

# ‘UNSTOPPABLE POWER & INEVITABLE DESTRUCTION’ DANIEL 8

**[St Mark’s Northbridge, November 24, 2019- All Services]**

## 1. Knowing The Future.

Like most of us, I expect, I have a love/hate relationship with knowing the future. When I know what’s coming up for me, I can be either filled with anxiety or filled with excitement. I’m sure you know what I’m talking about. You have a difficult meeting or a difficult conversation you know you have to have. You know when it’s going to be. And in the days before-hand it can be hard to get it out of your mind, hard to concentrate on other things. Knowing the future can fill our hearts with worry. But then perhaps you’ve got something coming up that you’ve really been anticipating, and whenever you think about it a little smile appears on your face, and you feel like you can endure the daily grind just that little bit easier because you’ve got this to look forward to. Knowing the future can also flood our hearts with gladness.

In Daniel 8, Daniel learns about the future. And we’re not talking here about a difficult conversation or a great dinner with friends. Instead we’re talking about the rising and falling of empires, the fate of kingdoms, the fortunes not just of an individual, but of a whole nation. And the weight of it rests very heavily on Daniel. As we’ll see, there are some things in here that would’ve given his heart solid reasons for hope. But for the most part, he didn’t like what he saw and heard. It overwhelmed him with grief and anxiety. This was one of those moments when perhaps he might’ve wished he’d never had the vision, that he’d never come to know this future. Remember the very last verse of the chapter?

[Read 8:27]

Let’s remind ourselves of what Daniel saw and heard that caused this reaction. And then when we’ve done that, I’d like to reflect on what the message was for Daniel in this, and then what the message is for us.

## 2. The Vision & The Interpretation.

Daniel’s vision here is pretty bizarre. It’s like something that comes from an imaginative fantasy novel. And in many ways it has a lot in common with what we saw last week in chapter 7. But this vision comes to Daniel two years after the vision in chapter 7- in the third year of King Belshazzar. And basically he sees a series of animals with horns who do things to each other and to God’s people. And then in the second half of the chapter, Daniel relays to us what he heard from the Angel Gabriel who interpreted the vision for him.

There are five key figures in the vision Daniel receives, and each figure is given an interpretation. Let me run you through them.

**- the ram {1<sup>st</sup> Slide}**

Firstly there's the ram. In the vision, verses 3-4, there's a ram with two long horns. The ram charges around and defeats every other creature he decides to challenge. As verse 4 says: 'No animal could stand against it, and none could rescue from its power. It did as it pleased and became great.'

And in verse 20 we're told that the ram represents the empire of the Medes and the Persians.

### **- the ram's two horns**

And so, the ram's two horns represent the kings of those nations- the king of Media, and the king of Persia.

### **- the goat {2<sup>nd</sup> Slide}**

And then next in Daniel's vision he sees a goat with a prominent horn. And in his vision the goat travels so fast- verse 6- that it seems he's not even touching the ground. Perhaps a bit like the road runner in those old Bugs Bunny cartoons? And then, verse 7, he furiously attacks the two-horned ram. And whereas verse 4 had told us that none could rescue from the ram's power, now we discover that in the face of the goat the ram was 'powerless'. {3<sup>rd</sup> Slide} The goat tramples the ram on the ground. The goat, like the ram before him, becomes great<sup>1</sup>. But, in the height of his power, his prominent horn is broken off.

Well, verse 21 tells us that the goat is the King of Greece, and the horn between his eyes is the first Greek King. Many people have seen this as a reference to Alexander the Great<sup>2</sup>- the Greek king who really broke the power of the Persian Empire.

### **- the four new horns**

And then next in Daniel's vision come four new horns where the former horn used to be. Verse 22 tells us that these four horns represent the four kingdoms that emerge from the nation ruled by the first Greek king. They are, however, less powerful than the first Greek king.

### **- the next horn**

And then finally there's one more horn. Out of the four new horns grows the next horn. It's described from verse 9. It starts small but grows in power. It grew so much it could reach up to heaven. And it threw some stars to the earth and trampled on them. Then it set itself up to be as great as the commander of the Lord's army- possibly a reference to a senior angel, or even to God himself. He then goes after the 'daily sacrifice'- the spiritual staple of Israelite religion, and also the sanctuary- the central sacred place in Jewish life. And God gives his people over to this evil

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<sup>1</sup> Verse 8, cf. verse 4.

<sup>2</sup> In the second half of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC.

because of their rebellion against him- verse 12. So the horn prospers in every way, even vanquishing truth itself.

