

## DARKNESS BEFORE DAWN



Daniel 8:1-27

Ninth Message

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SERIES: ONE KING TO RULE THEM ALL

I hear that this afternoon on TV there is a wildlife program about conflict between tigers and rams. But I am a little puzzled. Tigers are solitary animals. They don't hunt together like lions. I don't know about rams, but they do go after goats. The best way to catch a tiger is not by its tail but with a goat, tied to a tree. The goat is no match for the tiger. And then the tiger is no match for the person hiding up the tree. As for the rams, they tend to fight each other for the ladies; I'm not sure how well they would cooperate to fight against tigers. But I like nature documentaries, so I'm intrigued to watch this one.

But I now see that I've got the wrong end of the stick. The penny just dropped. The tigers and the rams are not "real" tigers and rams at all. They're "only" two football teams: the Cincinnati Bengals and the Los Angeles Rams, facing off in the SuperBowl. But it's not my cup of tea. Still, I'm glad many of you and others in the Bay Area will be watching it. This makes it the best time of year for a bike ride.

But I've been watching rugby: the annual Six Nations Championship started last weekend. Scotland beat England, which is the most important thing. Fans go to a rugby game not just to watch the play but also to sing. What do they sing? The Scottish fans sing *Flower of Scotland*, which is so popular that it is Scotland's unofficial national anthem. O flower of Scotland! What a wimpy image! It doesn't project power. Not like the Lions or the Bears.

But Scottish, English, and Irish rugby all use a flower as their symbol: the thistle, the rose, and the shamrock. So the Scottish thistle defeated the English rose. Not the Thistles defeated the Roses. No, the singular flower stands for the country. It wasn't just the Scottish rugby team that defeated the English rugby team. Scotland defeated England. The thistle defeated the rose. Yesterday Scotland played Wales, whose national flower is the daffodil. So, some of the Welsh fans were dressed as daffodils. For them the daffodil *is* Wales and Welshness.

Now when the Scots sing "O flower of Scotland," they're not thinking about a flower at all, even though most of them have a thistle somewhere on their clothing or painted on their face. The flower of Scotland is actually people, long ago in ancient history. The song evokes a powerful memory of those who rose up and defeated the English 700 years ago at the Battle of Bannockburn (1315), popularized by the movie *Braveheart*. May the same happen today on the field with the current flower of Scotland, its rugby team.

As I'm preaching through Daniel and as our women are studying Revelation, I know that some of you are struggling with the concept of metaphors. You are used to reading the text "literally," and you are disturbed by the fact that I am not. But what is a literal reading? As I hope you have now seen from my introduction, when metaphors are involved a "literal" reading is usually the farthest thing from the intended meaning. We all use metaphors and other figures of speech in our every-day communication. Metaphors can't mean just anything. Metaphors work because of a shared culture. We navigate them automatically when communicating within a culture. But if we are communicating cross-culturally we are easily baffled by

metaphors.

Metaphors and images are even more common in dreams. Both Daniel and Revelation consist largely of dreams or visions. In Revelation the primary narrative thread is "I saw," 45 times. Four times John was "in the Spirit." He was in a Spirit-induced visionary state in which he was shown things. The source book for most of the metaphors in Revelation is not 21st-century America, but the OT. We often have trouble understanding Revelation because we don't know the OT well enough; we don't know the source book of the imagery.

Biblical interpretation has been dominated by white Western males, who read the Bible within a particular culture. I'll use an example from Revelation. At the opening of the fifth and sixth seals, John sees a swarm of locusts emerge from the Abyss and an enormous army of mounted warriors cross the Euphrates (Rev 9). Many American readers, who are most insistent that they are reading literally, think that what John sees represents modern or even future military hardware: helicopter gunships, even nuclear war. But if you talk with someone from Africa, an enormous swarm of locusts is still a very real image of total devastation. They've experienced locust swarms. And a student of history is familiar with the many times that hordes of mounted warriors swept westwards from beyond the Euphrates. Furthermore, focusing on modern military hardware feeds a fascination with militarism that I find dissonant with the message of Revelation.

