

Living trustfully in stressful times

Sermon 14 March 2021 on Daniel, chapter 8

Throughout the book of Daniel, faithful, admirable Jewish men contrast with wicked and weak or powerful foreign male tyrants. The first chapters of Daniel tell us that selected talented, handsome, royal, young Jewish men were exiled in Babylon, far away from Jerusalem.

We find that in chapter 8, Daniel is no longer young but old. Tradition tells us that Daniel himself never went back to Jerusalem to worship at the holy site of the Temple in Jerusalem in Israel, the *'beautiful land'* of verse 9 in chapter 8. He lived into old age in Babylon, in comfort but in exile.

In chapter 8, Daniel has a dramatic and strange dream. There are terrible fighting rams and goats, the Angel Gabriel, some big numbers and a weird goat's horn that grows as high as the heavens, grabs angels and stars and tramples them. There's destruction in the heavens and on earth. There's an instruction to seal up the vision for the future.

Chapter 8 is not a preacher's favourite chapter in Daniel! It seems more straightforward to focus on God rescuing Daniel from lions or Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego from the fiery furnace. Those are indeed great stories about faithfulness to God, about brave people taking a stand for truth. If you want to run primary school RE lessons or Junior Church sessions, there's no shortage of material on Daniel in the lion's den or our three heroes and the angel (or God) in the fiery furnace. But there's very little available for children and not much for adults on the visions in chapter 8.

Some commentaries and guides to preaching do tackle chapter 8. They differ according to their own church style. But they all seem to agree on the central message:

Trust God in stressful times

Christians over the centuries have struggled to make sense of all this. But then, chapter 8 tells us that Daniel himself struggled. In verse 27 of chapter 8 he says that he does not understand his own dream. That seems surprising, as he was so expert at interpreting royal dreams before. Also it seems somewhat contradictory, as the Angel Gabriel explains it to him in verses 19 to 25! The rams, the goat and the horns represent big problems in the world. The villains are the kings and empires of the Medes and Persians (rams) Alexander of Greece (goat), and then finally Antiochus IV from the Seleucid Empire (the little horn that desecrated Jerusalem between 167 and 164BCE).

People, often kings but others too, become like wild beasts when they don't listen to God. The worst of all, Antiochus, only dominated Jerusalem for three years before being driven out by a rebellious Jewish uprising. For Daniel, Antiochus was the worst villain because he called himself Epiphanes, meaning 'God Manifest' and demanded worship in Jerusalem. His army drove out the priests, the true holy representatives of God from the Temple. Verse 13 emphasises the horror, *'the transgression that makes desolate, and the giving over of the sanctuary and host to be trampled'*.

Daniel, growing old and safe in Babylon, feels the stress and suffering of the Jewish people. At a distance of time and space, Daniel dreams of successive invasions of Israel, but holds fast to his trust in God. With hindsight, we know that the Jewish people were to suffer many more calamities in history.

So what do we make of chapter 8 of the book of Daniel as we read, listen, learn and decide how to act?

In the Jewish Bible, the book of Daniel is placed with song, story and poetry, in the Writings not with the Prophets. Along with Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah and Ecclesiastes, Daniel is seen as one of the latest books to be written.

In the Christian Bible, we find the book of Daniel grouped with the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Daniel is seen as important prophecy, foreseeing Jesus and Christian Resurrection.

Some say that Chapters 7 to 12 are apocalyptic visions, revelations about the end of history. There are many links with the last book in the Christian Bible, Revelation, or 'The Apocalypse of John'. Revelation has 82 allusions to Daniel. It repeats accounts of the destruction of statues, the actions of angels and beasts, the importance of sealed documents. In Revelation we even have the 'Whore of Babylon'. That is the Roman Empire which dominated Israel 100 years after Antiochus Epiphanes.

An apocalypse is full of imagery and symbolism that reveals hidden truths about God. It was a popular style of writing in Middle Eastern (or Hellenistic) cultures in the centuries just before and just after the birth of Christ. Apocalypses focus on the unseen world, on times of difficulty for God's people and God's plan for the end times. The language is often symbolic, vivid and exaggerated. Heroes and martyrs win because God is on their side and wicked kings get their just desserts. Wicked oppressors are often wild beasts like the rams and goats in chapter 8. In the Bible, wicked people become like beasts when they forget to listen to God.

In the book of Daniel, as in the rest of the Bible, people who trust in God and live according to his rule will be saved. Those who do not, will be judged for eternity. It's not for us to judge. God will. It's down to us to live trustfully through stressful times.

Health warning

It can be all too easy to

1. be disturbed and exhausted by vivid dreams like Daniel's
2. get confused by different views about the Bible
3. become depressed about human nature and the future of the world.

There is a much more positive way to take the imagery of Daniel in our stride. The main purpose of Daniel chapter 8 is to remind us of God's long-term plan:

God has a pattern and promise for all generations

God's people will have stressful times

God will eventually rescue the world

Some of us are using a book by Jeff Lucas for a Lent study. He focusses on the powerful influence Daniel and his companions had on the Babylonians. These heroes of the faith had to learn to live in a 'second choice' context. Jeff Lucas encourages us today to take a stand in society as Christians, be 'resident aliens' with a strong moral voice, strong in faith about the future.

Now in Daniel chapter 8 it might seem that Daniel is not particularly heroic or courageous. Neither does he appear to DO anything. I suggest we do NOT want to copy him and retreat to our bed in misery:

*verse 27: So I, Daniel, was overcome and lay sick for some days;
... I was dismayed by the vision and did not understand it.*

Perhaps the main point of chapter 8 for us is in one small phrase in the middle of verse 27:
'...then I arose and went about the king's business.'

In other words, Daniel eventually got up and got on with his everyday job in Babylon.

That's much more encouraging.

We carry on with our everyday life.

We deepen our prayer life.

We hold on to the hope of Easter.

We trust God as we wait.

We can also carry on with everyday actions. We can:

- keep in touch with, and care for neighbours, family and friends
- support children and their parents
- donate to Foodbank and other social justice charities
- take climate change seriously and take local action on plastic waste.

Daniel represents a long-term faithful human being, trusting that God will eventually rescue the world. That says something for us today. We may be geographically far away from situations of great stress, but we can feel the pain of our fellow human beings. In Myanmar, Syria, Sudan, Yemen and elsewhere, there is great suffering. They are all God's people. We can continue to pray for, and we should send aid to, people whose lives and holy places are being destroyed by war.

As we consider Daniel's dream in chapter 8 about stressful times for God's people and living in trust, here are some challenges for the week ahead. You might like to take time to think about these on your own. You might like to discuss them with someone else. God will help.

1. LISTEN: Everyone has stressful times in their lives, perhaps especially so during this pandemic. It's OK to be fearful at times. Like Daniel, do you feel humbled by God's long-term promise? Moved by the suffering of other people?

2. LEARN: What in the 21st century are the most important events that affect you and others? What are the signs of things to come? