Westlake Church Lausanne

Difficult Days
Daniel 8

Last weekend we went as a family to the cinema, and as we were walking away Su said, 'film's incredibly powerful, isn't it? It draws you in and works on your emotions.' And the visual can do that, can't it. And in this vision, it's as if Daniel watches a film, and its content – what's going to happen to God's people - leaves him physically and emotionally exhausted.

Look at v1, 'In the third year of the reign of King Belshazzar a vision appeared to me.' So we've moved forward 2-3 years from chapter 7, and it's around 548BC. And if Daniel looked out at the international scene he would have seen Cyrus the Great and the Medo-Persian empire on the rise, and he'd have had good reason to think that change was on its way.

You see, as we know from the next chapter, Daniel knew from the prophet Jeremiah that God had assigned 70 years exile in Babylon for the people of Israel. And the end of those years was fast approaching. And so as Daniel saw Cyrus and the Medo-Persians and Cyrus gaining power against Babylon, it would have been understandable if he had thought the days of suffering for God's people are coming to an end, and freedom is on it's way.

But this vision tells him a very different story. And rather than return from exile ending the suffering and life becoming easier, in fact it will become more difficult, not less, to live out a life of faithfulness to God in the years ahead.

When Power Becomes Oppressive
In this vision Daniel sees himself, v2, 'In Susa the citadel' – what is now Shushan, in SW Iran. It was a Persian powerbase. And, v3, 'I raised my eyes and saw, and behold a ram.' And the ram had two horns, but, v3, 'one was higher than the other.' And in his interpretation of the vision, the angel Gabriel tells Daniel in v20 what this ram represents: 'The ram that you saw with the two horns, these are the kings of Media and Persia.' So, remember in Daniel's dream last week, how the bear came out of the sea with one side lifted up? So here this ram, with its asymmetrical horns, represents the Medo-Persian empire, and the greater power held by the Persians.

And then, v4, Daniel sees 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.' And that's about 200 years of turbulent international history squashed into one verse! - as the Medo-Persians conquered nation after nation. And then Daniel says, 'He did as he pleased and became great.' So if the first part of v4 compresses history into a nutshell, the second does it for power, and the danger of leaders thinking themselves above the law, and using power to make themselves great.

But then Daniel sees another animal, v5, 'A male goat came from the west' and it had one large horn between its eyes. And in v21 Daniel's told who it represents, 'The goat is the king of Greece' and the horn is the first king. So this is Alexander the Great, who lead the Greek empire to conquer the Medo-Persians in 333BC. And taking just four years, it was a stunning military achievement – which is why Daniel sees the goat

coming on, in v5, 'without touching the ground'. And it tramples the first ram to the ground.

So, if Nebuchadnezzar's dream back in chapter 2, and Daniel's dream back in chapter 7 covered 4 empires, this vision is restricted to the middle two. But in reality, it's even more restricted than that, because it homes in on a little horn that arises from the goat.

Verse 8, 'Then the goat became exceedingly great, but when he was strong, the great horn was broken.' And so some 200 years before it happens, Daniel forsees the death of Alexander at the peak of his power, aged just 33. And with no clear successor, the Greek empire divided between four of his generals. Which is why Daniel sees, v8, 'there came up four conspicuous horns toward the four winds of heaven' – just like the four heads of the leopard in his last dream. As Gabriel explains in v22, '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.'

But from one of these four horns, Daniel sees another, little horn sprouting, v9, 'which grew exceedingly great.' And it's this little horn that now takes centre stage. And Gabriel explains that this is another king, v23, 'A king of bold face, one who understands riddles… his power shall be great.' And this is Antiochus IV, who became king of the Syrian remnant of the Greek empire in 175BC. And he's described as being of bold face – because he was, dangerously ambitious. He's described as being one who understands riddles. Now does that mean he's good at crosswords – or liked nothing better than a good Sudoku? No – it means he was cunning, and deceitful, and used those skills to gain and retain power.

But why does he get so much attention in this dream? Because the territory he controlled was nothing in comparison to the vast empires before him. And in terms of military success this man was no Alexander the Great. So why does he take this place of prominence? Because of where he turns his attention. Verse 9, he 'grew exceedingly great toward the south, toward the east, and toward the glorious land' – toward Israel, and God's people returned from exile.