Fortunately we are now hearing more voices from different cultures: from women, from scholars in the two-thirds world, and from social and cultural anthropologists. They read images quite differently. They can help us understand the metaphors.

In the first half of Daniel, King Nebuchadnezzar had two vivid dreams at night. This was expected of a king. But it was not expected that the king know the meaning of the dreams, that there was a plain "literal" meaning. Instead, the king employed magicians to interpret the imagery. This was true also of Pharaoh in Joseph's day. Today one might seek out a psycho-analyst to interpret dreams or nightmares. The court magicians were unable to interpret Nebuchadnezzar's dreams, but God gave Daniel the ability to do so. Now in the second half of the book it is Daniel who has visions—four of them. He cannot interpret his own visions. Again, there isn't a plain "literal" meaning. Instead, heavenly angels interpret the meaning for him.

Today we come to Daniel's second vision. He receives it two years after the first vision, in the third year of King Belshazzar, the final king of the Babylonian Empire. The date is about 550 BC. In his vision he is transported to Susa, 200 km east of Babylon, which would become the capital of the next empire, the Persian Empire.

His vision is action-packed. It contains a ram (a male sheep), a (male) goat, and lots of horns: eight of them. Sheep and goats are both domesticated animals, unlike the wild beasts of chapter 7. Females are docile, but not the males. They're macho. They can have impressive horns which they use against competing males. Through-

out the Bible and the ancient world, horns represent power, both physical strength and authority or rule.

First, Daniel sees a two-horned ram, a male sheep. If you drive a Dodge Ram truck you're familiar with the two-horned ram. The Ram logo depicts the impressive horns of a male bighorn sheep. In Daniel's vision, one horn is longer and came up later than the other. This is contrary to nature, but we're in a vision where such things happen and they convey meaning. This ram charges forth from Susa in the east, towards the west, the north and the south. It overwhelms all in its path. No animal can stand in its way and there is none to rescue. The ram accomplishes its plan, and becomes great.

Next, a goat. We're not talking cute goats in pajamas, but a male goat with serious horns. Actually it's just one horn, which, again, is unnatural, but this is a vision. This goat comes charging from the opposite direction, from the west. At top speed it charges into the ram, shattering its two horns, knocking it to the ground, and trampling it underfoot. The tables are turned: now it's the ram's turn to have none to rescue to it. The goat becomes very great. But at the height of the goat's power an unexpected thing happens: its horn is broken off. We're not told by whom, but God is implied. In its place grow four horns towards the four winds of heaven, or, we would say, the four points of the compass.

Thus far the vision has been vivid and action-packed. But the ram and the goat and their seven horns are not the focus of the vision; they're just the prelude. Before we move on, let me give the interpretation of these elements. This is supplied by the angel Gabriel later in the chapter (20-22). He is very brief: just thirty words in Hebrew. But this interpretation covers 370 years of history!

The ram, the goat, and the horns are all symbolic: they each represent something or someone else. The two-horned ram represents the kings of Media and Persia (20). Persia is the horn that grew up later and became longer.

In 559 BC Cyrus became ruler of Persia, then a small territory within the large Median Empire. In 550 he rebelled and conquered the king of Media, who was also his grandfather. He married the king's daughter, and established the Persian Empire. Under Cyrus the Great and Darius the Great the Persian Empire grew very large, reaching all the way to the edge of Greece. Twice Persia attempted unsuccessfully to conquer Greece, first under Darius (490) then under Xerxes (480).

The goat is the king of Greece, and the large horn its first king (21). This is Alexander the Great (r. 336-323). 150 years after Darius and Xerxes, he burst out of Greece. In just three years (334-331) he conquered the entire Persian Empire, thus avenging for Persia's invasions. He built an enormous empire, the largest yet.

But Alexander died suddenly in his prime in Babylon (323), without a designated heir. For fifty years, his generals fought each other as they attempted to carve out their own mini-empires. These are the four horns representing four kingdoms (22). They are not a sequence of kingdoms as in chapter 7, but concurrent. Some see literally four kingdoms, but I read the number symbolically. There were more than four generals carving out mini-states. But they were to the four points of the compass. Each was smaller than Alexander's vast empire; none had his same power.

