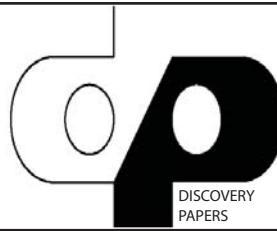


WHEN BLASPHEMY BACKFIRES

SERIES: WHEN KINGDOMS COLLIDE



Catalog No. 20141207

Daniel 8:1-27

9th Message

Paul Taylor

December 7, 2014

Let's start this morning by taking a little poll. How many of you know everything? How many of you have the power to do anything you want? How many of you can be anywhere you want at any given moment?

Ok, now I'd like to ask you to hold up your smartphone if you have one. Let's take the same poll again. If you need to know a piece of information, how many of you have the capability to find out in a few seconds? If you want to get something done, like have a TV shipped to your house or change the temperature on your thermostat at home, do you have the capability to do it? If you want to video chat with someone halfway across the world, are you able to do that?

Knowing everything is called omniscience. Being able to do anything is called omnipotence. Being able to be anywhere or everywhere is called omnipresence. These are attributes that we usually apply only to God. But if we think about, we're getting awfully close to those words describing us with our smartphones.

We're getting pretty close to thinking of ourselves as gods. I think that's why we like technology so much. I think that is what drives a lot of people here in the Silicon Valley. So much of what we do and create and work on in this area has the potential to make us feel like gods. Is it any wonder that people have so little need for the God of Christianity anymore?

I came across a movie clip from almost twenty years ago that captures this idea perfectly. It's from a movie called *Malice*. Alec Baldwin plays an arrogant doctor who ends up involved in a strange plot of deception. I can't really recommend the movie, but this scene is a great illustration. During this scene, he is confronted about a risky decision he made during surgery. He is accused of having a "god complex."

He gave an incredible speech. This doctor's conclusion, "I am God", puts into words what I think many people feel but aren't willing to say. With all the capability and technology and medicine and competence that we have, who needs God? Aren't we god enough?

Today we are continuing our series in the book of Daniel. We've called this series *When Kingdoms Collide* because

of the constant tension between the kingdom of God and kingdom of man throughout this book. For the four weeks during Advent, we are looking at the four visions that are recorded in the second half of this book. These visions all depict the graphic chaos that precedes the final arrival of the kingdom of God.

This week we're looking at Daniel's second vision. It begins by describing a fight between a ram and a goat, but eventually focuses on a character that is called the "little horn" from the goat. This little horn is apparently a leader who takes things too far. He is violent, ambitious, arrogant and presumptive. But he crosses a line when he directly challenges God. It goes too far when he acts like God. When he does that, God steps in and intervenes. Today we will see what happens when blasphemy backfires.

If you weren't with us last week, you might be wondering why we're talking about rams, goats, and blasphemy during Advent. Where did joy, peace, and love go? Last week I pointed out that Advent is typically the season of the church calendar when we anticipate the Advent or coming of Jesus. We remember that he came as a baby in a manger as a way of looking forward to his return. So these visions of Daniel that describe the intervention of God at the end of time are an appropriate way of helping us look forward to Jesus' final victory.

Last week we saw a vision about four great beasts that came up out of the sea, but were eventually conquered. Their violence and brutality gave way to justice and peace. I suggested that this vision was a general picture of how the world operates. God's kingdom will eventually overcome the chaos of the kingdom of man. This week is different because we are told about specific historical entities that the vision refers to in the second century BC.

One of the commentators describes it as if Chapter 7 is like an impressionist painting. It depicts in broad strokes the patterns of world history. But Chapter 8 is like a political cartoon. It zeroes in on one historical context and makes a strong statement about what happens in that context. The chapter begins with the vision, and the interpretation follows. As we read it, we're going to be interspersing the vision with the interpretation and I'll be helping us to understand the historical events being referred to along the way.

Along the way, we're going to be thinking about this idea of having a god complex. We live in a world where people, companies, institutions and governments all seem like they might have a god complex. We often function in our own lives as if we have a god complex.

So what happens when you have a god complex? What happens when people put themselves in the place of God? Our vision this morning answers that question. We'll try to take that answer and apply it to us. We want to know how to live in a world of people who act like gods. And we want to figure out what to do about our own problem as well.

So let's look at this vision and see what happens when blasphemy backfires.

The vision

In the last vision, Daniel saw four terrible beasts coming out of the sea. This vision also has to do with animals.

Daniel 8:3-7—

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. ⁴I 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.

⁵As 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. ⁶He 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. ⁷I 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.

