

The Times Are in His Hands

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 20 February 2022

Preacher: Paul Brennan

[0 : 0 0] Well, we are going to turn out to our Bibles, and as you know, Paul has begun a series in the second half of the book of Daniel. Last week, we were looking at Daniel chapter 7, and so we're going to read together this morning in Daniel chapter 8.

Daniel chapter 8. Now, this is a long and complicated chapter full of all kinds of strange beasts, so you better pay attention, and Paul is going to help us understand it, I hope.

I just have to read it. So Daniel chapter 8, reading from verse 1. In the third year of the reign of King Belshazzar, a vision appeared to me, Daniel, after that which appeared to me at the first.

And I saw in the vision, and when I saw, I was in Susa, the capital, which is in the province of Elam. And I saw in the vision, and I was at the Ulai Canal.

I raised my eyes and saw, and behold, a ram standing on the bank of the canal. It had two horns. Both horns were high, but one was higher than the other, and the higher one came up last.

[1 : 1 9] I 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. However, he did as he pleased, and he became great.

As 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. He 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.

I 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. Then the goat became exceedingly great.

[2 : 2 1] But when he was strong, the great horn was broken. And instead of it, there came up four conspicuous horns towards the four winds of heaven. Out of one of them came a little horn, which grew exceedingly great towards the south and toward the east and towards the glorious land.

It 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.

It 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.

And 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.

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?

[3 : 30] The transgression that makes desolate. And the giving over of the sanctuary and host to be trampled underfoot. And he said to me, For two thousand three hundred evenings and mornings, then the sanctuary shall be restored to its rightful state.

When I, Daniel, had seen the vision, I sought to understand it. And behold, there stood before me one having the appearance of a man.

And I heard a man's voice between the banks of the Ulai. And it called, Gabriel, make this man understand the vision. So he came near where I stood.

And when he came, I was frightened, fell on my face. But he said to me, Understand, O son of man, that the vision is for the time of the end.

And when he had spoken to me, I fell into a deep sleep with my face to the ground. But he touched me and made me stand up. He said, Behold, I will make known to you what shall be in the latter end of the indignation.

[4 : 42] For it refers to the appointed time of the end. As for the ram that you saw with the two horns, these are the kings of Media and Persia.

And the goat is the king of Greece. And the great horn between his eyes is the first king. As for the horn that was broken, in place of which four others arose, four kingdoms shall arise from this nation, but not with his power.

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.

And his 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. By his cunning, he shall make deceit prosper under his hand.

[5 : 50] 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. The vision of the evenings and the mornings that has been told is true.

Seal up the vision, for it refers to many days from now. Thy Daniel was overcome and lay sick for some days. And then I rose and went about the king's business.

But I was appalled by the vision and did not understand it. Amen. May God bless to us this, his word.

Amen. Well, good morning, folks. And please do turn up Daniel 8 and have that in front of you as we spend a few moments looking at this chapter together this morning.

[6 : 59] Now, at first glance, it's a complex, difficult chapter, isn't it? But here's the big thing that this chapter is teaching us. Here's the big message for us today.

This chapter is teaching us that our God is a God who graciously forewarns his people about what is to come so that his people can remain steadfast.

He is warning his people of what is to come so they can remain steadfast. And he does that. He is able to do that because he is the sovereign Lord.

He is the Lord of history and he is in control. And he knows what is coming. It's very much like the words of Jesus to his disciples there in the upper room.

He's been telling them what is to come, what they can expect in terms of opposition and persecution. And Jesus says to his disciples, I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away.

[8 : 02] And in this chapter in Daniel, God is again demonstrating his mastery over history so that his people and so that you and I would not fall away but would rather trust God and keep going.

That is what this chapter is here for. And here in Daniel 8, he is giving the generations that would come afterwards, that would come after Daniel, he is giving them details about how history is going to unfold so that when the hardships come, they won't panic but they will endure.

Now there's lots of detail and striking imagery here in this chapter and we could get bogged down, lost in all the minutiae, but we need to make sure that we don't miss the wood for the trees.

We need to make sure that we do grapple with the big message of this chapter and consider its implications for us today. Even though it might seem very alien to us, the imagery spectacular, shocking, this is part of the scriptures and we need to remember what these words are here for.

Remember Paul's words in Romans 15 where he talks about the purposes of the scriptures. He says, for whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction. That is New Testament Christians that through endurance and through the encouragement of the scriptures, we might have hope.

