

THE ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD

SERIES: FORTIFIED FOR FAITHFULNESS

By Steve Zeisler

The gospel we believe is anchored in historical, objective realities. On the one hand, history refers to things that have already occurred. We look back in history to the cross of Christ where our Lord gave his life freely for our sakes. We look back to the empty tomb where his Father raised him from the dead. Jesus' death took place at Passover, of course, so we look back before the cross to the history of the Exodus, and before that to the giving of the covenants. All of these actions and words of God give us foundations for our faith.

But on the other hand, our faith also rests on things that will occur in the future. We know them as certainly as we know the things that have already transpired. Remember, the writer of Hebrews tells us that "for the joy set before him [Jesus] endured the cross..." (12:2). It was our Lord's conviction that his Father would keep his promises that strengthened him to go to the cross. The same is true for us. We look forward to the glorious return of our Lord, to the vindication of the righteous, and we are thereby strengthened to deal with today's temptations, sorrows, and flux. We have an adequate response to these things because we believe the gospel that is anchored in history.

The book of Daniel is, if nothing else, a history book. The first six chapters of Daniel tell the accounts of the lives of a Hebrew man and his friends who trusted God before kings, in the fiery furnace, in the lions' den. Under extreme provocation they believed the truth and witnessed to it. And because we know these things happened, we have hope that our lives will be the same.

The second half of the book of Daniel, however, is about the visions that Daniel had of the future. Some of the things he saw and was told about, which were future to him, have occurred by now; others are still to come. Daniel was great in God's service because he was "sure of what he hoped for" (Hebrews 11:1). We can be like him.

We are going to consider chapter 8 in this message, but first let me remind you of the four-stage framework of future events that has been given to us twice in the book of Daniel, once in the dream of Nebuchadnezzar in chapter 2, and once in Daniel's own dream in chapter 7. The fourth of these stages, the feet and legs of the statue and the fourth beast from the sea, is the most remarkable, the one to which our attention is drawn. The fourth beast, with its iron teeth and bronze claws and horrible demeanor, was so terrifying that Daniel could hardly describe it. The fourth stage of future events is probably best understood to happen twice, corresponding to the first and second comings of Christ. The final end of the fourth kingdom is the end of history.

Both in chapter 2 and in chapter 7, God's kingdom is established. In chapter 2 the rock that was cut without hands and that shatters the statue becomes a mountain that fills the whole earth. In chapter 7 the Son of man receives the kingdom forever, and the saints of God, having suffered at the hands of the one the New testament calls "the man of lawlessness... the son of destruction" (2 Thessalonians 2:3, NASB), are vindicated.

But in chapter 8, we are now going back to look at the two middle stages of the framework of future events, corresponding to the two middle beasts and the middle part of the statue. We'll find this helpful to our own discipleship, because here we encounter history as it unfolds in more ordinary conditions. We encounter not the saints who have to face the final conflict, but the saints like us who have to face today's conflict: seeing the

unrighteous in power and being called to faithfulness in our Father's business, the normal conditions of hard humanity.

Kingdoms come and go

The scene in chapter 8 is set two years after the vision in chapter 7 took place, which was during the first year of Belshazzar's reign. In the third year of Belshazzar's reign Cyrus consolidated his power and began taking action that would lead to the establishment of the Medo-Persian Empire, which would eventually overthrow Babylon. So in the year Daniel was given this vision, important developments were occurring in the balance of power among the nations.

Verses 1-8:

In the third year of King Belshazzar's reign, I, Daniel, had a vision, after the one that had already appeared to me. 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. 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. I watched the ram as he charged toward the west and the north and the south. No animal could stand against him, and none could rescue from his power. He did as he pleased and became great.

As I was thinking about this, suddenly a goat with a prominent horn between his eyes came from the west, crossing the whole earth without touching the ground. He came toward the two-horned ram I had seen standing beside the canal and charged at him in great rage. I saw him attack the ram furiously, striking the ram and shattering his two horns. The ram was powerless to stand against him; the goat knocked him to the ground and trampled on him, and none could rescue the ram from his power. The goat became very great, but at the height of his power his large horn was broken off, and in its place four prominent horns grew up toward the four winds of heaven.

In verses 20-22 an angel will interpret this part of the vision for Daniel: "The two-horned ram that you saw represents the kings of Media and Persia. The shaggy goat is the king of Greece, and the large horn between his eyes is the first king. 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."

In his vision Daniel found himself in the city of Susa on the eastern edge of the Babylonian Empire. He looked farther east to where the power of Persia was gathering, and eventually this two-horned ram, Medo-Persia, the empire that would succeed Babylon, carried the day. It butted its way north, south, and west and took over the known world. It fancied itself great, became greater, magnified itself.

