/549BC Cyrus broke his allegiance to Astyages the Mede establishing a joint state. It is probable that this had recently taken place prior to Daniel receiving this vision. He was bound to wonder if Isaiah 45:1 was in sight of fulfilment with its reference to a deliverer called Cyrus. Isaiah in the eighth century BC recorded these words in Isaiah 44:24b-45:5a: *I am the Lord, the Maker of all things, who stretches out the heavens, who spreads out the earth by Myself,*²⁵ *who foils the signs of false prophets and makes fools of diviners, who overthrows the learning of the wise and turns it into nonsense,*²⁶ *who carries out the words of His servants and fulfils the predictions of his messengers, who says of Jerusalem, "It shall be inhabited," of the towns of Judah, "They shall be rebuilt," and of their ruins, "I will restore them,"*²⁷ *who says to the watery deep, "Be dry, and I will dry up your streams,"*²⁸ **who says of Cyrus, "He is My shepherd and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, 'Let it be rebuilt,' and of the temple, 'Let its foundations be laid.'"** ***This is what the Lord says to His anointed, to***

*Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of to subdue nations before him and to strip kings of their armour, to open doors before him so that gates will not be shut: ² I will go before you and will level the mountains; I will break down gates of bronze and cut through bars of iron. ³ I will give you hidden treasures, riches stored in secret places, so that you may know that I am the Lord, the God of Israel, who summons you by name. ⁴ For the sake of Jacob My servant, of Israel My chosen, I summon you by name and bestow on you a title of honour, **though you do not acknowledge Me.** ⁵ I am the Lord, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God. What amazing words! The question in Daniel's mind, though, must have been: How can this relate to us when we Jews are captives in the neighbouring Babylonian Empire? We too can wonder how the details of God's plans can happen in our lives today. The visions Daniel received from God were to reassure him, and by application future generations of believers, that God knows what He is doing. Isaiah 55:8-11 reminds us of this fact: *For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,* declares the Lord. ⁹ *As the heavens are higher than the earth, **so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.*** ¹⁰ *As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, ¹¹ so is My word that goes out from My mouth: **it will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*** We only ever see part of God's bigger picture. We trust our heavenly Father to accomplish His purposes even if we cannot see quite how it will happen. So often as we have experienced in this congregation and likewise in Panmurefield Village Church none of us could have imagined the events of the last ten years a decade ago. Prayers were sincerely prayed and God's people genuinely sought His will and we came to where we are today. Let us also be humble enough to accept that what God accomplishes in us and through us over the next ten years will also be different to what many of us are currently expecting to be the case. Like Daniel at times we will be confused and concerned but always remember that God is in control! Incidentally Daniel 8:4 reveals Cyrus' military strategy in advance of his actual operations. He took the territories surrounding Babylon before attacking the heart of the empire which he was to capture with amazing efficiency and with comparatively little bloodshed. Here is clear evidence of divine sovereignty yet equally clear evidence of human responsibility in the person of Cyrus. If God goes to this length to work in the life of a man of another faith background, how much more will He care for His children. Jesus made the same point in Matthew 10:29-31: ⁹ *Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. ³⁰ And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. ³¹ So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.* Each of us is very precious to our heavenly Father.*

(c) **The explanation from Gabriel** (Daniel 8:15-20) Gabriel in Daniel 8:15-20 will explain what this part of the dream means. In essence the point being made was that God is in control of His world. 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 **The two-horned ram that you saw represents the kings of Media and Persia.*** Notice even a man so wise as Daniel was only trying to understand ... what God had revealed to him in this vision. In Ezekiel 14:12-14 we know that his contemporary Ezekiel reckoned him one of the three greatest men in their nation's history: *The word of the Lord came to me: ¹³ 'Son of man, if a country sins against Me by being unfaithful and I stretch out My hand against it to cut off its food supply and send famine upon it and kill its people and their animals, ¹⁴ even if these three men – Noah, **Daniel** and Job – were in it, they could save only themselves by their righteousness, declares the Sovereign Lord.* If such an able

believer has this kind of struggle then ordinary believers like you and me will also have our struggles. Yet the clear lesson from this vision and the rest of the book of Daniel is quite clear –remember this – God is still in control!