[9 : 38] And that is certainly, I trust, the outcome of spending this morning in Daniel 8 that we would be instructed, that we would be encouraged so that we might have hope.

Now before we go to the detail, it's important to remember who this is written for. It's a vision given to Daniel. Note verse 1, the date.

It's the third year of King Belshazzar. So this is a couple of years after the massive vision we saw last week in Daniel 7. This is two years later and things were going to be much harder for God's people now under Belshazzar's reign.

It was early days, but the events that we read about in chapter 5 weren't too far away. Remember what happened in Daniel 5 and Belshazzar stripping the temple of all its possessions, mocking God.

These were difficult days for God's people. And Daniel would, by this point, by year 3, under Belshazzar, be feeling the pressure already. And although the details of this vision, they are looking hundreds of years down the line, as we'll see, the implications for Daniel and what he sees here had their impact.

[10 : 57] Even though this was looking at history to come, there were still implications for Daniel living there in the third year of Belshazzar. And what Daniel sees here in this vision, alongside what he saw in Daniel 7 last week, surely what he sees here equips him to stand firm.

Surely what we see here enables him to do what he does in Daniel 5 and Daniel 6 as he faces Belshazzar and the Persian Empire coming in and what happens with Darius and the den of lions.

These visions equipped him to face those days. And as well as applying to Daniel and to generations that would live through the events described in this chapter, this chapter applies to us too because it describes not only what's happened in the second century BC, but it describes a very familiar pattern that God's people will have to reckon with in every generation, including ours, until the return of Christ that we read about there in Daniel 7.

This chapter prepares and equips us for life as Christians in this age. this is a word for us to instruct us, to encourage us so that we might have hope.

And this is a chapter with special relevance for the people of God. This vision in chapter 8 is written in Hebrew.

[12 : 30] Now that's a fairly niche point you might think, but it is significant because Daniel chapters 2 to 7 were not written in Hebrew. They were written in the universal common language of the day, Aramaic.

It would be a bit like switching from Gaelic to English. Chapters 2 to 7 were written in the language of Aramaic, universal scale. Everyone could read it and understand it.

It's very much setting out the global implications of the sovereign God in chapters 2 to 7. But now that we switch back to Hebrew in chapter 8, we're very much focusing in on the people of God in particular.

Chapter 8 is a message of particular relevance for the people of God. Not to say there aren't broader implications for everybody, but the main message is for the people of God.

And that's clear as we read and see what is focused on in this chapter. Namely, this is about the persecution of God's people under the rulers of this world and of one ruler in particular.

[13 : 43] So there's a slight narrowing of focus as we come to chapter 8. Chapter 7 was massive and global. Chapter 8 is a bit more focused on the people of God.

Well, that's enough wagging on the T. Let's look at this chapter under two headings. Two key things we're going to see in this chapter. First, we see that God graciously prepares his people for difficult times.

That's the first thing we see. God is graciously preparing his people for difficult times. We see here that God is reminding Daniel and later generations and us it's reminding us who is really in charge of human history.

He controls it and he reveals it. And we need to remember that because history and the events that we face they scare us, don't they?

Who isn't a bit nervous about what's going on on the Ukrainian border right now? Who's not a bit nervous about where the West is headed? So let's run through the details of the history that this chapter presents us with and then we'll draw out two key lessons under this first point.

[15 : 02] Now in the previous vision, if you were here last week, Daniel 7, there were four beasts in that vision and these four beasts, as we saw last time, correspond to four different human empires.

The Babylonian Empire, the Medo-Persian Empire, the Greek Empire, and then lastly an empire of an entirely different order, beginning with the Roman Empire and really encompassing every empire that follows until the end of time.

But this vision in chapter 8, it focuses on two beasts, and it focuses on beasts 2 and 3 from the vision in chapter 7.

These are the kingdoms that would be the main players on the stage of human history for the next 400 years. From the point where Daniel is standing, the next two big empires would be the Medo-Persian Empire and the Greek Empire.

And that is the focus in Daniel 8. Look at verse 3. Here's what Daniel sees in his vision. He saw a ram standing on the bank of the canal.

[16 : 15] And we're told in verse 20 that this ram is the kings of Media and Persia, which makes sense of the location where Daniel sees this vision.

Notice verse 2. He's in Susa, which is the capital of the Persian Empire. And this ram has two horns and was charging westwards and northwards and southwards.