Then a goat came from the west, moving so swiftly it was as if its feet didn't touch the ground. Like a unicorn, it had a dramatic horn growing out from the middle of its head. It was so terrible that it utterly destroyed the once-great ram. Then this kingdom expanded as well. It was the empire of the Greeks, and the horn, its first king, was Alexander the Great, who was more rightly named "the Great" than almost any other who bears that title. Yet strikingly, after he had conquered the world, at thirty-three years of age his life was forfeit. He probably died from the combined effects of high consumption of alcohol and malaria. Four of his generals each took over a quadrant of his empire. All of this was told to Daniel in the vision before any of it happened.

It's good to be reminded that kingdoms come and go. If history makes any point at all, it is this: when a people, a culture, an empire, a military ruler, or an economic authority grows great, it imagines itself to have achieved what none have before. "This time no one will stand in the way! This time my magnificence will last forever!" And inevitably it is wrong. The two middle kingdoms here are representative of all the kingdoms that are succeeded one after another on and on through history, until the Lord returns. There is nothing stable, nothing lastingly powerful, about human authority.

Consider the rest of the chapter. The four generals who each ruled a quadrant of Alexander's dominion gave their names to their respective, smaller kingdoms. One of these, the Seleucid Empire, was the region that comprised Syria as well as Canaan, the Promised Land of the people of God. Some generations later the Seleucid Empire would have a terrible ruler. Daniel saw him in this prophetic dream.

The reign of evil

Verses 9-27:

Out of one of them [the four prominent horns of the goat] came another horn, which started small but grew in power to the south and to the east and toward the Beautiful Land [the Promised Land]. 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. It set itself up to be as great as the Prince of the host; it took away the daily sacrifice from him, and the place of his sanctuary was brought low. Because of rebellion, the host of the saints and the daily sacrifice were given over to it. It prospered in everything it did, and truth was thrown to the ground.

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, and the surrender of the sanctuary and of the host that will be trampled underfoot?"

He said to me, "It will take 2,300 evenings and mornings [the temple sacrifices were offered morning and evening, so the 2,300 sacrifices represent half that many days, or 1,150]; then the sanctuary will be reconsecrated."

While I, Daniel, was watching the vision and trying to understand it, there before me stood one who looked like a man. And I heard a man's voice from the Ulai calling, "Gabriel, tell this man the meaning of the vision."

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."

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.

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. The two-horned ram that you saw represents the kings of Media and Persia. The shaggy goat is the king of Greece, and the large horn between his eyes is the first king. 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.

“In the latter part of their reign, when rebels have become completely wicked, a stern-faced king, a master of intrigue, will arise. 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 the mighty men and the holy people. 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.

“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.”

I, Daniel, was exhausted and lay ill for several days. Then I got up and went about the king’s business. I was appalled by the vision; it was beyond understanding.

The little horn that would grow up out of one of the four remnants of Alexander’s empire would wreak destruction among the people of God, who by then would be once again residing in the Promised Land and worshiping in the temple. This figure of violence, self-regard, and hatred of God and of his people is clearly Antiochus IV, known as Antiochus Epiphanes. The events described here have their fulfillment during his time. Chapter 11 will go into more detail about Antiochus, his battles and his arrogance.

But in the story of this blasphemer Antiochus there is also a foreshadowing of the antichrist, the “man of lawlessness,” who is yet to come, and who will act similarly. Though the final arrogant world ruler is related in history to the fourth beast of Daniel 7, the nature of human defiance of God is not different in small scale or large. What drives Antiochus will drive his eventual successor. Jesus uses this vision that predicted what Antiochus would do in the temple to explain that there was one still coming who would do the same thing on a grander scale, with greater violence and more successful hatred of God (Matthew 24:15; Mark 13:14). So Daniel was being told about things that would happen in the third kingdom, and while it was not primarily a description of the end, it was like what would happen at the end.

What we are given here is a way to think about history. Jesus said that history is like intense, hard, painful labor contractions (Matthew 24:8; Mark 13:8). A contraction comes, and then there’s relief. When the people of God are under the pressure of suffering, God will call an end to that particular struggle and give a period of relief. Another contraction will come, and another. The final contraction leads to the birth of a baby, and the final episode of the suffering of the people of God in history will lead to the end of the age, to the return of the Lord. But that final episode will be similar to the ones before it. So what we are learning when end times are in view is how to be disciples in our time. What will be true of the battle then is true of the battle now.

Antiochus hated the truth of God; he threw it to the ground. History records that he actively attempted to destroy the scrolls of the Scriptures. Antiochus was a terrible person who had a visceral hatred for the people of God. He butchered them and killed children indiscriminately. He took a sow and had it slaughtered, ripped down the curtain to the holy of holies in the temple, marched in with the sow, and spread its blood all over the holiest place where God would be worshiped. He laughed at the agony of the Jews and trampled on their leaders. He proclaimed Zeus to be God and Yahweh to be foolish.

