



Daniel's Vision of the Ram & the Goat

Pilgrim Living for the 21st Century

Daniel 8

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We'll be in Daniel 8 and I'll admit that when David asked me to preach on this chapter I was not overly excited. Some texts are easier to preach than others. I approached this chapter with fear and trembling, trying to figure out what the ram, goat, and the horns, represent, all while trying to brush up on my world history knowledge.

There was also the challenge of the chronology of Daniel. While the first half of the book is narrative—describing the life of the Israelites in Babylon—the second half contains these apocalyptic and prophetic visions. But these visions came during different points of Daniel's life in the earlier narratives. So I wasn't very excited going into this, knowing how much I had to catch up with, but God has changed my heart about this chapter this week. It's an incredible chapter. So I'm hoping I can faithfully communicate what I've learned.

There is an amazing amount of fulfilled prophecy in this chapter that points to our God as the sovereign Ruler, reigning over the universe. This miraculous vision that Daniel received should really strengthen our faith and build our confidence in the hope we have. In fact, I believe the reason this literature exists is to evoke our emotions and to paint a picture of world events that goes beyond their initial fulfillment and points toward the rest of history until Christ returns.

It was helpful to me to learn where this particular vision landed in Daniel's life. God's people were taken from their land and brought into Babylonian captivity in 605 B.C., although they came in stages, so we don't know exactly when Daniel was taken. We believe Daniel was around 15 years old at the time of his captivity.

The next big event in their history was when Nebuchadnezzar commanded Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to bow down before his golden statue. When they refused, they were cast into the fiery furnace. This is likely to have taken place when Daniel was in his early 30s. At that point he would have been in captivity between 15 and 20 years.

The vision of the ram and the goat that we'll be looking at today comes later, when Daniel is about 70 years old, somewhere around 550 B.C. Daniel anchors this date in chapter eight as

being in the third year of the reign of King Belshazzar. As a point of reference, in the lion's den story in Daniel 6, Daniel is probably around 80 years old. The handwriting on the wall took place a couple years earlier. So this vision is before the handwriting on the wall, while Belshazzar is still in power.

Let me read through this chapter, pausing occasionally to help us picture this vision as Daniel saw it. Verse one, *"In the third year of the reign of King Belshazzar a vision appeared to me, Daniel, after that which appeared to me at the first."* He's referring back to the vision in chapter seven, which was probably about two years earlier.

² And I saw in the vision; and when I saw, I was in Susa the citadel, which is in the province of Elam. And I saw in the vision, and I was at the Ulai canal. ³ I raised my eyes and saw, and behold, a ram standing on the bank of the canal. It had two horns, and both horns were high, but one was higher than the other, and the higher one came up last. ⁴ I saw the ram charging westward and northward and southward. No beast could stand before him, and there was no one who could rescue from his power. He did as he pleased and became great.

So the first part of this vision is of a ram that had two great horns, standing on the edge of the canal. One was higher, and it came up last. I don't know if they were growing in his vision, but the higher one grew up last. Then it almost seems as though we're not picturing a normal ram on a normal canal, because it talks about him charging northward and southward and westward. I don't think it's simply running in circles—five yards here and two yards there. There's a sense instead that he's covering the earth, and no beast can stand against his charge. Apparently there are other beasts in the vision that are being blown over by this ram. As he charges in all directions, no one can be rescued from him. He's a powerful creature that runs around doing whatever he wants.

Now let's look at the goat. *"As I was considering, behold, a male goat came from the west across the face of the whole earth."* That's another indication that somehow we've zoomed out and are seeing a bigger picture of the earth, with this goat now crossing the whole face of the earth. It's running *"without touching the ground."*

⁵ And the goat had a conspicuous horn between his eyes. ⁶ He came to the ram with the two horns, which I had seen standing on the bank of the canal, and he ran at him in his powerful wrath. ⁷ I saw him come close to the ram, and he was enraged against him and struck the ram and broke his two horns. And the ram had no power to stand before him, but he cast him down to the ground and

trampled on him. And there was no one who could rescue the ram from his power. ⁸ Then the goat became exceedingly great, but when he was strong, the great horn was broken, and instead of it there came up four conspicuous horns toward the four winds of heaven.