Just look at verse 3 there and verse 4. There was no one who could rescue anyone from its power. No one could stand before it. He did as he pleased, became great.

And this is exactly what happened in history. The Persian Empire defeated the Babylonian Empire. You can read about that and what happened in Daniel chapter 5. You see the night, the very night when Babylon crumbled and the media Persian Empire stood in.

But the next beast, verse 5, is a goat. It comes from the west. Without touching the ground, it strikes down the ram.

[17 : 23] The ram had no power before the goat and was cast down and trampled upon. And again, that is exactly what happens. We are told that this goat, verse 21, is the king of Greece.

the Greek empire under Alexander the Great, the great horn of verse 21, sweeps across the ancient world and had built a massive empire by the age of 26.

And yet, it all comes crashing down. Look at verse 22. Alexander, we know, died very suddenly at the age of 32. And in his place came four others.

Look at verse 22. four followed this great king, but with considerably less power. And that is what happened. The Greek empire that Alexander had built came under control of four of his generals.

And it was the fourth of these generals under the leadership of Antioch as the fourth that really gets the attention in the vision from verses 9 to 14.

[18 : 37] and then 23 to 26. This is the king. This is the leader who will do terrible things to the Lord's land and to the Lord's people.

This particular ruler would desolate the temple. people He was a cruel and arrogant man. He called himself Antiochus Epiphanes.

In other words, God reveals God's revelation. He had something of an ego, this particular ruler. And if you read the history, you'll see that he killed many thousands of people in Jerusalem in AD 169 as he passed through on his way back from Egypt.

He removed the temple priests. He looted the temple. But worse was yet to come. And a couple of years later when he sent his chief tax collector to Jerusalem with instructions of pillage and massacre and ruin, this was accompanied by a ruthless paganization program which was designed to corrupt and to decimate every aspect of Israel faith and practice there in Jerusalem.

Let me read to you a description of that program of paganization. This scheme under Antiochus Epiphanes, this scheme called for the abolition of the temple cult.

[20 : 09] It called for the abolition of the observance of the law and in its place to put pagan cults. The observance of all Jewish ordinances in particular those relating to the Sabbath and circumcision were prohibited on the pain of death.

In every town in Judea sacrifice was to be offered instead to heathen gods. And where the people did not comply willingly, they were obliged to do so by force.

Once a month, the check was made and whoever was found with the scroll of the Torah or had their child circumcised was put to death. A heathen altar was built in Jerusalem on the great altar of burnt offering and sacrifice was made not to the God of Israel but to the Olympian Zeus.

That's a brief description of the paganization program that was put in place by this ruler, this little horn that we read about here in Daniel 8.

It was a systematic program to destroy the worship of the people of God. However, a few years later the temple was cleansed and it was rededicated under the leadership of Judea's Maccabees in December 164 BC so just about three years later.

[21 : 35] And that seems to be what all the dates are referring to there in verse 14. It's a bit puzzling isn't it as you read that but that seems to correspond to the desecration of the temple in 167 BC and its restoration three and a half years later.

That's roughly 2300 mornings and evenings. So that seems to be what's being described there. And as verse 25 hints at Antiochus comes to an abrupt and a surprising end which is exactly what happens.

He died in mysterious circumstances around the end of 164 BC whilst returning from Persia. Now all this in Daniel's vision is taking place hundreds of years before these events that we read about here in the second century BC.

It's incredibly accurate. And all that Daniel sees happens. And this shouldn't surprise us should it because Daniel's God is the God who is sovereign over all things and over all of human history.

But so what? What is the implication of all this ancient history for us? Well we'll look at two key things that God was teaching Daniel and those who would follow in the centuries after him and for every generation of believers since including us in terms of how he is graciously preparing his people for difficult times.

[23 : 11] The first thing is significance but the second is where the emphasis in this chapter really seems to be. So here's the first thing that God is teaching us.

We're seeing that God's people are being prepared for the turbulence of history. That is part of what this vision is doing. It's preparing God's people for the turbulence of living in this world.

And we're focusing here on what we see about the ram and the goat in particular. And many years are contained in these few verses. Hundreds of years.

This is really picking up from the end of the Babylonian empire right through to the end of the Greek empire. Hundreds of years. years. But it demonstrates for us the realities of history and the fragility of so-called human superpowers.

Empires will come and they'll go. Empires that at the time seem so full of themselves and so powerful, well they can seemingly be brushed aside with apparent ease.

