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About the King's Business

Daniel 8:1-27

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The books of 1 and 2 Maccabees in the Apocrypha detail the persecution of the Jews in the mid-160s BC, during the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes. 2 Maccabees 6, for example, tells how “the king sent an Athenian senator to compel the Jews to forsake the laws of their ancestors and no longer to live by the laws of God; also to pollute the temple in Jerusalem and to call it the temple of Olympian Zeus” (6:1-2). The gentiles used the temple of God for their orgies and drunken banquets. Antiochus desecrated the altar with the sacrifice of a pig. On holidays the king’s men would round up Jews and force them to participate in his parades and sacrifices. Those who refused to participate or who were caught living by *torah* were killed. Two women, for example, were caught having circumcised their baby boys. Their babies were tied around their necks as the women were paraded through the streets to the wall of the city and then thrown down it to their deaths. Faithful Jews who were caught secretly observing the sabbath in a nearby network of caves were burned alive. 2 Maccabees 7 tells the story of seven brothers and their mother, who were threatened with torture to eat pork. Despite being beaten, they refused.

The king fell into a rage, and gave orders to have pans and caldrons heated. These were heated immediately, and he commanded that the tongue of their spokesman be cut out and that they scalp him and cut off his hands and feet, while the rest of the brothers and the mother looked on. When he was

utterly helpless, the king ordered them to take him to the fire, still breathing, and to fry him in a pan. The smoke from the pan spread widely, but the brothers and their mother encouraged one another to die nobly, saying, “The Lord God is watching over us and in truth has compassion on us, as Moses declared in his song that bore witness against the people to their faces, when he said, ‘And he will have compassion on his servants.’” (2 Maccabees 7:3-6)

The king went on to do the same to the second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh brothers who all refused. We read that:

The mother was especially admirable and worthy of honorable memory. Although she saw her seven sons perish within a single day, she bore it with good courage because of her hope in the Lord. She encouraged each of them in the language of their ancestors. Filled with a noble spirit, she reinforced her woman’s reasoning with a man’s courage, and said to them, “I do not know how you came into being in my womb. It was not I who gave you life and breath, nor I who set in order the elements within each of you. Therefore the Creator of the world, who shaped the beginning of humankind and devised the origin of all things, will in his mercy give life and breath back to you again, since you now forget yourselves for the sake of his laws.” (2 Maccabees 7:20-23)

She stood firm—and so did her sons—because they hoped in the Lord. They knew that he is the Lord of history. They knew his goodness. They knew his faithfulness. They knew their story and how it was interwoven with the story of the faithfulness of the God of Israel, and so even as they were brutally murdered by a mad king, they trusted in him. Daniel was written for these people. The stories in the first half of the book show Daniel and his friends standing firm for the Lord

during the Babylonian exile, but the dreams and visions in the second are situated right in the middle of those days of violent persecution four centuries later. That’s what we see now as we come to Chapter 8 and to Daniel’s second vision. Let’s start with verse 1 and read through to the end.

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. 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. 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. 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.

As I was considering, behold, a male goat came from the west across the face of the whole earth, without touching the ground. And the goat had a conspicuous horn between his eyes. 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. 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. 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.

Out of one of them came a little horn, which grew exceedingly great

toward the south, toward the east, and toward the glorious land. 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. 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. 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. 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?" And he said to me, "For 2,300 evenings and mornings. Then the sanctuary shall be restored to its rightful state."

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. And I heard a man's voice between the banks of the Ulai, and it called, "Gabriel, make this man understand the vision." 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."

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. 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. As for the ram that you saw with the two horns, these are the kings of Media and Persia. And the goat is the king of Greece. And the great horn between his eyes is the first king. 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. And at the latter end of their kingdom, when the transgressors have reached their limit, a king of bold face, one who understands riddles, shall arise. 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. 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. 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."

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.

Another vision during the reign of the blasphemous king Belshazzar. In his ways, he foreshadows the evils of Antiochus Epiphanes. But as the first vision revealed, the days of Babylon were soon to be over, so this vision whisks Daniel hundreds of kilometres to the east, to Susa, which would become the capital of the Persian empire. And there he sees another animal, this time a ram. This is another clue as to when the book was written. The ram as a sign of the zodiac was associated with Persia—not in Daniel's day, but in the time of the Greeks.