2. The Glimpses of the Goat (Daniel 8:5-8, 21-22)

(a) The Glory of Greece (Daniel 8:5-8, 21-22)⁵ *As I was thinking about this, suddenly a goat with a prominent horn between its eyes came from the west, crossing the whole earth without touching the ground.* ⁶ *It came towards the two-horned ram I had seen standing beside the canal and charged at it in great rage.* ⁷ *I saw it attack the ram furiously, striking the ram and shattering its two horns. The ram was powerless to stand against it; the goat knocked it to the ground and trampled on it, and none could rescue the ram from its power.* ⁸ *The goat became very great, but at the height of its power the large horn was broken off, and in its place four prominent horns grew up towards the four winds of heaven...* The symbol of Greece is a goat. The first colony of Greece allegedly was founded in a location chosen by a goat, after an oracle apparently suggested that a goat –guide should lead them to the right place. The city was called Aegae (Goat City). The waters around Greece to this day are called the Aegean Sea (Goat Sea). Many Macedonian monuments have figures of goats on them. Alexander the Great is the individual in great rage who led the small army of 35,000 men through the Granicus River in 334BC emerging from the water unexpectedly to attack the 100,000 footmen and 10,000 cavalry killing over 20,000 of them for the loss of only one hundred Greek troops. He followed it up with victory at the battles of Issus the following year and at Guagamela in 331BC (Sinclair Ferguson, *Daniel*, p. 170). The vivid and dramatic imagery of Daniel 8:6-7 is a remarkably accurate picture of the mauling of the much larger Persian forces by the incredibly mobile and energetic Greek forces that were financed by their confiscation of the cities and countries their forces overran. For twelve amazing years Alexander and his army conquered every nation within reasonable travelling distance of their homeland. Alexander became the General of the Greek Army at the astonishingly early age of twenty-one and had emerged victorious from the major battles he would fight by the age of twenty-six. He was dead by the age of thirty-three as a result of a fever and the consequences of living a wild life of sexual depravity combined with excessive consumption of alcohol. Alexander's gifting for military leadership was outstanding; his discipline of his army was excellent, but his self-control was abysmal, completely lacking and in the end it destroyed him. Reflecting on his story the question rebounds to you and me. What is your weakness and mine? Where do you or me lack self-control? For some people it is pride that leads to their downfall; for others the mishandling of money; another segment of the population is ruined by sexual misconduct – that may be legal but in breach of God's moral law. For others relationship difficulties limit their potential. Some people struggle to control their tempers or fail to exhibit grace-filled lives in their dealings with other people. Never think you are immune from personal failure. Too many Christian leaders and other church members are no longer in frontline Christian service today because they believed they were invincible; that they would not fail in a particular aspect of their character or conduct. God placed us in churches for a reason to enable each other to stand for Jesus and to lift each other up when we fail and help us get back on track with our Christian discipleship.

(b) The division of the Greek Empire (Daniel 8:21-22) *The shaggy goat is the king of Greece, and the large horn between its 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* Alexander died suddenly in 323BC. After a couple of decades of uncertainty the Greek empire was divided. Macedonia, Thessaly and Greece was ruled by Cassander; Thrace and Asia Minor (Western Turkey) by Lysimachus; Babylonia, Media and the region of Syria that extended down to Egypt by Selucus; and Egypt, Cyrene (Libya) and Cyprus was under the

control of Ptolemy. They held the territory *but will not have the same power* (Daniel 8:22b). Several centuries earlier God had revealed to His servant the outcome of the affairs of these rulers. They were entirely responsible for their choices and gave no thought to God. However, God is still in control! On the surface it looked like the absence of God in supporting His people through some of these trials but that would be to misunderstand what was going on. Then and now despite what we think might be going on God never abandons His people.

3. **The Horrors of the Little Horn** (Daniel 8:9-14, 23-27)