So now this powerful ram that was doing whatever he wanted is faced with this oncoming goat. This goat, which is like a unicorn with one great horn coming out from between his eyes, is coming quickly against the ram, without touching the ground. Daniel watches the ram as the goat approaches with great wrath and collides with the ram. The goat (kind of a unicorn) breaks the ram's horns and overcomes him. He gores and then tramples the ram under his feet. No one can rescue the ram, so now the goat is the king of the vision.

Daniel is probably confused here, but he's watching what's happening with these two great animals. It says the goat "*became exceedingly great...*" I don't know if he got bigger or if it's describing his power. But somehow in the vision the goat's great unicorn horn is broken off, and in its place he grew four horns. And next Daniel watches a little horn come out of one of the four horns.

⁹ Out of one of them came a little horn, which grew exceedingly great toward the south, toward the east, and toward the glorious land. ¹⁰ It grew great, even to the host of heaven. And some of the host and some of the stars it threw down to the ground and trampled on them. ¹¹ It became great, even as great as the Prince of the host. And the regular burnt offering was taken away from him, and the place of his sanctuary was overthrown.

I can't picture this, but somehow this little horn that's growing out of one of the four horns becomes great. It doesn't stay little. It's growing toward the glorious land, and it starts doing bad things. It takes away the burnt offering and the place of the sanctuary is overthrown, as we see in verse 11: "*And a host will be given over to it together with the regular burnt offering because of transgression, and it will throw truth to the ground, and it will act and prosper.*" This horn is doing bad things, yet it is prospering.

¹³ Then I heard a holy one speaking, and another holy one said to the one who spoke, "For how long is the vision concerning the regular burnt offering, the transgression that makes desolate, and the giving over of the sanctuary and host to be trampled underfoot?"

¹⁴ And he said to me, "For 2,300 evenings and mornings. Then the sanctuary shall be restored to its rightful state."

That ends the vision. That's what Daniel saw—and he was very confused. So now we have the interpretation which is very helpful. But let's see how he responds to this interpretation before we read it. Skip ahead and look at verse 27: *“And I, Daniel, was overcome and lay sick for some days. Then I rose and went about the king's business, but I was appalled by the vision and did not understand it.”*

This could leave us feeling hopeless. If Daniel was appalled and couldn't even understand the vision—and even had an angel trying to explain it to him—then perhaps we should be comforted, knowing we're not alone in our confusion. Although I actually think where we stand now, looking back from our place in history, we're in a better position to understand more than even Daniel did. Let's read this interpretation that was given to him, beginning in verse 15:

¹⁵ When I, Daniel, had seen the vision, I sought to understand it. And behold, there stood before me one having the appearance of a man. ¹⁶ And I heard a man's voice between the banks of the Ulai, and it called, “Gabriel, make this man understand the vision.” ¹⁷ So he came near where I stood. And when he came, I was frightened and fell on my face. But he said to me, “Understand, O son of man, that the vision is for the time of the end.”

¹⁸ And when he had spoken to me, I fell into a deep sleep with my face to the ground. But he touched me and made me stand up. ¹⁹ He said, “Behold, I will make known to you what shall be at the latter end of the indignation, for it refers to the appointed time of the end. ²⁰ As for the ram that you saw with the two horns, these are the kings of Media and Persia. ²¹ And the goat is the king of Greece. And the great horn between his eyes is the first king. ²² As for the horn that was broken, in place of which four others arose, four kingdoms shall arise from his nation, but not with his power. ²³ And at the latter end of their kingdom, when the transgressors have reached their limit, a king of bold face [now he's describing the little horn], one who understands riddles, shall arise. ²⁴ His power shall be great—but not by his own power; and he shall cause fearful destruction and shall succeed in what he does, and destroy mighty men and the people who are the saints. ²⁵ By his cunning he shall make deceit prosper under his hand, and in his own mind he shall become great. Without warning he shall destroy many. And he shall even rise up against the Prince of princes, and he shall be broken—but by no human hand. ²⁶ The vision of the evenings and the mornings that has been told is true, but seal up the vision, for it refers to many days from now.”

