

Daniel Series Part 19

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] exhausted, ill, appalled, and confused. If Daniel ever thought that hearing the Word of God was some kind of spiritual pick-me-up, the vision he receives in the third year of King Belshazzar will surely have disabused him of such a misapprehension. Daniel testifies concerning how he was cast down by the vision that he received, exhausted, ill, appalled, confused.

He's left bedridden for several days as he ponders on the awful content of the vision received. Now, that is not a particularly cheery introduction to our own treatment or consideration of the vision, but the subject matter is anything but cheery. I want to consider this chapter and the vision that it contains in the following way. I want to pose three questions and seek to answer them. First of all, what? The second one, and I'll explain what I mean by these questions, but firstly, what? Then, so what? And finally, now what? What, so what, and now what? The answer to the first question, what, will simply be a descriptive presentation of the vision and its interpretation, grounded in the interpretation that we find within the chapter itself, but also its fulfillment in subsequent history, inasmuch as we're able to make that connection. And I think on this occasion, it is possible to do so without going in any flights of fancy. So, what? What is it that we are told?

What does the vision reveal concerning God's purposes in history? The answer to the second question concerns what we today are to learn from the vision and its interpretation and its fulfillment. Hence, so what? The thing is, we can read a chapter like this and say, well, yes, it's the Word of God, but so what? What does it say to us today? What can we learn? What possible benefit can there be for us in what we read in this chapter? So, we want to deal with that. So, what? And then finally, now what?

And that will allow us to briefly explore how we should actively respond to the vision, its interpretation and fulfillment. What? So what? And now what? First of all, then, what?

And before we do embark on answering this question, there are two relevant points that will, I hope, serve to inject some realism into any unrealistic expectation regarding our capacity to interpret every detail of the vision. We're not going to do that, partly for reasons of time and partly because we are unable to interpret every detail of the vision. But in recognizing that, there are two things I just want to say by way of introduction. First of all, that within the chapter, within the vision, if you wish, there is interpretation. Gabriel interprets the vision for Daniel's benefit and for our benefit. But even in that interpretation, which in some parts is very specific, nonetheless, in that interpretation, there are a number of very intriguing aspects of the vision that are not dealt with, presumably because they are not of central importance. Not to say they're unimportant, but if in the interpretation that Daniel is given, there are aspects that are not covered, then that would suggest that they are certainly of secondary importance and that what he deals with, the interpretation that he grants to Daniel, responds to what is central in the vision. The other thing, of course, is that Daniel himself, spiritually discerning though he was evidently had great difficulty in understanding the vision and its interpretation. That is what he himself declares at the very end of the chapter. He says it was beyond understanding.

[4 : 56] Now, it's true that it may be that in speaking in those terms, there is a sense in which Daniel is referring to his inability to accept or to understand why God would do the things that he will do, or why history would take the course that it is going to take. So, not necessarily completely confused about the vision and its interpretation, but simply having difficulty getting his head around it and accepting that this could possibly be what is happening. That said, clearly, Daniel does recognize his own inability to fully understand the vision. It would be surprising if we were to do better than Daniel.

Another thing, just to say, Daniel. Another thing, just to say, by way of introduction is that Daniel received the vision, there is a time reference, a very specific time reference at the beginning of the chapter, in the third year of King Belshazzar's reign, which places the occasion roughly around 550 B.C., before the rise and expansion of the Persian Empire.

Just before, just before, just before, but before. Well, the vision that we've read there in chapter 8 concerns three central characters or symbols. We read, first of all, of the ram with two horns. There follows a reference made to the goat, a goat that begins with one horn, and which is subsequently replaced by four horns.

And the third character or symbol is one of these four horns that begins as a little horn, but we're told that grows in power.

Now, what we are told within the chapter itself is that the ram with the two horns represents the Persian Empire, or if you wish, the Medo-Persian Empire.

[7 : 00] There in verse 20, the interpretation is very explicit. The two-horned ram that you saw represents the kings of Media and Persia.

In the vision itself, the reference is made to, of the two horns, one being a longer horn. And it's generally understood that that would be a reference to Persia, because Persia was very much the dominant partner within the Medo-Persian Empire.

It's also worth noting that by identifying the first character, in this case a beast representing an empire, we are immediately brought to the Medo-Persian Empire.

There is no reference in this vision to the Babylonian Empire, unlike what we had seen previously in Nebuchadnezzar's dream, and indeed in chapter 7 in Daniel's dream of the four beasts.

And that would seem to be because the occasion on which this particular vision is received is when the Babylonian Empire was very much in decline and very close to its demise.

[8 : 07] And so, there is no reference to the Babylonian Empire. As the vision indicates, this Persian Empire, we'll simply call it the Persian Empire, was to expand rapidly west, north, and south.

That is what the vision declares in verse 4. I watched the ram as he charged towards the west and the north and the south. No animal could stand against him.

So, a picture of rapid expansion in these directions, and that is what subsequently happened in world history. Between 549 BC and 539 BC, just one very crucial decade, the Persian army led by King Cyrus spread west, conquering Babylon and Syria and Asia Minor.

It spread north to Armenia and the Caspian Sea, and it spread south as far as North Africa. And as the vision declares, none could rescue from his power.

And indeed it goes on to say, as it so often says of earthly emperors and despots, he did as he pleased and became great.

[9 : 25] Now, at this point, having introduced the Persian Empire and its rapid early expansion, the vision fast forwards, and we are catapulted from roughly 539 BC, two centuries on, to roughly 334 BC, to the rise to world dominion of Greece under Alexander the Great.

And again, the angel in giving the interpretation of the vision to Daniel very explicitly identifies the second beast, the goat, as the king of Greece.

There in verse 21, and thus far we don't need to speculate at all or try and identify these characters because we're given the identification.

Verse 21, the shaggy goat is the king of Greece, and the large horn between his eyes is the first king. So, the goat represents Greece, the rise of the Greek empire under Alexander the Great.

Now, Alexander became a general in the Greek army, a very young man, when he was 21. And as the vision predicts, 200 years before, indeed more than that, he had virtually conquered the known world by the age of 26.

[10 : 52] And the language of the vision could hardly be more descriptive of the astonishing pace of conquest that Alexander the Great enjoyed. There in verse 5, in poetic language but very descriptive language, we are told of the pace with which he would conquer crossing the whole earth without touching the ground.

But the vision does more than predict the rise of the Greek empire. It also would appear to predict a very decisive and brutal victory over the Persian empire that in a sense established Alexander as the dominant world leader.

Here in verses 6 and 7, there is this reference to a very specific, it would appear, and a very decisive victory of the king of Greece over the Persian empire.

We read there in verses 6 and 7, He came towards the two-horned ram, which represents the Persian empire. 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.

[12 : 21] There is, even before we make reference to the battle that it would seem that this is speaking of, there is a delicious irony in a sense in the way the same language is used of these empires that come and go.

At their height, no one can withstand their power, and yet another comes, and those who were so powerful are brought low. But as regards this decisive victory that the vision would seem to be predicting, it certainly is the case that in history we have recorded how in 334 B.C.

The army of Alexander the Great, 35,000 strong, confronted the Persian forces at the Granicus River. Some of you may have seen the film of Alexander.

And the Persian forces were over 100,000 strong, and yet Alexander and his troops gained a decisive victory. There were subsequent victories, but this was the critical victory that would seem to be very clearly described in the vision that Daniel receives.

The goat furiously struck the ram and shattered his two horns. The vision then relates how the single horn is broken off, the single horn on the goat that represents the Greek Empire, the single horn is broken off and replaced by four prominent horns.

[13 : 51] And this can reasonably be understood to refer to the death of Alexander. As the vision states, at the height of his power, we're told there in verse 8, the goat became very great, but at the height of his power, his large horn was broken off.