By the end of the fifty years of strife, two of these empires dominated the Near East: the Seleucid Empire in the north and east, and the Ptolemaic Empire in Egypt. Jerusalem was caught in the middle between them. We'll hear more about these two empires and Jerusalem in the middle in chapter 11.

The vision and its interpretation have thus far swept through many centuries. The pace now slows down; the remainder of the vision covers less than seven years. The focus is on another horn that emerges from one of the four. The vision first portrays the rapid growth of this little horn:

**Out of one of them came another horn, which started small but grew in power to the south and to the east and toward the Beautiful Land. It grew until it reached the host of the heavens, and it threw some of the starry host down to the earth and trampled on them. It set itself up to be as great as the commander of the army of the Lord. (Dan 8:9-11a NIV)**

There is agreement that this little horn is Antiochus IV Epiphanes. In 175 BC, he seized the throne of the Seleucid Empire through nefarious means. Starting small, he sought greatness.

There is an ominous progression throughout the vision. The ram rapidly built a large empire; it "became great" (4). The goat even more rapidly built an even larger empire; it "became very great" (8). They both built earthly empires. The little horn grew to the south and to the east and to the Beautiful Land, the land of Israel, and more specifically Jerusalem (9). Its empire on earth was not as large as the ram's or the goat's. But the little horn had other aspirations for greatness. It continued growing. It grew as far as the host of heaven (10), and still further, as far as the commander of the host (11), God himself. The little horn expanded vertically in an assault on heaven. Antiochus attempted to become God.

The vision continues with the actions taken by the little horn in its assault on heaven:

**it took away the daily sacrifice from the Lord, and his sanctuary was thrown down. Because of rebellion, the Lord's people and the daily sacrifice were given over to it. It prospered in everything it did, and truth was thrown to the ground. (8:11b-12)**

Here ends the vision. What a dark ending. The little horn has assaulted the Lord, his temple, and his people. It has accomplished everything it set out to do. Where is the light at the end of the tunnel? Is there anyone to deliver?

Next Daniel hears a conversation between two holy ones, presumably two angels in heaven. One asked the other:

**"How long will it take for the vision to be fulfilled—the vision concerning the daily sacrifice, the rebellion that causes desolation, the surrender of the sanctuary and the trampling underfoot of the Lord's people?" (8:13)**

The answer is given:

**"It will take 2,300 evenings and mornings; then the sanctuary will be reconsecrated." (8:14)**

How long? This is one of the most commonly asked questions in Scripture: "How long, O Lord?" It's a commonly-asked question today. How long will this pandemic continue? At midnight on Tuesday the state mask mandate will expire. But not here in Santa Clara County. How much longer will we be under a mask mandate? We all want to know. Is there an end in sight?

The angel singles out four items in the vision: the daily sacrifice, the rebellion that causes desolation, the surrender of the sanctuary, and the trampling underfoot of the Lord's people. The daily sacrifice is the *tamid* offering, the "continual" burnt offering of a lamb every morning and every evening, ever since the tabernacle was constructed over a thousand years earlier. But the little horn has taken this away. The sanctuary is the Lord's Temple in Jerusalem, over-

thrown by the little horn. The daily sacrifice, the sanctuary, and the Lord's people have been handed over to the little horn because of rebellion. Whose rebellion? Sadly, the rebellion is by the Lord's own people against him. It is the Lord who has handed them over into the oppressor's power because of their unfaithfulness; they have broken covenant. This is the "time of wrath" (19): God's wrath against his own people.

In 167 BC Antiochus acted against the Jews in Jerusalem. In the temple he set up a statue of Zeus. He desecrated the altar. He stopped the twice-daily sacrifice. He outlawed all the ordained customs of the Jews: circumcision, sabbath observance, and Torah, the Jewish Law. It was cultural genocide. Many Jews were killed. Antiochus called himself Epiphanes: God manifest. He proclaimed and presented himself as God manifest on earth. This was all a desolation, an abomination. But it was precipitated by the rebellion of God's own people.