We have a ram and a goat. We first see the ram. He is charging everywhere. He is powerful: it is said that no one could rescue from his power. But a ram is not a terrifying animal. It's just a male sheep. Then a goat

appears. This goat is unique because he skims across the face of the earth. Then he gets into a fight with the ram and wins. After that victory it is said that no one could rescue the powerful ram from the even more powerful goat.

The vision we looked at last week contained terrible, frightening, fantasy like creatures: a lion with eagle's wings and a leopard with four heads. This week is much more commonplace. Rams and goats are everywhere in rural cultures. Occasionally they fight. I actually found a video on YouTube of a ram and a goat fighting in the middle of a rural street while people watched in amusement.

So at this point, there isn't anything too remarkable in this vision. This is what animals do. Later on, when Daniel asks what this vision means, he is told this in Daniel 8:20-21:

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.

It's a bit unique in the Bible to have a vision interpreted so specifically. But we are told that these animals represent Media, Persia, and Greece. These are nations that were active during the time following Israel's exile in Babylon. First, the Persian Empire ruled. Then Alexander the Great came around and conquered most of that part of the world and the Greek Empire was born. All of this happened from the sixth the fourth century BC.

So this vision is specific, but it also describes the general way that things work. Just like animals fight and try to overpower each other, nations do the same thing. It is the way things work. First one nation is the strongest one around. Then another one comes around and gets stronger and defeats it. No one stays at the top forever. At least, this is what I tell myself when my team loses.

Doesn't this describe the world that we live in? This is true in technology and education and sports and social life. One minute you're the hero. Then, as fast as it happened, you've been replaced by the hot new thing. Our world is inherently competitive and there is only space for one at the top. A lot of people spend a lot of energy trying to get to that one spot. And then eventually they lose it and have to ask, "What next?"

Do you feel this way? Sometimes we are on the outside of this competition as our bosses and companies and

countries compete. Other times we get caught right up in it as well. We feel like we constantly have to prove ourselves. We always have to worry about whether we are on the way up or on the way down. It is incredibly exhausting to live in this kind of a world.

Our world is full of this kind of competition. But every now and then, the normal pattern of competition gets elevated to a different kind of level. This is how the vision continues. What began as a standard fight between a ram and a goat starts to get weird. Here is Daniel 8:9–12. It begins by describing the horns of the goat.

Daniel 8:9–12—

Out of one of them came a little horn, which grew exceedingly great toward the south, toward the east, and toward the glorious land. ¹⁰It 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. ¹¹It 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. ¹²And 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.

OK, now things are strange. We expect rams and goats to fight each other. But horns that rise up and throw down the host of heaven? This is odd. And very specific. “*The regular burnt offering was taken away,*” “*the place of his sanctuary was overthrown,*” “*it will throw truth to the ground.*” These are phrases that are way more specific than a ram breaking the horns of a goat and trampling him to the ground.

When the vision is interpreted, we get some more detail about this little horn.

Daniel 8:23–24—

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. ²⁴His 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.

I suggested earlier that this vision is a bit like a political cartoon. This caricature bears a lot of resemblance to

a historical figure in the second century BC. He is the Syrian king Antiochus IV. He is known as Antiochus Epiphanes. He ruled from 175 BC until 164 BC. He is described in this vision in Daniel 8 and again in the vision of Daniel 10–12. So we need to spend a little time understanding who he is. To do that we need some background.

Alexander the Great was the Greek ruler who conquered most of the known world from the Persians. He amassed a huge empire. But when he died in 323, his empire split into what became four different smaller empires. Two of them concern us: the Seleucid Empire, which covered all of Israel’s land and extended north and east, and the Ptolemaic or Egyptian empire which covered Egypt and south. These two dynasties were constantly in conflict.



Antiochus was a king of the Seleucid Empire—the area that controlled Jerusalem and all of Israel. He was a very ambitious king and several times he marched down to Egypt to try to conquer that region. When he did so, he would pass right through Jerusalem.

Jerusalem itself was going through a really difficult period at the same time. They were wrestling with what it meant to live as Jews in a world that was becoming dominated by Greek culture. So there was a bunch of unrest in Jerusalem.

One day in 167 BC, everything erupted. Antiochus marched down through Jerusalem on his way to attack Egypt for the second time. But he never got there. He was rebuffed by a Roman ambassador who was trying to keep peace in the region. So Antiochus backed down

and turned around to head home. On his way, he passed through Jerusalem where there was a tense rivalry about who should be high priest.

Have you ever seen a bully who has been put in his place and forced to back down? What does he do? He goes home and kicks the dog. That's what Antiochus did. He was furious that he had been out-muscled. So when he got to Jerusalem, he took out all his frustration on the Jews. He went on a rampage. The actions of the little horn in this vision align very closely with what Antiochus did in Jerusalem.