And in this vision Daniel is given advance notice that Antiochus will use his power to oppress and crush God's people: v11-12, 'the regular burnt offering was taken away… the place of [the] sanctuary was overthrown. And a host will be given over to it… and it will throw truth to the ground.' Then Gabriel says in v24-25, 'he shall cause fearful destruction… and destroy mighty men and the people who are the saints… without warning he shall destroy many.' And if you know your history, you'll know the horrors that Antiochus unleashed on the Jewish people.

He carried out a systematic program of persecution to eliminate the Jewish faith and replace it with paganism. He wanted to eradicate any difference between the Jews and anyone else under his rule. In 169BC he forcibly entered the Temple, which had been rebuilt after the exile, and he entered the Most Holy Place. In the space of just 3 days contemporary historians estimate he slaughtered 40,000 people who resisted him in

Jerusalem, including in the temple precincts. He banned the Sabbath and circumcision – and anyone found practicing either was murdered. A collaborator was installed as High Priest, and the temple sacrifices were banned. In their place Antiochus sacrificed a pig on the altar of burnt offering and publically burned the Torah, the Old Testament, murdering anyone found in possession of it. So truth really did fall in the streets. It was like nothing Israel had ever experienced. And then, once he had gained control, Antiochus rededicated the Temple to the Greek god Zeus, and placed a statue of Zeus in the temple. It was, as Daniel overhears the angel saying in v13, 'the transgression that makes desolate', what Jesus will later call the abomination of desolation in the holy place. And in his pride Antiochus called himself, *Antiochus Epiphanes* – Antiochus: God made manifest, Antiochus: God as a man.

So think about what Antiochus was doing. His assault was on worship and on truth. And yet, as the contemporary historians tell us, many preferred to die than compromise.

You see, through this vision, Daniel is told what this battle for Jerusalem, and the temple, and the worship of the people is really about. In v10 he sees this little horn growing great, 'even to the host of heaven. And some of the stars it threw down to the ground and trampled on them.' Then, v11, 'It became great, even as great as the Prince of the host.' Then Gabriel says in v25, 'He shall even rise up against the Prince of princes.' So whilst Antiochus was assaulting religious liberty and truth, in reality this was an assault on God, because who is the Prince of princes, who is the leader of leaders, but God? And when Daniel says in v11 that this king will remove the Prince of the host's sacrifices and overthrow his sanctuary, to whom do the sacrifices and sanctuary belong, but God? And in the arrogance of power, in his pride and ambition, in his desire to control and crush, his assault upon the people of God and the temple of God and the word of God, was an assault upon God himself. Even to the point of claiming to be God.

And yet, incredibly, despite all this, Daniel tells us in v12 that this king 'will act *and prosper'*. It's a reminder that success, whether military or political or financial or electoral, is no sign of God's approval.

And as Daniel watches all this unfold, he hears two angels asking the question many of us ask in the face of suffering and trouble, v13, "How long?" And the answer is, v14, "For 2,300 evenings and mornings." And whether that is 2,300 days, or 1,150 days because each evening and morning is a pair, either would fit for the persecution under Antiochus. Because it was around 6 years from the time he started troubling Israel until deliverance came, and 3 years from the time he entered the temple until it was cleansed and rededicated. So whichever it is, the point is: what is coming is going to be terrible, but it will have an end.

And so Daniel has discovered that the conflict he's been involved in in Babylon – seeking to live out his faith in a deeply pagan environment, trying to seek the welfare of

the city under godless men like Belshazzar, is not a one-off. It won't end with the return from exile. That struggle is going to continue - right up to today.

Forewarned is Forearmed

Ask yourself, why does God tell Daniel all this, 400 years before it actually happens? And part of the answer is, so that when it does happen, those who have to live through it are not caught by surprise, and can know that, even when it seems otherwise, God is in control, and that there will be an end. And that's why Daniel's vision still matters for you and me, and for anyone who has, or is, seeking to live out their faith in a challenging environment.

Look what Gabriel says to Daniel in v17, "Understand, O son of man, that the vision is for the time of the end." Then in v19 he says, "it refers to the appointed time of the end." Now does that mean the end of all things, the end of the world, the second coming of Christ? Well, no. We know from Nebuchadnezzar's and Daniel's dream that after the Greek empire another, more destructive empire, Rome, would emerge. And in this vision there's no mention of the coming kingdom of God as there was in both previous dreams. So this isn't 'the end' end. This is the end of the suffering that Antiochus will bring, until, as the angel says in v14, 'the sanctuary shall be restored to its rightful state.'

And that happened under the great Jewish hero, Judas Maccabeus, Judas the Hammer, who led the revolt against Antiochus in 166BC and retook Jerusalem, and rededicated the temple and restored the sacrifices. All of which the Jewish festival of Hanukkah, the feast of dedication, still celebrates.

And yet, in Matthew 24, Jesus talks of *the abomination of desolation* as a future event: v15, 'When you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place….' In other words, Antiochus is a prototype, a foretaste of more trouble to come. And in 70AD, the Roman general Titus conquered Jerusalem, raised the standard of the Rome over the temple, tore down the curtain and entered the Most Holy Place before burning the Torah on the altar of burnt offering, and finally destroying the temple.

And since then there have been multiple Antiochus Epiphanees, who have sought to curtail religious freedom, oppress God's people and throw truth to the ground. In the last 100 years alone we've seen Stalin, and Hitler, and Pol Pot and Mao – all of whose murderous activities have far exceeded those of Antiochus, but all of whom were motivated by the same atheistic, anti-God ideology.

Now, any opposition we, or our kids at school, might experience here in the West, is trivial in comparison to what others have, or are experiencing around the world. But think what Antiochus was trying to achieve. His project was one of Hellenization. He wanted everyone to live and think and worship like a Greek. He wanted to impose one world-view on everyone and he could not accept the Jews saw things differently. Belief in, and worship of the God of the Bible was simply irreconcilable with the culture and

society he wanted to create. And many Jews went along with him. They saw the attraction of the Greek lifestyle – the world of sports and entertainment and ideas was opened to them. It freed them from the moral constraints of Judaism – it let them live as they wanted to live, like the rest of the world. They just had to abandon their allegiance to God.

It all sounds very familiar doesn't it? And today, the rising secularism of the West presents the same kinds of challenges: the marginalisation of religious belief, and especially Christianity, because it's seen as inhibiting personal freedom. And just as Antiochus opposed the uniqueness of Judaism, so there's opposition to the exclusive claims of Jesus and the gospel. And in our postmodern assertion that there is no absolute truth, and what might be true for you is not true for me, truth is once again thrown to the ground. And there's the pressure, and the temptation, to conform to the world-view of those in power, and the threat of exclusion if you don't.

And that's why Daniel's vision remains so relevant. Because it tells us to expect this kind of thing, because these little horns are going to be a recurring phenomenon, whatever shape they take. It's why in John 15 Jesus warned that the world will hate those who follow him. It's why Paul writes to Timothy and says 'All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted' (2 Tim 3:12). It's why Paul says that when the man of lawlessness comes, the final version of Antiochus, there will be those who 'refused to love the truth' (2 Thess 2:10) that truth will once again be thrown to the ground.

But are they serious? Could you really be hated for being a follower of Jesus, or persecuted for wanting to live a godly life, and will people really turn their back on truth? Apparently yes. And so if our faith is to remain steadfast, we're going to need to persevere.

The Power We Need

Now on the surface, Daniel's vision seems to be all about man's destructive, malevolent power, directed against God's people, doesn't it? And when you see it like that, the temptation is to think that to survive we need to harness power in such a way that it works for our agenda, and our values – not against them. That we need a strongman to defend us. But listen to what the Psalmist says, 'Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation' (Ps 146:3).

Now, why this warning against looking to a political, or military leader as the one who can turn things around for you? Why not look to a prince, or a president, or a prime minister? Well, firstly, the danger is that when the oppressed come into power, they frequently become the oppressors, don't they. There is simply something about power that corrupts. And you might be the oppressed now, but gain power and influence and, over time, you become the oppressor.