(a) **The identity of this evil man and his reign** (Daniel 8:9-12) ⁹ *Out 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. 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. ¹¹ It set itself up to be as great as the commander of the army of the Lord; it took away the daily sacrifice from the Lord, and His sanctuary was thrown down. ¹² Because of rebellion, the Lord's people and the daily sacrifice were given over to it. It prospered in everything it did, and truth was thrown to the ground.* Antiochus IV of Syria was the eighth in line of the Selucid rulers and reigned in Syria from 175-164BC. He had a lust for violence and conquest attacking Egypt on the southern boundary of his territory on several occasions unsuccessfully; he had greater success in wars in places like Armenia. However his hatred for the Jewish people knew no limits. Without going into the details verse nine tells us he advanced towards the south (Egypt); east (Babylon and Persia) and the Beautiful Land (Israel). In 167BC he decided to massacre the population of Jerusalem destroy worship and the practice of the Jewish faith and eliminate even the traces of its existence – just like Islamic State is doing in territories under its control at the present time. Anyone found in possession of a scroll of Torah (Jewish Scriptures) was killed as were any who had circumcised a child. He banned the daily sacrifices ordained in Exodus 29:38-43: ³⁸ *'This is what you are to offer on the altar regularly each day: two lambs a year old. ³⁹ Offer one in the morning and the other at twilight. ⁴⁰ With the first lamb offer a tenth of an ephah of the finest flour mixed with a quarter of a hin of oil from pressed olives, and a quarter of a hin of wine as a drink offering. ⁴¹ Sacrifice the other lamb at twilight with the same grain offering and its drink offering as in the morning – a pleasing aroma, a food offering presented to the Lord. ⁴² 'For the generations to come this burnt offering is to be made regularly at the entrance to the tent of meeting, before the Lord. There I will meet you and speak to you; ⁴³ there also I will meet with the Israelites, and the place will be consecrated by My glory.* In December 167BC the Temple was renamed in honour of the pagan god Jupiter (or Zeus) and swine's flesh offered on the altar as a calculated insult to the Jews and to God. He minted coins with the inscription ANTIOCHUS THEOS EPIPHANES (Antiochus is God made manifest). He was known amongst his subject peoples as Antiochus Epimanes (Antiochus the madman). He left a detachment of troops to guard the Temple to prevent the Jews from regaining control over the site. The elimination of every Jew from Israel and the surrounding territories was his aim – in effect a holocaust. Evil people do not take God by surprise. God will always have the last word- because He is still in control

(b) **The horrors of his unspeakable cruelty** (Daniel 8:13-14) 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, the surrender of the sanctuary and the trampling underfoot of the Lord's people?' ¹⁴ He said to me, 'It will take 2,300 evenings and mornings; then the sanctuary will be reconsecrated.'* Antiochus IV appeared to be getting away with his horrendous crimes. Why is so much space given here to this less significant Selucid ruler? God in His grace was revealing to His servant Daniel centuries earlier a clear warning of both the horrors this man would carry out, but also state that he

would be defeated. Quite rightly God's people cried out: *How long will it take for the vision to be fulfilled?* (Daniel 8:13a) Judas Maccabeus the Jewish revolt's leader led a guerrilla war that was successful in driving out the Selucid forces. Jewish worship in the Temple was restored on 25 December 165BC after its initial desecration on 6 September 171BC. The reign of terror and its successful overthrow lasted between six and seven years and at the cost of many innocent people's lives. Jews celebrate the Feast of Hannukkah (Dedication) to this day in honour of this victory. God is still in control they proclaim!

(c) **The interpretation of the reign and its end** (Daniel 8:23-27)²³ *'In the latter part of their reign, when rebels have become completely wicked, a fierce-looking 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 those who are mighty, 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.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.'²⁷ I, Daniel, was worn out. I lay exhausted for several days. Then I got up and went about the king's business. I was appalled by the vision; it was beyond understanding. No wonder Daniel was appalled by the evil events described. He wasn't to know that centuries of historical events were included in the vision. All he knew was that this evil man would be overcome *Yet he will be destroyed, but not by human power* (Daniel 8:25b). God will always have the last word. Do we need to be encouraged by that statement at the present time?*

4. Principles to Ponder

(a) **Evil always over-reaches itself** (Daniel 8:25) *Yet he will be destroyed, but not by human power...* In Genesis 15:16 concerning the sin of the Amorites, the indigenous people of Canaan prior to Israelite conquest, God spoke these words to Abraham. ¹⁶ *In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.'* God prefers to demonstrate grace but sin without repentance will result in judgement. In Psalm 73 Asaph the writer is deeply troubled by the acts of wicked people around him, but eventually he grasps a fuller perspective of what is going on. He had thought wicked people had got away with their wrongdoing. *If I had spoken out like that, I would have betrayed Your children.¹⁶ When I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply¹⁷ till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny* (Psalm 73:15-17). He had come to see that God is still in control. Do you grasp this truth or are his words ones you need to reflect on?

(b) **The strong are weak and the weak are strong** Alexander build an empire but could not control himself. Antiochus IV was also a great soldier but his empire was diminished because he was consumed with anti-Semitic hate. However, believers too can fall; even outstanding individuals like the great king of Judah Uzziah. In II Chronicles 26:16a the writer simply states: *But after Uriah became powerful, his pride led to his downfall.* The mistakes of believers in the Bible are recorded for a purpose, as Paul indicates in I Corinthians 10:6: *Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did.* Like Paul we need to depend heavily on God and His grace each day of our lives. He expressed it so well in II Corinthians 12:9-10: *But He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.'* Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. ¹⁰ *That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

(c) **God's people will always face opposition in service for God** Whether, for example, an evil brute like Antiochus or false teachers within the Church (Acts 20:28-31) are the cause, we must be vigilant and self-disciplined in service, but always remembering God is still in control, Amen.