"How long will this desolation last?" asked the angel. "It will take 2,300 evenings and mornings" (14). But what does this mean? Does an evening and a morning count as one or two? Is it 2300 days or 1150 days? Is it a little over 6 years or a little over 3 years? Those who read the number literally cannot agree. And those who read 2300 symbolically do not agree either. Perhaps we have to be content not knowing in full what this number means. It is a significant period of time, but a limited period of time.

Three times Daniel is told that his vision concerns distant events: the time of the end (17), the appointed time of the end (19), the distant future (26). It is clear that the distant days will be dark indeed. Daniel is told to seal up the vision because it concerns these distant event (26). It is not for the present time. He could have tried to put this all out of his mind, knowing that he would be long-dead before the vision be fulfilled. He does get up and go about the king's business. But he identifies emotionally with the horror of the vision:

**I, Daniel, was worn out. I lay exhausted for several days... I was appalled by the vision; it was beyond understanding. (8:27)**

Poor Daniel; we need to spare a thought for him. It's traumatic receiving these visions. In the previous chapter the vision left him troubled in spirit and disturbed (7:15). The interpretation was even worse, leaving him deeply troubled and ashen-faced (7:28).

But there are two small notes of hope: "the sanctuary will be reconsecrated" (13), and "he [the little horn] will be destroyed, but not by human power" (25). Nothing further is said. But the presumption is that God himself will be the agent of the little horn's destruction. This will have to be enough for Daniel to hold onto. And it will have to be enough for the faithful Jews in Jerusalem to hold onto centuries later during the persecution by Antiochus.

The book of Daniel is resistance literature. In the first half of the book, the stories of Daniel and his three friends resisting the blasphemous edicts of the kings in Babylon inspire others to resist also, to remain loyal to the one true God while living in pagan empires. In the second half, the visions of horrific beastly empires and of targeted attacks on God's faithful people inspire future generations to see the beasts for what they are—imposters—and to remain faithful to the one true God. These beasts and the little horn are not worthy of worship.

The little horn makes an assault on heaven, setting itself up as God. This is the vision of every emperor: to be God. This was true of Pharaoh, of Nebuchadnezzar, of Antiochus, of Roman Caesars. This is true of Antichrist, whether of John's letters or the man of law-

lessness of 2 Thess 2. This assault on heaven is a major part of the dynamic of the book of Revelation. The dragon has placed the beast on the throne. The false prophet orchestrates humanity to worship the beast. Revelation is also resistance literature. It unmasks the beast for what it really is: one not worthy of worship. It inspires the Christians to remain faithful: loyal and devoted to the Lamb whom they follow. Unlike the beast, the Lamb *is* worthy of their worship, and he is worthy of our worship today.

Isaiah penned a poem about the king of Babylon:

**How you have fallen from heaven,  
morning star, son of the dawn!  
You have been cast down to the earth,  
you who once laid low the nations!  
You said in your heart,  
"I will ascend to the heavens;  
I will raise my throne  
above the stars of God;  
I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly,  
on the utmost heights of Mount Zaphon.  
I will ascend above the tops of the clouds;  
I will make myself like the Most High." (Isa 14:12-14)**

"I will ascend to the heavens...I will make myself like the Most High." The poem alludes to the morning star, son of the dawn. Venus is currently visible in the pre-dawn sky. It is the brightest object in the sky, 25 times brighter than Sirius the brightest star. I've been out the past few mornings to look at it. Even well into dawn, when the sky is quite bright and the stars have disappeared, Venus is still visible. But then the sun comes up. Venus disappears. It is outshone. The Hebrew word translated as "morning star" is *heylel*, meaning a shining object in the sky. It was translated into Latin as *lucifer*, a perfectly good translation since it means "light-bearer." But along the way Lucifer was capitalized. Lucifer is not really in the text, but the poem does expose Satan's desire: to shine as brightly as God, indeed to supplant God. This is at the heart of Satan's operations.