But secondly, the psalmist tells us why a strong leader, or political power, is not a good place to put your hope for change: 'When his breath departs, he returns to the earth; on

that very day his plans perish' (Ps 146:4). In other words, think soberly about earthly power – don't be taken in by the big words, or personalities. See them in the long view. They don't last. You see, here in Daniel's vision, we see Alexander the Great – a young, charismatic, phenomenally successful leader – and yet, he's soon gone. And on the surface, Alexander and Antiochus seem the most powerful of men, but neither was in control of their own lives.

So we need a much better source of hope and power for change. We need a much better source of strength to remain steadfast in a hostile world. We need a power that works through those and for those who have no power. A power that inspires loyalty even when the cost is great. A power that is willing to sacrifice itself. A power that enables us to stand against injustice and oppression without making us oppressors. A power that helps us love those who oppose us, not crush them. A power that gives us the courage to speak truth to power, without being corrupted by that power, without ourselves letting truth fall in the streets.

So where can you get that kind of power? Secularism and atheism cannot give it to you can they? They have no foundation upon which costly sacrifice and love of enemies can be built. And religion based on self-improvement cannot give you this because it makes you proud, and that so easily leads to oppression.

So we need another source of strength to stay steadfast in the face of oppressive power. Listen once more to the psalmist: 'Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord his God… who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed' (Ps 146:5-7). So the strength and help and hope you need is in God, he says. And whilst on the surface this vision is all about man's power – the power of princes - beneath the surface there is a much greater power at work. You see, it's God who gives Daniel this vision in the first place – so it's God who knows what the future holds. It's God who has set the number of days he will allow the suffering to continue, and it will not last a day longer than he says. And it's God who will bring Antiochus down, v25, 'he shall be broken – but by no human hand.'

So the message of Daniel's vision is that it's to this God, in ultimate control of human history, that we should look for strength. And it's this God who has entered our human history. As John writes in his gospel, 'At that time the Feast of Dedication took place at Jerusalem…' the feast of Hanukkah, when Israel was celebrating the rededication of the temple from the horrors of Antiochus Epiphanes – Antiochus: God manifest, 'and Jesus was walking in the temple… So the Jews gathered around him and said to him… "If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." Jesus answered them… "I and the Father are one" (John 10:22-30). I am God made manifest. But he had not come to oppress others like Antiochus did, Jesus was himself oppressed and crushed by earthly powers: by the strongmen of his day.

And rather than raise up in the temple what Daniel calls here in v13 'the transgression that makes desolate', Jesus took upon himself all our transgressions, and at the cross he was made desolate, and was abandoned, as the Father turned his face away. But in

dying for us, he became the one final, perfect sacrifice – and so did, with his self-sacrificing power, what Antiochus could never do, and once and for all removed the daily sacrifice for sin.

And it's knowing this power in your own heart – the power of what Jesus has done for you at the cross, the power of his resurrection from the dead - that can give you both the desire and the strength to remain steadfast in the face of hostility. Because you know it's the Lamb of God who has triumphed, not the ram or the goat. And you know that even when you didn't deserve it, even when you were a liar and had thrown truth to the ground, when you were a proud oppressor, he loved you and died for you. And when you know that, you can't hate those who hate you, because you know that you, a hater, have been loved. So the power of Jesus will give you a love for him that inspires deep loyalty, and a love for others that doesn't oppress, regardless of the cost.

You see, as we finish, look how Daniel responds to this vision. Verse 27, 'I, Daniel, was overcome and lay sick for some days… I was appalled by the vision.' But why was he so cut up when this was about something hundreds of years in the future – that would never trouble him? Because true spirituality cares for those beyond yourself doesn't it – it cares for those in other nations and in coming generations. But then notice what he does: v27, 'Then I rose and went about the king's business.' So, knowing the hostility to come, he did not retreat into the ghetto. He got up and carried on the work God had given him to do.

And knowing God's power, and the power of the cross, can give you the strength, and the confidence to keep on seeking the welfare of the city where God has placed you, even when you know difficult days lie ahead.