So the goat is not destroyed, but the large horn, representing the king, is broken off. And again, we know from the history of the world, from sources out with the Bible, that Alexander the Great died, a young man, i.e. sudden death, at the height of his power.

But then the vision speaks of how that same kingdom would be divided, would be divided in four. And again, there is a very telling parallel with what happened in actual fact.

When Alexander died, the empire that he had built up in such a remarkably short time was divided between four of his generals. They divided up the empire, as tends to happen on these occasions.

When there isn't one who is able to replace the dominant emperor, so the empire was divided into four dynasties that together still made up what we might call the Greek empire, but divided in this way, as the vision predicts.

[15 : 20] And of those four nations, the one that occupies the attention of Daniel, or that occupies the attention of the vision, is what has been identified as the Seleucid dynasty, that controlled Syria and beyond, but that roughly gives a geographic reference, called the Seleucid dynasty, because the first general, of those four generals that I mentioned who divided up the empire, well, one of them was General Soloukos Nicator, and from his name, the dynasty takes its own name.

But the vision then, fast forward, when it then goes on to speak of a little horn that emerged from these, from one of these four horns, it would seem to be fast forwarding to the eighth king of this dynasty, to a king called Antiochus.

And we will, in a moment, give a little bit more, the reasons why it's generally understood that this is the king that is being referred to in the vision by this little horn that is referred to growing up from one of the four horns when the Greek empire was divided.

Now here, for those of you who have been able to participate in and be present when we've been going through the book of Daniel and have been considering some of the other dreams and visions, what you may be noticing is that here we have a significant departure from previous visions or dreams.

We're following on from Greece. The visions have moved on to represent the Roman Empire, or certainly that is how they are generally understood. So in the case of Nebuchadnezzar's statue, we had his feet of iron representing the Roman Empire, following on from Greece.

[17 : 13] In Daniel's vision of the four beasts in chapter 7, the fourth beast, generally understood to be a reference to Rome. And then, of course, that allows the visions to move on to what is of particular interest to us, and that is the establishing of God's eternal kingdom under King Jesus.

But in this chapter, there is no reference to Rome, and so consequently to what follows on from Rome and God bringing about the establishing and the growth and the building of his own eternal kingdom.

Which rather begs the question, why this preoccupation in this particular vision with one part of a declining Greek empire, and of that one part of a declining empire, one, in the grand scheme of things, is fairly insignificant king within that dynasty, King Antiochus.

Why? You know, you can understand that the vision would speak of Alexander the Great. Indeed, you might imagine he would occupy the most prominent position in the vision, but that is not what we have.

He is mentioned, but then we move on to be given considerable detail concerning this one king. As I say, fairly insignificant in the grand scheme of things.

[18 : 38] Why is that? I think the key as to why the vision zooms in on and focuses on this particular king, Antiochus, is to be found in verse 9, when we read something of what he did, of the expansion of his own power and of what he goes on to do.

Because we read there in verse 9, out of one of them, that is one of the four horns from the goat that represented the Greek empire, 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.

I think this reference to the beautiful land gives us the key as to why the vision speaks of this man, this king, Antiochus. You see, Antiochus is important from the standpoint of heaven, from God's standpoint, because he was foolish enough to trample on the beautiful land.

And the beautiful land being a reference to the promised land, to Jerusalem, to the land where God had chosen to dwell. And Antiochus tramples on the beautiful land, so beautifully described in the vision.

The vision and its interpretation speaks of the little horn invading the beautiful land. There we've read in verse 9b, it speaks of how he took away the daily sacrifices.

[20 : 06] There in verse 11, clearly a reference to the temple worship and the daily sacrifices that were practiced in the temple in Jerusalem. It speaks of how this king, this little horn, who we've identified as Antiochus, brought low the sanctuary.

In that same verse 11, in verse 12, it speaks of him throwing truth to the ground. Maybe literally, in terms of the scrolls, the Torah, or perhaps this is a symbolic language of his dismissing of the truth.