The people who had to suffer under him can teach us lessons about hard experiences that we have to go through. It may be required that we live with weakness in the face of unrighteousness that is strong. But what we know of the end can strengthen us for today.

Looking backward in history, not forward, what insight can we gain from this?

The witness of the saints

One insight comes from comparing the relative interest shown in Antiochus and in Alexander. Any thoughtful historian today, writing a top-ten list of the great figures who have influenced world events, would include Alexander the Great. He was both brilliant and terrible. Furthermore, his influence has lasted throughout the centuries as Greek philosophy and government formed the basis for western civilization. Alexander was a towering figure, and that he accomplished all that he did by age thirty-three is almost unimaginable.

I recently listened to a tape on Daniel 8 by a man who obviously loved history. He told at length the story of Alexander--his battles, his malaria and drinking, his generals, his horse. At the end of his message he rushed through the rest of the verses. It's easy to be taken with the man Alexander.

But the text of chapter 8 quickly dismisses Alexander. The great horn was broken--end of story. The empire was divided up, and on we go. The key element in the text is what Daniel calls "the Beautiful Land" and its future. Much more important than Alexander's empire was one city, Jerusalem, and the temple in Jerusalem, the place where God intended to establish witness to him that would influence the rest of the world. That's a perspective on history that we should have but often don't. What's most important is what's happening among the ordinary people of God in their witness, their integrity and faithfulness, the salt and light "below the radar" of the world's attention. Little credit is given to the people of God for being who they should be. Seldom do they make the news, at least not in any positive way. Yet these things, from the perspective of heaven, are much more important than which beastly kingdom is currently running things. The critical question is, are the saints courageously defending the faith and speaking up for the Lord?

I receive a quarterly college alumni magazine. My class, the class of 1971, has a little section in it that tells what's happening to its members. Someone has become a judge, someone else an ambassador, someone else a CEO. Never is there reference to someone's becoming an elder in their church, or going to work with the poor, or serving in a hospital. There is no attention paid to the good things of changed hearts, because the world doesn't know how to pay attention to those things. But God does.

I hope you are acquainted with J.R.R. Tolkien's masterwork *The Lord of the Rings*. It's coming out in a major motion picture this year. It's a magnificent story. Tolkien's great Christian insights make exactly the same point as our text. There are great wars and large-scale villains and heroes: Sauron, Saruman, Gandalf, and Elrond, heroic figures fighting crucial battles. The future of a world is at stake. But the key player in the drama is a hobbit named Frodo--a lowly, insignificant, physically ordinary soul. But everything hangs on whether Frodo will make it to the Cracks of Doom. The key story is being waged by the courage, faithfulness, dedication, and simplicity of one little guy. Tolkien was a genius, because he knew that real history is the same. From the perspective of heaven Alexander's story is not as important as that of the faithful ones who stood up to Antiochus in his destructive rage.

Another insight from this text is that our knowledge of prophecy and the victory of God should make disciples of us, not just people who can give interesting lectures. Sometimes the enthusiasm for prophecy gets disconnected from anything in the real world. But it shouldn't. History will repeat itself many times from Daniel's day to the end of the world. The temptation to fail and the call for courage are the same over and over again. But there is a limit to what evil can do, and God will establish the righteous. Antiochus was given 1,150 days, not 1,151. The angels knew when he would be called on the carpet and cast into hell for his arrogance. Because we know the prophetic word, we should be more faithful as disciples now, not fearful, withdrawn, or lost. Suffering and humiliation are predictable in this life, but "he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it" (1 Corinthians 10:13). It cannot go on forever.

Love and faithfulness

The last insight from this chapter concerns Daniel's reactions to the vision. One was that he became ill. Now remember, at the time of his vision, the people of God were still exiled in Babylon. There were no Jews in the Promised Land, no temple in Jerusalem, no sacrifices being offered. When Daniel saw these things, his heart broke at the realization that Jews would once again be allowed to worship in their city and temple and once again be persecuted for righteousness in days yet to come. It was a wrenching experience for Daniel to witness this. He himself would not experience any of these events. But he loved the people who would, so much that at one point he was cast to the ground in a daze, and subsequently it made him physically ill.

There are believers in this world who are suffering horrifically for their faith this very day. I am ashamed that I am not for love's sake more connected to these people. Daniel's example of putting himself in the shoes of those in the distant future, being overwhelmed with what they would suffer, teaches an important lesson.

Finally, we observe that at the end Daniel rose to his feet and went about the king's business. Neither the mystery nor the agony of what he saw kept Daniel from faithfulness in the place God had put him.

What is our responsibility? No one has all the assignments--Daniel couldn't prevent what he saw from happening. There was no place he could go to hold back the floodwaters of the future from spilling over the dike. But he could go to the place in the world where he had a chance to speak and live the truth. And his example of faithfulness can inspire us as well.

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