²⁷ And I, Daniel, was overcome and lay sick for some days. Then I rose and went about the king's business, but I was appalled by the vision and did not understand it.

Let's step back now to review the vision and what we're told it represents—and then we'll draw some conclusions. First, we're told right away that the ram's two horns were the kings of Media and Persia. Again, this was ten years or so before Belshazzar is overthrown, but the Medo-Persian Empire is already growing and becomes very strong.

This is the part of history I had to review. The Medo-Persian Empire was a powerhouse in the world, and nothing could stand against it. It was far-reaching in its rule over many nations. It appeared invincible. But Alexander the Great, who was the first king of the Greek Empire, came and overtook it, which is exactly what was prophesied here. Even the way the goat is described as coming against these kings—*“without touching the ground”*—reflects the very swift defeat that the young Alexander accomplished. He was the great horn on that goat, the first king.

Remember, Daniel received this vision about 550 B.C. Alexander the Great ruled from 336-323 B.C. So it was over 200 years later that this prophecy was fulfilled. And of course, this chapter in Daniel and other portions of Daniel are attacked by textual critics who say there was no way these specific prophecies could have been written in 550 B.C. They were just too accurate. My point here is not to go into too much detail, but Daniel specifically tells us the year he received the vision—and there are other evidences that this is a very ancient document which predates the events it describes.

For us, this is an incredible prophecy that upholds the reliability of God's Word, as He has given a vision of things that were coming that we now know were so precisely fulfilled. Alexander the Great's kingdom spread quickly. The Greek Empire became very strong. But as Daniel saw, *“When he was strong, the great horn was broken.”* He died very young, in his early 30s, and there was no planned successor for his rule. What followed was a fight for power, which led to the division of his kingdom into four smaller kingdoms run by four of his generals—exactly as the vision foretold. In the place of the great horn, *“there came up four conspicuous horns,”* but none of them were as strong as the first.

Then out of one of them a little horn grew up. This part especially is where there are some differences of interpretation among Christians. Is this little horn only looking to a time that is yet future for us? An antichrist who will rise to power and will brutally rule over and persecute God's people? Or is it simply referring to a historical figure that very precisely fulfills what is described here?

His name was Antiochus IV, and he gave himself the name Antiochus Epiphanes, which means “God made manifest.” As the Daniel passage says, he became great *“in his own mind”* (verse 25). When it describes earlier that this ruler was going *“toward the glorious land,”* Antiochus IV did that. He went to Jerusalem and actually overthrew the temple, prohibiting

sacrifices as foretold in verse 11. He kept God's people from worshipping as He commanded and in fact killed many of the people. In Jewish literature he's called "Antiochus the Wicked" because of his brutal rule over and destruction of God's people. Again, this was a very clear fulfillment of the vision. Antiochus ruled from 223 B.C. to 187 B.C., which means it was over 300 years after this prophecy was given.

Imagine with me for a moment what it would have been like to be Daniel, even before receiving this vision. Without getting too politically charged here, let's say that Canada grew to be some great empire and sought to take over the world. I realize this feels implausible, but try to imagine the emotion of what it might be like to live in captivity. So the Canadian Empire grows, and let's say they come into our country and especially target Christians. They take us away from our homes. Families are often separated. In different waves over the years, we are put on trains or planes and taken to live up there.

During that time we might be harshly ruled and often prohibited from worshipping God as we should. Laws are made against us and our beliefs. Let's say we're there for 50 years. This isn't a brief interruption in our lives—a few months or a couple years—but we're there for 50 years. We still might have hope for returning home.

But even this illustration breaks down. As God's people, the Israelites were in a Promised Land, which meant they had a unique sense of God's promises to them. There was supposed to be a Messiah King Who would make things right by setting up His Kingdom. But now they've been in captivity for many, many years.