The symbolism of Daniel 7 was difficult and there's a fair bit of disagreement about what it all means, but not so much with Daniel 8. This vision is simpler and the explanation pretty straightforward. Most everyone agrees on the major points. So it

begins with a ram representing the combined empire of the Medes and the Persians—those are the two horns, one bigger than the other. Horns, in ancient imagery, represent strength. The Medes were strong, but the Persians eventually become stronger and gobbled them up and so Daniel sees the ram, lowering its head, and charging from the east into the north and into the south and into the west—which is exactly what the Persian empire did, until it controlled the known world, even as far as Greece. Daniel writes that the ram did as it pleased and became strong. It's the way of human empires.

But as the ram reaches the peak of its power, Daniel sees a goat appear in the west. It helps to know that in the biblical mind, the goat was stronger and more powerful than the ram. This goat had a single horn and it made its way across the land so fast it might have been flying for all it seemed to touch the earth. It put its head down and charged the mighty ram and shattered both its powerful horns. In case the symbolism wasn't already obvious, the angel explains that the goat is Greece. The jutting horn is Alexander the Great.

Alexander was the son of Philip II, King of Macedon. He was tutored by Aristotle and assumed the throne when his father died in 336 BC. He was only twenty years old. By the age of thirty he had conquered the known world, from Greece in the west to India in the East, from Central Asia in the north to Egypt in the south. And then, in 323 BC, still a young man, Alexander died of a fever in Babylon. For twenty years his generals fought over his empire, eventually carving it up into four kingdoms, which Daniel sees as four horns. The two relevant ones for the Jews were that of Seleucus who controlled Syria and the east, and Ptolemy, who controlled Egypt and Palestine.

But this is all the background to the most important part of the vision. Out

of those Greek successor kingdoms arises another horn. He isn't named, but as the details of the first horn obviously point to Alexander, the details of this new horn point very obviously to Antiochus IV Epiphanes. In the great sweep of history, Antiochus was hardly the greatest of the Greek kings, but when he defeated the Egyptian Ptolemies and took control of Judah he became very important to the Jews. The Ptolemies had treated the Jews well and allowed them to govern themselves as a sort of religious state as long as the high priest coughed up the annual taxes. Antiochus, however, wanted to make good Greeks of the Jews and to get his hands on the temple treasury. Under his rule the priesthood was bought and sold and eventually observance of *torah* was outlawed and *torah* scrolls burned. God's worship in the temple was ended and it was turned into a temple to Olympian Zeus. And Antiochus murdered faithful Jews by the tens of thousands.

In Daniel's vision, Antiochus takes the form of this great horn that rises up against heaven itself. These verses, especially 12-13, are difficult. Just when I was glad to leave the Aramaic of chapters 2-7 behind, here come these verses that I can only describe as a Hebrew word salad. The Hebrew of Daniel is something else that points to it having been written in the Second Century, because it's not written in the great literary Hebrew of Daniel's day, but in a sort of clunky Hebrew that looks a lot like it was written by someone who probably spoke Aramaic as a first language. But that's okay. The gist of Daniel's vision is that Antiochus, in going up against the temple and the priesthood, was really shaking his fist at the God of Israel. This little earthly king who called himself "Epiphanies"—the manifestation of God—was pitting himself against the living God, the Lord of history, the one the Babylonian kings had had the good sense to acknowledge as God Most High. That never ends well.

And yet, for a time, the mad king seems to have won. Israel's identity was centred on the temple. That was the place where heaven and earth, where God and man met. They were the holy people who lived with God in their midst. And not only did Antiochus do his best to make sure they broke their end of the covenant with God by preventing them from keeping his law, but he suspended the very sacrifices that acknowledged God's presence in the temple. He wanted the Jews to live like good Greeks and when they insisted on living like Jews, he banished their God from his temple and set up an altar to Zeus. Judah was now his land. Their God was gone, so they had no reason to obey his law. Of course, the Jews knew better. Like that mother and her seven sons in 2 Maccabees, they knew the faithfulness of the God of the Israel and they knew that no puny human king could blaspheme against him forever. But, for a time, he would seem to have won the day. According to Daniel's vision, for 2300 evenings and mornings the temple would be desolate. That's a reference to the morning and evening sacrifices that were—or were supposed to be—made every day. The sacrifices that Antiochus suspended. Depending on how you parse this detail out, it's either about three years and three months or it's about six years and six months. Most people tend to go with the three years, which corresponds closely to the time when Antiochus had suspended the worship of the Lord in the temple. But the six-and-a-half years works too, if you count back to when the high priest was deposed. Either way, we know what the vision represents. And either way and for whatever reason, it's not an exact number, which means it may also be symbolic—we just can't be sure exactly how. However we parse out the number, the important point is that the Lord has numbered these evil days.