And in verses 23-25, we're given the interpretation. This 'next horn' is a fierce looking king who rises up. He is a 'master of intrigue' which sounds interesting; but it turns out he's just plain evil. His strength is not his own<sup>3</sup>. But he causes 'astounding devastation'. He destroys the people of God. He causes deceit to prosper. He takes his stand against the prince of princes<sup>4</sup>. And this is what makes him unique in this chapter. His physical attack on Israelite land, people, and temple amounts to a spiritual assault against the armies of God in heaven. He has ultimately made himself an enemy of God. **And that, of course, is his fatal mistake. Because clearly God was willing to use him to bring discipline to his people. God allowed his power to flourish for a time. But when he opposed God to God's face, that was always going to be the end. God does not tolerate his evil forever. Listen to the understated way verse 25 describes his fall: 'Yet he will be destroyed, but not by human power'.** He who destroys- verse 24- ends up being the one destroyed- verse 25.

At one level, as I said, this is a bizarre vision. But unlike many other bizarre visions in the Bible, this one has its own built-in translation. So it's not really that complicated to get our heads around. The vision represents the events of history that would unfold in the years and decades following Daniel's dream<sup>5</sup>. It represents the rise and fall of kingdoms. And not just any kingdoms, but the specific historical kingdoms named here. The kingdom of the Medes and Persians. Then the Greek kingdom and the smaller kingdoms that came from it. And then the kingdom of the fiercest king. This one, admittedly, is not specifically identified<sup>6</sup>. And yet it's still pretty clear what's being described. It's a period of history in which a particularly arrogant king sets himself up against God's people, and, in fact, against God himself. And yet, this is a vision, about how that kind of evil will not be allowed to prosper indefinitely. God remains the king over all the kings. And that's the heart of what this vision seeks to remind Daniel of.

### 3. The Message For Daniel.

But let's now take a few minutes just to break that down. What was really the message for Daniel in this vision? I want to point out three things.

#### - the flourishing of evil

Firstly, the vision makes a point about the flourishing of evil. When the last horn, the fierce-looking king is described here, we learn that he deliberately and violently opposes God, his truth, and his people. Whereas the earlier kings in the vision were powerful but perhaps morally ambiguous, there is no ambiguity about the final king.

<sup>3</sup> Perhaps he rides on the coat-tails of those powerful kings who went before him? Perhaps his power comes from Satan himself? Perhaps the most likely meaning here (especially given v.25) is that he is allowed to flourish only by the power of the Sovereign God himself?

<sup>4</sup> This could be a reference again to a senior angel or to God himself- the same language is used here (in the original) as was used to describe the commander of the Lord's army in v.11.

<sup>5</sup> This is what is meant by 'the time of the end' (v.17), the 'time of wrath' (v.19), and 'the distant future' (v.26).

<sup>6</sup> Though most scholars identify him as Antiochus Epihanes IV- late 3<sup>rd</sup> Century to early 2<sup>nd</sup> Century BC.

He is a nasty piece of work. He is wicked. Yet notice that God doesn't just allow this evil to exist. God actually allows evil to flourish. Look at the use of the word 'prosper' in verse 12.

[Read 8:12]

And listen again to verse 24: 'He will succeed in whatever he does'. And verse 25: 'He will cause deceit to prosper'.

This is the first thing Daniel needed to learn: that God, in his mysterious but perfect purposes, would allow evil to flourish. And it's this realisation, I think, which best explains Daniel's reaction to his vision. You remember that verse 27 describes him as worn out, exhausted, and appalled. He had to take a few mental health days just to recover. And that's because he now knew that days were coming which would be bitterly, bitterly awful for the people of God- for himself perhaps, and certainly for his fellow-Israelites. They would be lied to, persecuted, and furiously opposed. And God would not only allow it to happen. He would allow it to prosper.

You know when you wake up from a nightmare and you feel terrified or deeply distressed and it takes you a few minutes for your pulse rate to return to normal as you realise it was just a dream? Well imagine what it would be like for Daniel to wake up from his nightmare only to realise that it was real. All too real. This wasn't just a terrible trick of his imagination. This was a prophecy from God. And all of God's prophecies come true. No wonder he felt as he did.

### **- the limits imposed on evil**

But secondly, and very importantly, Daniel also learnt from this that there would be limits imposed on evil. Limits imposed by God. We haven't yet talked much about verses 13-14, but they are very significant in the chapter as a whole. Let me remind you.

[Read 8:13-14]

That last little phrase there would've meant the world to Daniel. It was a little seed of hope in the midst of an otherwise very bleak picture. No doubt it was that little phrase, amongst others, which helped Daniel recover from the vision to some extent and get back to work in the king's service. Because no matter how appalling the vision was, what appalled Daniel was not the final word. One day the sanctuary 'thrown down' would be the sanctuary 'reconsecrated'- restored.