In verse 11, the horn becomes as great as the Prince of the Host. The first thing Antiochus did was to install a high priest that didn't care about following God at all. Verse 11 continues, "the regular burnt offering was taken away." The second thing Antiochus did was to forbid any sacrifices from happening in the temple. Verse 12 says, "it will throw truth to the ground." Antiochus also organized a huge effort to round up copies of the Torah and burn them. Antiochus essentially made it illegal to worship the God of Israel.

Antiochus was a king who acted like a god. We'll talk about more that he did when we get to the vision in chapters 10–12. The vision in this chapter seems to highlight his rising up and taking on the nature of God. It highlights his god complex. Antiochus put himself in the place of god and wreaked havoc all around him.

When someone starts acting like god, it doesn't go well for anyone else in the vicinity. When someone thinks they can control everything around them, it's the people around them that suffer.

Has this happened to you? Have you gotten hurt by the manipulation or scheming of someone trying to control more than they should? Have you been used by someone as part of their great plan to succeed? Have you been hurt because your parents or your spouse or your boss tried to control way too much about your life?

Does it help to realize that God knows about it? That's one of the great comforts of a prophecy that is so specific. It demonstrates that God isn't unaware of everything going on down here. He knows exactly which country is doing what. He knows who has a god complex and he knows who is being hurt by it. God sees.

God sees the hurt caused by all these people trying to act like God. This same dynamic plays out on a much wider scale. In Andy Crouch's recent book, he quotes Jayakumar Christian, the director of World Vision India.

He works among the poorest of the poor and he had this to say about poverty, "The poor are poor because someone else is trying to play God in their lives."¹

Our world is overrun by people who think they can act like God and get away with it. This is what causes so much of the injustice everywhere. Groups that rise up and kill others in their effort to achieve god-like power. People who buy and sell human beings as if they are property.

While this vision of Daniel's aligns with the actions of Antiochus, it also gives us a more general picture of what things will be like before God's kingdom is established. There will always be little horns. There will always be people like Antiochus. Leaders frequently try to act like god. God knows this. He sees what is going on. But is he going to do anything about it? What does God do about people like Antiochus?

God steps in

I'm sure Daniel wonders the same thing. As the vision continues, Daniel overhears to angels talking about what is going on. They are concerned for the suffering of the Jews under the terrible rampage of this little horn. One of the angels asks an important question. This is "the question" that we ask when things aren't going our way.

Daniel 8:13—

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?"

When things are falling apart, this is what we want to know: "For how long?" When will things get better? When will I find a job or get pregnant or meet a spouse or stop being depressed or get out of debt or whatever it is going on in your life. How long will this situation in my life go on?

This is one of the most common questions in the Bible. Moses asks Pharaoh how long he will refuse to treat God's people well (Exodus 10:3). God asks his people how long they will rebel against him in the desert (Numbers 14:27). The psalmist asks God how long until he will be healed (Psalm 6:3). Zechariah asks God how long will he ignore his people in Jerusalem (Zechariah 1:12).

When things are falling apart, we want to know when it is going to end. So when one angel asks this question

of another angel, it makes sense. We expect this question in a situation like this. What we don't necessarily expect is for there to be an answer. In Daniel 8:14b, the angel replies,

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

This is incredible. There is an answer to the question of how long.

There is an end to the pain. The sanctuary will be restored. Whatever is happening won't go on forever. When we ask the question, “how long?” we never really expect an answer. Most of the time, we're just complaining. But this time, we get an answer. It won't go on forever.

The specific answer has given rise to several different interpretations. Some people think the angel is referring separately to evenings and mornings. So 2300 of them would be half as many days: 1150. Other people think the evening and morning reference together refers to a day. So that would be 2300 days. Either way, there are some interesting historical parallels. 1150 days is approximately the time that there were no sacrifices in the temple of Jerusalem, during Antiochus's decree. This began in 167 BC. 2300 days is approximately the time that the temple was led by a high priest who wasn't legitimate. This began in 171 BC. Both periods ended with the defeat of Antiochus in 164 BC.

But I'm convinced that more important than which period of time this answer refers to is simply the point that there is an answer. There will be an end to this trial. Later in the chapter when the angel interprets the vision, he doesn't focus on the exact period of time, but on how the little horn will be defeated.

Daniel 8:25—

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.

There is so much emphasis on the effort and accomplishment of this little horn. He will rise up farther than anyone could have imagined and do unthinkable things. Then he shall be broken. Not by a human hand. But by the hand of God.

In the opening of this chapter, we are told that this vision is given to Daniel during the time of King Belshazzar. Do you remember the story from Daniel 5 about Belshazzar? That king was having a huge party—denouncing the name of God. And what happened? The hand of God appeared and wrote on the wall. God stepped in. His hand showed up to bring down Belshazzar. His hand will show up to break this evil king in the second century.