And that's the point I want to close on. Too often we get fixated on numbers and on fixing dates and end up missing the point. We do it with books like Daniel. We do it with books like Revelation. We do it with the prophets and with the apocalyptic discourses of Jesus. It's nothing new. Christians have been setting dates for over a thousand years and whenever we do, we seem to end up distracted from the gospel mission we've been given. Often it ends with the creation of schismatic sects and cults. William Miller, for example, worked out from these 2300 evening and mornings that Jesus would return in 1843. His argument convinced a lot of people (and it helped that he threw in plenty of "God has told me"). Of course, it didn't happen so he adjusted his formula, admitted a small error, and corrected the date to 1844. That didn't happen either. But his followers had given up everything and then many of them walked away and became jaded. They called it the "Great Disappointment". But, still, to this day Miller has his ardent followers. They're the Seventh Day Adventists and believe that it really did happen in 1843, and that it wasn't about Jesus returning to the earth, but that Jesus on that date entered the heavenly temple to begin his work of judging souls in anticipation of his return.

And many of us remember Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* that became a sensation in the 1970s. Lindsey made a point of not setting an exact date, but he wasn't shy about saying things like the 1980's would probably be the earth's last decade. It motivated some people to become missionaries, but it motivated lots of other people to abandon their jobs, their families, and to run up massive credit card debt because they were convinced that in a year or two none of it would matter. In more recent years we've had similar predictions made about "blood moons" and the like. Christian bookstores were filled with books about the imminent return of Jesus and end of

the world. People were, once again, all worked up about the end of the world and, once again, nothing happened.

Again, we too often forget the point of passages like this one in Daniel 8. Even if we could estimate or even set a date by it, the point is that God is in control and, because of that, we have every reason to stand firm in the midst of trials and persecution, knowing that God will vindicate us in the same way that he has vindicated his people in the past and, especially for us as Christians, in the same way that he vindicated his son when he raised him from death. Daniel 8—and so many other passages—remind us first and foremost that God is sovereign. No matter how it seems, history is not random. No matter how much they may shake their fists at the heavens, no king is outside the sovereign will of God. No matter how much we may abuse our God-given liberty, every one of us will be held to account. Sin and evil will not go on forever. God is judge, one day he will deal with sin and death once and for all, and eventually all of creation will be to rights—including us. And we know that this will happen, we believe, we have hope, because of the death and resurrection of Jesus. At the cross God did the hard part needed to set the world to rights. At the cross Jesus won the decisive battle and one day the war will be over when we, the church, his people, have accomplished the work he has given. He has equipped us with his own Spirit and sends us out to proclaim the life giving and renewing good news of his death and resurrection. And for two thousand years, that good news has driven away the false gods of the pagans and brought kings and their people to their knees before Jesus and to give glory to the God of Israel. Brothers and Sisters, date-setting, goofy predictions, and eschatological paranoia do nothing to witness the sovereignty of the Lord of history. They do just the opposite and they undermine our witness. They make

Christians look foolish and the scriptures untrustworthy. Our mission is to proclaim the gospel, because in Jesus and in his death and resurrection, *that* is where the world meets the living God and knows his faithfulness.

And that brings me to the final point. Look again at verse 27 and Daniel's response. The vision left him troubled. He even lay sick in his bed for "some days". He was in some sense dismayed because he didn't fully understand it. But what did he do? He says that he arose and went about the king's business. Brothers and Sisters, the prophecies and apocalypses that the Spirit has given us in the scripture were never meant to send us out in a panic or a frenzy, they weren't given to have us abandon our earthly responsibilities because the world is coming to an end. They were given to us to remind us that God is sovereign, that he will judge the wicked, and that he will vindicate his people for their faithfulness. So be faithful. The Lord had placed Daniel in a position of authority in the court of the king of Babylon. That pagan court was soon to fall. That pagan king was soon to die. But the Lord had put Daniel in that position for a reason and so he went faithfully back to his work. The same goes for each of us. The Lord has put us where we are for a reason. Be a faithful husband and father or a faithful wife and mother knowing that the Lord is sovereign. Be faithful in your vocation, whatever it may be, however mundane it may seem. Be faithful to your earthly obligations: to your family, to your business, to your school, to your church, to your club, to your friends, to your debts, to your country knowing that the Lord has placed you where you are. That is, after all, the King's business. This witness to our trust in the sovereignty of God is the foundation that undergirds our greater witness to Jesus and the gospel. It is what prepares us to stand firm should the day come when we find ourselves forced to

choose between obedience to an earthly king and obedience to our heavenly King. May we stand firm like the saints of old and declare with the mother of those seven martyred sons, "The Lord God is watching over us and in truth has compassion on us."

Let's pray: Almighty God, look with mercy on your people; that by your great goodness we may be always governed and preserved both in body and soul, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*