2,300 evenings and mornings is just a symbolic number I think. Because the key point here is that it's a period that will come to an end. Evil will not flourish for ever. God will allow it to prosper for a time. But that time is limited. And this would have planted a seed of confidence in Daniel's heart.

And it's a good reminder to us too. Because we live in our own 'time of wrath'<sup>7</sup>. And as we look around at our world today, we too can see evil flourishing. It's hard enough to get our heads around why God would allow it to exist. But we often find ourselves asking why God has allowed it to prosper. Because at many times and in many places, it does. And when we see that, it can be easy to feel overwhelmed. We can quickly give in to despair about it. There's so much evil in the world. What can I possibly do to hold back the tide? Is there any point even trying to resist evil, or work against it, or pray against it? Daniel 8 reminds us that there is. Just as it reminded Daniel. Because though evil prospers, it can only prosper within the limits imposed by Almighty God. And it has a used-by date.

### - the inevitable destruction of evil

And that brings us to the third point here too. God will ultimately and inevitably destroy evil. There is one phrase in this chapter that would've been even more encouraging to Daniel than the end of verse 14. And that was the final sentence of verse 25.

[Read 8:25]

God is the destroyer of evil. That's not a word we use to describe God very often. We tend to choose names and adjectives for God that look slightly better on a CV. But this is what this chapter told Daniel, and tells us. In one respect at least this is a perfectly appropriate word for God. When it comes to evil, he is its destroyer.

{As many of you know, I play in a local cricket team on Saturday afternoons. And in my grade the batting team supplies the game's umpires. It doubles as a cost-saving measure and a kind of lovely honour system. Anyway, a couple of weeks ago, as I was umpiring, one of the players on my team failed to complete a full run when he was running between the wickets. And according to the laws of cricket his error needs to be signalled so that one run can be deducted from the score. It's called running 'one short'. So I signaled one-short to the scorers. Even though it was just a careless mistake from the batsman rather than anything intentional, it was still the right thing for me to call one short. But when we came off the field shortly after at the end of the innings, this player on my team got quite cross at me. He felt my call had been unnecessary and unkind. And he, like the rest of the players on my team, knows I'm a Christian. And he chose that moment, in front of several other players mind you, to announce that my umpiring call was the 'most unchristian thing I could possibly do'. I was a little taken aback! But you'll be pleased to know that I think I handled it well and he calmed down pretty quickly and understood why I'd done what I'd done.

But as I thought about it later, what really interested me was the assumption behind his accusation. The assumption was that the more Christian thing to do in that situation was to ignore the transgression and act like it hadn't happened. The assumption was that Christians should err on the side of letting sins go rather than

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<sup>7</sup> Verse 19.

acting rightly. The assumption was that it's not particularly Christian to act justly. And I think you and I run into that assumption a lot these days. But I want to say that Christians need to reclaim justice. It isn't Christian to ignore transgression or to let sin go. It is Christian to love righteousness and justice.}

And that's because God loves righteousness and justice. And that's a part of God's character that Christians ought to both celebrate and emulate. When we read here that God is the destroyer of evil, we ought not be embarrassed by his destructive tendency. Rather we ought to rejoice- rejoice that he hates evil and that he's able to bring evil people to justice. I suspect Daniel did.

#### 4. The Message For Us.

And of course, the message of chapter 8 for Daniel is also a message for us. Because even though the Medo-Persian empire and the Greek empire and the reign of the fierce-looking king have come and gone, nevertheless some of the things that Daniel was living through so long ago, are things we find ourselves thinking about and experiencing too. And, in particular, the Scriptures make it very clear to us that the days of God's people being persecuted are not over. The days when evil flourishes are not completely done yet. The threat of deceit vanquishing truth is a threat we still live with<sup>8</sup>. And so we still need to see the vision of Daniel 8. And in particular, we need to learn to treasure what it tells us about God. So I want to finish today with these three points: appreciating the revelation of God, trusting the power of God, and embracing the victory of God.

##### - appreciating the revelation of God

So first, appreciating the revelation of God. This chapter reminds us that God is in the business of revealing things to his people. He reveals his purposes. He reveals his character. And he even reveals the future. At times, as it was here, that can be very overwhelming. And yet, even when it's hardest to hear, God's revelation is always an act of kindness. He reveals what he reveals because of love. He speaks to us so that we will know the things we need to know, even if they're things we we'd rather not know. He opens up his mind and heart to us because he cares for us.

For example, it's kind of him to warn us that we will suffer for being Christians. And it's great to be told that when we do, it's not because he's lost control. It's one thing, isn't it, for God to be powerful and to be just, but it's another thing altogether for us to know that he is. And the fact that we do know is a testament to how kind he is. We can only know what God's like by him revealing it to us. But when we do know, that's when we can begin to order our lives and our thinking accordingly. If we didn't know what God is like, our lives would be very different indeed.