[24 : 22] Isn't that the case with the ram? At one stage we're told that no beast could stand before him. Until one did.

Until the goat came along and ran at him in his powerful wrath. You see the great rulers, the great empires of this world, they all eventually die and they all eventually fade away.

All of them. All the emperors of this world will crumble. At the time, the Babylonian empire looked unstoppable.

At the time, the Persian empire looked too big to fail. And the same for the Greek empire and the Roman empire and the Third Reich and the British empire and the Soviet union and the USA and China and Silicon Valley.

All these two have crumbled and will crumble. Just reflect on the aftermath of the Nuremberg trials in 1946.

[25 : 32] The Third Reich, which at one point seemed powerful and was going to sweep all before it. Just listen to a little story I came across. On the 16th of October in 1946, 14 bodies of key Nazi leaders were delivered to a Munich crematorium following their executions.

Included were Goering, Ribbentrop, Kittel and others. That very same evening, a container holding the ashes of all these men was driven through the rain into the Bavarian countryside.

After about an hour, the vehicle stopped, the container where the ashes was dumped into a muddy ditch on the side of the road.

As one writer put it five or six years earlier, these men could dominate and intimidate, but that night, the drizzle washed them away.

See, superpowers are not safe places. Superpowers fade. Those who seem beyond challenge, well, one day they'll be washed away.

[26 : 45] You see, superpowers are not worthy of our trust. They're not worthy of our fear because there is another king who is sovereign over all these toy empires.

And we need to be prepared, don't we, for the turbulence of history. We need to be realistic. and check where is it that our trust really resides.

Who knows? The West may well be in terminal decline. The securities and comforts that we've known for so long, well, they may be washed away.

There's no guarantee. And Jesus himself warns us, doesn't he? He says, when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed.

This must take place, but the end is not yet, for nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom. we need to be prepared for that.

[27 : 51] We need to be realistic about the world we live in and the rise and fall of nations. But that is not the main thing in this chapter. The vision does not focus, does it, on the goat or the ram.

It doesn't focus on Alexander the Great, the great leader of Greece, but rather it focuses on one of his minor successes, the little horn that we read about there from verse 9.

As we saw earlier, there's this figure called Antiochus Epiphanes. He was not a big player on the world stage, but he was very significant for the people of God.

So we've seen that God's people have been prepared for the turbulence of history, but more importantly, God's people, are being prepared for the terror of persecution. Daniel 8 focuses, as I've said, on the events surrounding Antiochus Epiphanes, and in particular, his dealing with Jerusalem and with the people of God.

Why is that? Why does it focus on a few years under this particular leader? Why, when you have epic figures like Alexander the Great, why is the focus on a handful of years under the reign of someone that you've never heard of until this morning?

[29 : 18] And particularly about what happens in Jerusalem over 2,000 years ago? Well, it focuses on these events and not Alexander the Great, because the history of God's people and what happens to them is of infinitely more importance than what happens to the emperors of this world.

think back to the ultimate reality we saw last week in chapter 7. God's people, they will inherit an everlasting kingdom.

God's people are the future. Every other kingdom in this world will submit in the end to Jesus. Every kingdom, every ruler. And the events surrounding the ram and the goat, the events of this world's superpowers are really, ultimately, a sideshow.

And that is why Daniel 8 focuses on what it focuses on. Daniel 8 zooms in on what really matters. And God's people needed to know what was coming.

Now these events, they were not imminent for Daniel, were they? Notice in verse 26, Daniel is told to seal up the vision, for it refers to many days from now.

[30 : 36] See, God was preparing his people for events hundreds of years down the line. But why? Why did they have to be prepared so far in advance for what was to come?

Well, as one commentator put it, God's people had never before faced what they met under Antiochus, a systematic program designed to eradicate completely every trace of Israel's faith, worship, and life.

The day would come when Israel would need this revelation. You see, being forewarned would steal God's people for what was going to happen.

Being forewarned in this way would give God's people facing those difficult days that God had not lost control. He had told them it was going to happen.

He wasn't caught by surprise, so they could stand firm and keep trusting him. Those were going to be very difficult days under Antiochus for God's people in Jerusalem.

[31 : 41] And knowing what was coming in advance would help them to stand firm. John Calvin on this passage says this, if nothing had been predicted, the pious would have glided gently downwards to despair in consequence of their heavy affliction.