If we were in that situation, a long-term captivity, what kind of emotions toward God and life would we be feeling? Abandonment. Hopelessness. Discouragement. Confusion. Sadness and grief. Yes. These people might not always have given in to the temptation to resent God, but the temptation would have been there. "God, what are You doing in this world? Have we sinned so much that You have given up on us? Are Your promises just gone? Or are You still at work in this world?" Their experiences would have caused great doubt and discouragement toward the promises of God.

But then let's say God gives you a vision—this vision that Daniel saw. And let's say the interpretation is that the ram is Canada, and the goat is Australia. Australia is going to rise up and take over the world. They will come quickly at Canada and overthrow it. You're back home now. But then the Australian Empire will divide, and out of the divisions one ruler will come and brutally persecute you, killing many of you and prohibiting the worship of God. Now what are we feeling? A lot of the same things. But at least there's hope now.

Daniel doesn't know how long it will be until these things take place. Prophecy rarely gives a time frame. He was given a date of 2,300 days, and there are differing ideas as to when that time span started, or even what "days" means. Some Christians have turned days to years, hoping to figure out when Christ will be returning.

Still, there is a timetable of some sort in place, which tells Daniel that there will be an end at some point. He's told us in verse 25 that this harsh ruler would be broken, but not by human hands. That was actually fulfilled in the reign of Antiochus as well. Josephus records that he died, not in battle but from a sickness that inexplicably took his life. So again, much of the prophecy is fulfilled in past history.

But as Daniel received the vision, he realized that the road out of Babylon would not be easy. Rather than getting easier, the future would become even more challenging. Of course, Daniel himself did not experience that, but he realized it might happen to the next generation, or the next, and he sensed what they would be going through. As we are told, the vision made him sick. He grieved, even as he had difficulty understanding it. Yet he must have asked, "Why did God give me this?"

Then we ask, "Why is this vision in the Scripture?" I think there are some amazing, reassuring, hope-producing, perseverance-causing truths here in this prophecy. As we are able to look back over history, we see that God knew all that would happen. He knew there would be evil rulers who would overtake the world and would harshly treat people. There would even be an evil ruler who would go into the Promised Land and desecrate the temple, creating an "abomination of desolation," stopping the sacrifices and outlawing the Torah.

Yet just as God knew all those things would take place, He also knew when He would bring about their end. There's hope. There's hope for what God is going to do. Instead of giving us apocalyptic literature—these visions and the difficult images they contain—God could have just said, "There will be a Medo-Persian empire, and then a Greek empire, and then a guy named Antiochus."

But I think these pictures are intended to broaden our view and add emotion to what we're told. This is cosmic warfare between evil and good, between Satan and our God. So these battles and other events are part of a much bigger picture. I think it also shows us that while these pictures were fulfilled initially in the past, they are also pointing toward what God's people will be experiencing throughout the rest of history, and in increasing measure as we approach the coming of Jesus Christ.

In fact, this is hinted at several times in this text. In verse 17, the angel says, "*Understand, O son of man, that the vision is for the time of the end.*" If that's all we were told,

we might think it was referring to the end of their captivity. But we also need to consider how Jesus took this passage in Matthew 24 and described Daniel's prophecy as being fulfilled, yet in the future when the Son of Man comes He will finally destroy the evil rulers. Their breaking will not be done with human hands. When the Son of Man comes, He will bring an end to all the evil in this world.

That gives us hope. There are Christians all around this world right now experiencing this kind of persecution, where their Christianity and their worship of God is outlawed and even punishable by death. They're enduring a part of the fulfillment of this prophecy. And yes, the day may come when we will experience this as well. When that happens, we will be called to live as pilgrims, holding on to the hope and assurance, believing an end will come, that Jesus will return and overthrow all evil rule.

This has application even to our more minor trials as well. Even with our lesser trials, there is coming an end. God assured His people by giving this vision. He steadied them to face persecution and opposition in this world. He prepared His people in the past, and He is preparing us today. He's building up our faith that He hasn't lost control, and He will bring an end to evil.

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