It speaks of him destroying the holy people. In the interpretation, in verse 25, there is this specific reference to him destroying mighty men and the holy people. And again, in the interpretation, it speaks of his ultimate folly, of him standing against the prince of princes.

He will destroy many and take his stand against the prince of princes. For the reference there or the name there seems to be a name for God himself.

Now, now all of this, all of these atrocities, if you wish, that are described in the vision fit like a glove with King Antiochus. We've already, in a sense, announced that this is who is being spoken of, but certainly everything that we find here would fit with this particular king.

[21 : 27] In 175 B.C., he expanded his dominion that had not originally included Palestine to include Palestine. And he replaced the legitimate high priest with the brother of the high priest who was a puppet high priest placed there by Antiochus.

Having achieved the fairly straightforward task of annexing Palestine to his particular part of the Greek Empire, he then invaded Egypt. Of course, here he really was going into the territory of another.

And while he was on his Egyptian campaign, there were rumors that he had died. And in Jerusalem, the rumor went about that Antiochus had died. And of course, this was the cause of much rejoicing, as you can imagine, given what he had done.

And so what the Jews did was replace the puppet high priest with the legitimate high priest, confident in the assumption that Antiochus was dead.

However, sadly, rumors of his death proved exaggerated. And when Antiochus returns to Jerusalem and discovers what has been done, in revenge, he executed, it is estimated, something of the order of 40,000 Jews in the course of three days.

[22 : 47] He subsequently, it's estimated, in the year 168 B.C., entered the Holy of Holies in the temple and sacrificed a pig.

Now, we don't need to be experts on Jewish traditions and Jewish religious convictions to imagine that if you were to try and think of the most horrendous thing you could possibly do, well, this is what he did.

Sacrificing a pig in the Holy of Holies on the altar of burnt offering, he placed a statue of Zeus in the temple. And of course, in those circumstances, the daily sacrifices simply could not continue, which is precisely what the vision indicates would happen.

The morning and the evening sacrifice is no longer taking place. But of course, the vision also speaks, in particular, the interpretation of it, of his pretensions to deity and of his standing against the prince of princes.

And as if his sacrilege of God's house and his massacre of God's people were not enough, he took to himself, this king Antiochus, he took to himself the name Theos Epiphanes, which means God made manifest.

[24 : 00] In fact, he's often referred to as Antiochus Epiphanes. Indeed, there are still coins that have been found that bear that inscription. On one side, they have a picture or an inscription of his face, and on the other side, he's sitting on a throne, and you have these words, King Antiochus, God made manifest.

Theos Epiphanes. The vision also speaks of his demise. We read in verse 25 and in the second half of the verse, yet he will be destroyed, but not by human power.

In the run that, in the flow of history that's described by the vision, you have the Persians emerging, and then another human power coming and destroying or taking their place.

But in the case of Antiochus, God reserves, as it were, special treatment for him in his own demands, and he is not killed by human power, but that is, if you wish, a direct intervention by God in judgment upon this man.

Again, outside historical references that we have would suggest or would declare that Antiochus died of a strange and painful illness accompanied by deep and unmitigated anguish, again, as a very relatively young man.

[25 : 30] The vision also, to just conclude this, if you wish, descriptive part of the vision and its fulfillment, and as much as we're able to determine that fulfillment, the vision also touches on the duration of this blasphemous and brutal chapter, and speaks in verse 14 of 2,300 evenings and mornings.

Now, we know that there is great excitement in the time references of the book of Daniel, but here, I don't think there's cause for great excitement.

These 2,300 evenings and mornings, the evenings and mornings referring to the evenings and morning sacrifices, is best understood as referring to 1,150 days.

So, 2,300 sacrifices, two a day, divide by two. And that works out at roughly three and a half years. And three and a half years, though it's difficult and it would be foolish to be dogmatic or in a closed way about these things, does seem to reflect or to equate to the time between the desecration of the temple by Antiochus and its reconsecration following his death by a character that you may also be familiar with, Judas Maccabeus, who led a revolt of the Jews against Antiochus.