The darkest hour is just before dawn. Some faithful Jews refused to comply with Antiochus's orders. They started the Maccabean Revolt. Three years later they captured the temple and rededicated it, commemorated ever since in Hanukkah ("Dedication"). But then they corrupted themselves with power. They built an empire. They persecuted and killed many of their own people—faithful Jews. They succumbed to the darkness.

Where then is the true sun that dispels the darkness? God's answer to the assault on heaven is not to respond with overwhelming power, but to send his Beloved into the world. His Beloved gave up his privileged position in the Father's embrace, humbled himself, made himself nothing, took on the form of a human being, even of a servant. As we read in John's Prologue:

**In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it... The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. (John 1:4-5, 9-11)**

As we sing in the ancient hymn, *Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence*: "The Light of light descendeth from the realms of endless day." But the world preferred to live in darkness. It put out the light. The Jewish leaders collaborated with the Roman authorities to put to death

this one who was a threat to their power. This was the darkest hour of all. Jesus died and was placed in the grave. But this was also the finest hour. A human being had been faithfully obedient to God to the very end. He had absorbed the very worst of evil and darkness but remained faithful.

It is customary to think that God turned his face away when Jesus hung on the cross. But I picture a different scenario. I think the Father was beaming on his Son with infinite pleasure, as Jesus forgave those who did him evil, as he committed his spirit into his Father's hands, and as he cried out "It is finished!" But no one else knew that it was the finest hour. The disciples thought it was the darkest hour. The Jewish leaders were micromanaging the situation lest it get out of hand. For the Romans it was just another day, disposing of troublesome revolutionaries. But God knew that it was the finest hour.

Most of us go through dark times. I think of the Coptic martyrs whom ISIS lined up on the beach beside the Mediterranean. The darkest hour for them, and yet the finest hour, as they remained faithful to death and were joined in their martyrdom by a black African. Our darkness may not be as dark as theirs, but we still encounter darkness. What is yours? Perhaps your darkness is the never-ending pandemic. Or fear, uncertainty and doubt. Or worry and anxiety about kids, employment, health or old age.

How do we respond when it is so dark? In a passage that our men studied just two weeks ago, Paul urged, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom 12:21). How do we do this? How do we live in darkness but not respond with darkness, not be sucked into darkness? How do we live under evil and respond without getting sucked into evil? How do we respond to evil with good, to darkness with light? By looking to Jesus and praying for God's spirit to

work in us—so that we can respond to darkness with light: with love, kindness, gentleness, with the fruit of the Spirit. This is what God is wanting to work in us, so that we are able to disempower darkness and evil, not with power, but with the fruit of the Spirit. Then, for us too, the darkest hour can be our finest hour, when we respond to evil with good, to darkness with light. I cannot promise you that the darkness will lift, that it will all go away. But what I can say is that in our darkness God wants to enable us to respond with light. To respond as Jesus responded to his darkness.

Which Jesus do we look to? Last week I mentioned Mark Driscoll's favorite image of Jesus: the rider on the white horse, slashing away with his sword, dripping with blood. But one of the most potent symbols of Jesus is the *Agnus Dei*, the Lamb of God. This is an ancient symbol, going back well over a thousand years. It is rich in meaning. It is the antithesis of the beasts, the antithesis of the horns, the antithesis of power. This lamb has no horns. Instead it has a wound. It is a lamb standing—standing as though slain. Its breast is pierced by a cross. From the cross flies the banner of resurrection, a red cross on a white background. Behind its head is a golden halo or nimbus, signifying deity. This is God. The red cross in the halo signifies that this is Jesus Christ, risen from the dead. In our window this *Agnus Dei* is atop the cross, facing the Lion. The Lion has conquered not with the power of a lion, but by being the slain Lamb. May we be shaped by this image of Jesus in our dark times. May it inspire us to our own acts of resistance: resistance to darkness and to evil by doing good and living in the light.

Our Lamb has conquered. Let us follow him.

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