This is exactly what happened to Antiochus Epiphanes. He was defeated. A group of Jews rose up in revolt against him and successfully defeated him. That was the Maccabean revolt which formed the basis for the Jewish celebration of Chanukah.

And the hand of God will show up to intervene in whatever is going on for you. God steps in. That's what he does after he sees his people in pain. It may not happen as quickly as you'd like. It may not be exactly the manner that you're hoping for. But evil will not go on forever. God will intervene.

So we wait. During Advent in particular, we learn to wait well. This is the season where we anticipate Jesus coming back and setting things right. Putting all those people with god complexes in their place.

But we get tired of waiting. We're not even sure we can trust that God will show up. Or that when he does show up, he'll handle things the way we want them to be handled. So we take them into our own hands. We develop god complexes of our own. We try to take charge of everything around us. Who needs God? I can handle things myself.

There is so much in our life that is outside of our control. Sometimes it is simply too much to accept. We can't handle it. And so we step in. We're so tempted to step in and take care of things ourselves. We try to control the people and circumstances and outcomes of everything around us.

When we do that, sometimes we, too, are broken. There might be times when we are brought low so that we can see the danger of our god complex. Those times are opportunities for us to return to God. As Scott Grant said during his Jonah series, “don't waste your crisis.” Find out what God is doing in it.

Being broken can be good news. If we start to have too much of a god complex, that can be really dangerous. We aren't god. If we think we are, then we start making decisions and treating people in ways that are going to hurt them.

That's what happened to Alec Baldwin's character in the film clip we watched. It turns out that he wasn't god. But because he thought he was, he brought a whole lot of pain to everyone around us.

At times, God breaks us to help us remember who we are and who he is. He helps us return to him.

Enter God's presence

But there is another way that God steps in. Sometimes he doesn't break us. Sometimes he just shows up. This is what we celebrate on December 25. God became present. He entered our experience. He came to be with us as one of us. As it turns out, being in the presence of God is a great antidote to having a god complex.

It's really hard to keep thinking of yourself as god when you're with the real thing. So as we consider our own tendency to view ourselves as God, my suggestion to counter that is to simply be with him. Go into his presence. God showed up so that we could be with him. Accept his invitation. Enter God's Presence.

Antiochus IV took the name Antiochus Epiphanes very intentionally. Epiphanes is a Greek word that translates as "God manifest." Antiochus wanted the people around him to think of himself as God among them. But he wasn't. The real God showed up and made that clear.

But our God has made himself manifest. He is among us. He is present with us. Being with him helps us to remember that we aren't him. This is why we gather together in worship. Part of what we do here every week is to say, "I worship you, God. I'm tempted to think that I am God. But I'm not. So I worship you as a way of remembering that."

When we enter God's presence, we realize that it really isn't all that much fun to have a god complex. It's exhausting to think that everything rests on my shoulders. Coming to God means that we can lay down the burden of trying to be god of our own lives. This afternoon we'll be talking more about what it looks like to rest because of God's presence through Jesus.

We don't really want to be god. It's a tough job. It is such a relief that know that God sees. God will step

in. I can enter into his presence and trust him. That doesn't mean I don't have a part to play. But it does mean that I don't have to be in charge. I don't have to be the mastermind. I don't have to be in control. God is god. Being with him reminds me of that.

Conclusion

We started off this sermon by watching a film clip of a man who thought he was God. He made what sounded like a pretty convincing argument. He was educated, skilled, and accomplished. He had the power to heal. He could save someone's life. He thought of himself as the best.

That's where this vision in Daniel begins. A ram and a goat fighting. Each one trying to overcome the other. Each one trying to be all powerful. But the vision continues with someone who takes it a step further. The little horn, who seems to have a lot in common with Antiochus IV, challenges God himself. And he is broken.

If you're living in a world where godless leaders seem to get away with everything, this is a great comfort. Nothing happens apart from God's knowledge. God sees all the terrible stuff that happens in his creation.

And he will not let it go on forever. He will intervene. God steps in.

That's a great comfort if we're suffering under those who have a god complex. It's also a warning to those of us who sometimes think of ourselves as God. God will not let that go on forever either. He will step in and correct us, but he will also step in and come alongside us, make himself present with us.

Either way, it's good news. When God intervenes, it's always good news. It doesn't matter whether we are being rescued from the godless world out there or the godless tendencies of our own hearts. Either way, we need to see God come.

And so we wait. We wait for his coming. We enter his presence now as we wait for the fullness of his presence later. Jesus is here. Jesus is coming.

Notes

- 1 Andy Crouch, *Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013).