He didn't have the pleasure of killing Antiochus. God took that upon Himself, but He was the one who was instrumental in reconsecrating the temple following its desecration by Antiochus.

[27 : 06] And as I say, that time when the sacrifices were not being offered would seem to equate to the time reference in the vision. And just to clarify there, in the vision it speaks on a couple of occasions of the end times.

And again, of course, that gets people very excited. And the suggestion would seem to be or people immediately think, well, this is talking about the end of time completely. But it would seem that in chapter 8, rather, the end time is simply a reference to the end of this particular atrocity or blasphemy or desecration under Antiochus and doesn't, is not intended to look beyond that.

But let's move on and more briefly to the second question, and that is, so what? Well, this is what the vision declares. In as much as we're able, we have suggested how the vision was fulfilled, some of it on the basis of the chapter itself, so with great confidence, and some of it by considering history and how it would seem to tie in with the vision.

But so what? So what? Well, the vision, its interpretation and fulfillment are perhaps, for some, perhaps not so for others, but for some, are fascinating.

We've only scratched at the surface of all that could be said and speculated. There are many details that we haven't even made reference to. But the question remains, so what? What does this vision have to teach us today?

[28 : 36] I think the central lesson is one that we've already come across repeatedly in Daniel, poetically affirmed in chapter 4, and we had a sermon that revolved around this verse in chapter 4 where it is declared, heaven rules.

Heaven rules. God rules. This vision also very eloquently and very powerfully declares the rule of God.

And there are three aspects of the rule of heaven, of the rule of God, that stand out. Firstly, God rules over history. You can also say, in the second place, that God rules with justice.

And thirdly, God rules for His people. Or another way that we could say those three things is that we can talk of the extent of God's rule, the manner of God's rule, and the purpose of God's rule.

Thinking firstly then of God ruling over history or the extent of God's rule. And this rule of God over history, over our God, over your God, the God who rules today, the rule of God over history involves two aspects.

[29 : 46] That is the aspect of God determining history, but also of God executing the course of history. The predictive element of God determining history is so evident in the vision.

You see, the vision declares with often precise detail that which will come to pass. And that could only be possible if God is the God who determines the course of history.

And of course, He is such a God. He knows the end from the beginning. He has determined all that will come to pass. He has determined the rise and the fall of empires, the birth and the death of petty tyrants.

For God, there are no surprises. He determines history, but He also executes history. He is a hands-on God intimately and minutely involved in the progress and unveiling of history.

And whether He chooses to use secondary causes or whether He chooses to intervene directly makes no material difference. His control remains the same.

[30 : 57] And this is as true today as it was in Daniel's day. So this is the first thing that we can say in answer to the question, so what? What can we take from this vision? Well, we can take this very clearly, that God rules over history.

But we can also take this truth, that God rules with justice. So moving beyond the extent of God's rule to the manner of God's rule. To affirm, as we have just done, the extent and absolute nature of God's rule leaves unanswered a couple of important questions.

Firstly, we could pose the question, and many have done, what are we to say of human responsibility? Are we all, the good guys and the bad guys, simply pawns on the cosmic chessboard, neither to be commended for the good that we do, nor condemned for the evil that we commit?

How to choose between a Daniel and an Antiochus if all has been determined by God? Well, the Bible is clear. We are all responsible moral agents.

God does commend Daniel, and He does condemn Antiochus. God's determining of history does not override human freedom to choose between right and wrong.

[32 : 13] Now, we may have, and indeed we do have, difficulty in reconciling these truths. But truths, they remain, regardless of our inability to get our head around them.

And this first question concerning human responsibility leads to a second question. How does God rule a world of moral agents? Well, He rules with justice.

God rules with justice. The Persian Empire is brought low. Alexander the Great is brought to heel. Antiochus is destroyed, but not by human power.

And be it by the use of means or by direct intervention, God's justice prevails. In the vision and in its fulfillment, there is one particularly sobering demonstration of God's justice in action.