##### - trusting the power of God

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Luke 21, 2 Thessalonians 2, Revelation 12-13.

And probably the main thing we're told here about what God is like, is that he is powerful. So this is the second thing to highlight now. Daniel 8 urges us to trust the power of God.

Because more than anything else that is the theme of this vision. Of course, this is really the theme of the whole book- that God is king, king over all kings. But the particular dimension of his kingship that this chapter stresses is his power. Listen again for this idea as I re-read you some verses.

Verse 4.

[Read 8:4]

Verse 7.

[Read 8:7]

Verse 9.

[Read 8:9]<sup>9</sup>

Seemingly, the figures in the vision progressively outdo each other in power. Unstoppable power. The ram appears to be supremely powerful. But then it turns out that the goat is even more powerful and can't be overthrown. But then it turns out that the final horn is more powerful still. Surely no-one can overturn his power? He's the most powerful of all. But no.

Verse 25.

[Read 8:25]

This is the climax of the chapter. Just when you thought you'd seen the greatest power there is, there is a power greater; and so much greater that his overthrow of the most powerful force of evil described here is effortless, understated. Here is irresistible power to trump all irresistible power. Here is greatness to outshine all greatness. Here is destruction to overwhelm all other destruction. Here is God.

Even seemingly unstoppable forces are under God's hand. Which means of course that, in the end, the word "unstoppable" in our sermon title today should be in inverted commas. It's not really unstoppable at all. Not when God's in the frame.

And brothers and sisters, I hope I don't need to remind you that this is our God. And if he really is all powerful then that has all sorts of implications. It means we shouldn't be cowed into fear or silence by forces that are against us in our society. Daniel 8 reminds us that even the most seemingly powerful forces may well be forgotten by

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<sup>9</sup> See also verse 22.

history in days to come. And if they are evil, God will not let them exercise their power without limit.

But the power of God has other implications for us too. It means that whatever it is that's stressing us in life, whatever's making us anxious needs to be viewed in the context of a greater reality. Reflecting on God's power should, quite simply, make us less anxious. Because his power is in our corner and there is nothing we face that he can't handle. You see, the power of God is an endlessly practical reality. It's not just something we believe. It's not just on the list of boxes you'd have to tick on a survey if someone asked you to answer some questions about what God is like. It's a truth that transforms daily life. Our God is powerful- more powerful than all others and all else. And so it's genuinely silly how much power we grant other people in our lives, how impressed we let ourselves become by people in the world, how anxious we get, how prayer-less we become- it's silly because the God we serve, and who is with us, is more powerful than all of them put together- by a cosmic mile, and then some.

### **- embracing the justice of God**

And so thirdly and finally- embracing the justice of God. Because what this chapter tells us about the destruction of the evil king by God, prefigures a much greater victory of God over all that is evil. Let me remind you of what Revelation 19 tells us about the rider on the white horse- the one who brings the final and perfect destruction of evil. Revelation 19:13.

[Read Revelation 19:13-16]

As it was back in Daniel's day, so now. All evil has a used-by date. God has imposed limits. And when the time has come for him to end its sway, God will destroy. Jesus- the King of Kings and Lord of Lords- will unleash his wrath.

All who have persisted in shaking their fists in God's face will come to judgement. All who have persisted in deriding him will be swallowed up by his justice. All who have persisted in propagating lies about him will be stopped in their tracks by the piercing light of his eternal truth. All who have persisted in opposing him will be vanquished.

And what that means is that heaven won't just be good because there will be no more cancer, or broken relationships, or crying yourself to sleep at night. But heaven will also be good because there will be no more smug letters from atheists to the SMH; there will be no more stand-up comics mocking God's son, and God's word, and God's people; there will be no more marginalization of Christians in the work-place or in families because of their loyalty to Jesus; there will be no more Christians being killed, or bashed, or excluded for their faith; and there will be no more people presuming they know better than God or presuming there is no judgement in the end.

What this also means is that there will no more evil of any kind. I've had three separate conversations this week with people who've told me about some great injustice they've been impacted by, or they've become aware of, and in all three conversations we agreed there was very little hope of justice coming to the guilty in

this life. They were conversations about bosses who mistreat their employees, conversations about people who lie under oath in court, conversations about husbands and fathers who abuse their wives and children. And I guess I have conversations like that most weeks. You probably do too. But our God hates evil. And he loves justice. And one day his justice will bring to light every act of evil the world has ever seen.

Because the rider on the white horse is coming over the top of the hill. And when he arrives, the power of God will be seen for all it is. The power of God will be bent towards his justice- the inevitable destruction of his enemies and his vindication of all who've been faithful to him.

[Read Revelation 19:16]