But because it was predicted, they had real solace in the midst of their ways. And this was not just relevant for those living in and around 186 BC in Jerusalem.

This is a path and opposition that's been played out again and again throughout history, hasn't it? And remember Jesus' words to his disciples in John 16. He's just been speaking to them about the hatred of the world both for him and for his disciples.

And Jesus says, I've said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. You see, Jesus forewarns us graciously so that we will be prepared for what is to come.

and I don't think it's a stretch to say that we are in the midst of an Antiochus Epiphanes paganization progress in the West.

[33 : 02] Just one example is the proposed conversion therapy legislation. The advocates of this ban on conversion therapy want to go beyond outlawing certain practices to effectively remove the ability of churches to call people to repentance.

I'd say that straight out of the Antiochus Epiphanes playbook, wouldn't you? We need to be prepared for the reality of opposition.

Stephen McAlpine in his recent book called Being the Bad Guys says this, the Bible tells us to expect hostility as Christians.

The cultural shift and challenging responses that many in the Western Church face today can be discombobulating if we do not have this reality locked away.

If the church is bred on a diet of self-help books that try to convince us that God's intentions to make our lives as smooth as possible, then we will be suckers in a hostile world.

[34 : 12] No wonder we become confused, angry, or despairing when the culture is throwing rotten tomatoes and not rose petals at us.

You see, you need to be prepared for hostility. And in God's gracious goodness, he warns us, he tells us what to expect so that we might be prepared and not surprised but how do we respond?

We've seen first that God graciously prepares his people for difficult times, both in the turbulence of history and nations rising and falling, but more particularly in the persecution we can expect as his people.

But how do we respond? This is the second big thing we see in the chapter. We see that God's people respond to difficult times with faithful perseverance.

See, Daniel 8 is not in any way, is it, downplaying the suffering of God's people. It takes it very seriously. We can see that not only in the sober detail of the vision, but also in Daniel's response.

[35 : 31] even even though he has seen things that won't impact him personally, these are looking at events way down the line, and he's told to seal up the vision because these are things for the future.

But even though that's so, he is devastated. He is devastated because his heart, his desire, is for God's kingdom.

And for Daniel to see what will befall God's people in many years time, it grieves him, doesn't it? Look at verse 27. And I, Daniel, was overcome and lay sick for some days.

I was appalled by the vision and did not understand it. See, Daniel has seen terrible things, and it's right to grieve the treatment of God's people when they're persecuted.

That is a right response. But Daniel is not paralyzed by his grief. He's not paralyzed by his fear. Notice the middle of those verses.

[36 : 41] Verse 27. What does Daniel do? Then I rose and went about the king's business. See, this vision didn't crush Daniel.

Daniel. Yes, it was very sobering and difficult, but God's purpose was not to crush Daniel, was it? It's not to crush the subsequent generations or us. We're not to go away from this chapter beaten down and discouraged and crushed.

No, God has given us this scripture to enable us to face persecution and opposition with a steady eye, to live our lives with a right perspective that sees beyond the superpowers of this age to the superpower.

See the one who controls all the events of man. And in light of those realities, in light of who is really in charge, we are to be about the king's business. We're not to lie on our beds, grieving, doing nothing.

That's not the purpose of this chapter. Rather, it's to equip us, to enable us to stand firm and to be about the king's business. As we close, let me finish with words from the apostle Peter in his first letter, chapter 4.

[38 : 02] He writes here, Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.

But rejoice in as much as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the spirit of glory and of God rests on you.

If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or a thief or any kind of criminal or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.

So then those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful creator and continue to do good.

So when we face persecution as we are promised we will, we are to commit ourselves to our faithful creator, to the one who is the superpower, and to continue to do good.

[39 : 14] We are to be about the king's business. And so that's what we are to do, friends. We are to continue to gather together as his people, committed to the word and prayer.

We are to witness to our city, sharing the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. To some it will be the stench of death, but for others it's the fragrance of life. And we're to love one another.

We are to be the people of God, not to hide away, not to be coward, but rather with a steady eye we go about the king's business.

Well, let me pray before we sing. our Father God, there is much that frightens us, there is much to scare us in our world, there is much to appall us, but Father help us in response to your word this morning.

Help us to be a people of faith who live not by sight, but rather trusting you, the one who is sovereign, the one who is in control of history, and the one who has in your grace prepared us for what is to come.

[40 : 40] So please help us together, all of us, to be about your business, for we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.