A reason is given for the horrors that gripped Jerusalem under the heel of Antiochus. In verse 12, we read, because of rebellion, the host of the saints and the daily sacrifice were given over to it, given over to Antiochus.

[33 : 22] And though this is a peculiarly difficult verse to both translate and to understand, the implication seems to be that the rebellion or transgression referred to is that of God's people.

And Antiochus, though guilty as sin for his atrocities, is unbeknown to him an agent of God's just and redeeming judgment on his own people.

So the justice of God occupies itself not only with the tyrants and the enemies, but it occupies itself also with his own people when we rebel against God and go our own way.

God rules over history, the extent of God's rule. God rules with justice, the manner of God's rule. But also God rules for his people, or we might say the purpose of his rule.

We have hinted, or more than hinted, at that already. We've already posed the question, why the focus on Antiochus? Well, because he was the one who desecrated the beautiful land and shed the blood of God's own.

[34 : 33] God's ruling and overruling of history revolves around the furthering of his purposes for his own chosen people. The center of gravity in God's geography is not Babylon or Athens or Rome, but Jerusalem.

And this remains true today. It's no longer the physical Jerusalem that lies at the center of God's attention and concern, but the spiritual Jerusalem, the church, the church of Jesus Christ with Jesus Christ as its head.

In the words of Paul in his letter to the Ephesians, and God placed all things under his feet, the feet of Jesus, and appointed him, appointed Jesus, to be the head over everything for the church, for the church, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way at the very center of God's purposes, even in the outworking of history itself.

We find the church, his church, his people. So what when we think of this chapter? Well, we can draw these important truths.

God rules. The extent of his rule, the manner of his rule, the purpose of his rule. But finally, and more briefly, we ask the third question. Now what?

[35 : 56] Now what? How are we to respond? Well, Daniel helps us here because Daniel responds, and in his response, there are aids and hints as to how we should respond.

There in verse 27, I, Daniel, was exhausted and lay ill for several days. Then I got up and went about the king's business. First of all, be concerned.

What do I mean by that be concerned? Well, Daniel and his illness, his being struck down and appalled at what he had seen, what that demonstrates is how Daniel shares God's concern for his own people.

Why is Daniel struck down in this way? Well, surely it is because of the vision he has received concerning the fate of Jerusalem. Jerusalem that he prayed to three times a day that it would suffer such a horrendous fate leaves him appalled and ill, even though the vision is very clear that these things will occur in the distant future as far as Daniel is concerned.

He himself will not be personally affected. He will not suffer any of this violence. It will be God's people in future generations and yet such is the way in which he identifies with God's concern for his people that he has struck down in the way that he is.

[37 : 13] Well, what about us? We don't need to look into the future to know of how God's people are the victims of violence and persecution and injustice and oppression.

We only need to look across to lands today where this is the case. Antiochus was struck down by God but many have arisen to take his place.

Many who today hate with a passion the beautiful land and furiously persecute God's people. With Daniel we ought to know what it is to be concerned for those who suffer in that way.

Be concerned but also be warned. Antiochus arose as an instrument of God's judgment on his own people. Well, what of us? Do we not have good cause?

Do we not have reasonable cause to conclude that the judgment of God rests on his church in our land? And we won't spend time to give reasons why that would seem to be a reasonable conclusion to come to.

[38 : 18] Be warned and repent. Be concerned, be warned but finally be busy Daniel, we are told, got up and went about the king's business.

In the light of these sobering and solemn truths we are not to despair. Daniel had his days cast down but the time came where he got up and went about the king's business.

We are not to despair. We are not to be paralyzed by fear and foreboding. The days are evil but we are to get up and be about the king's business.

And we are to be about the king's business in the confidence that our king is no mere Belshazzar. We are about the king's business, the king of kings business.

And we are about that business in the confidence that he rules, that he rules over all, that he rules with justice, and that he rules for us, for his people.

[39 : 24] Let us pray.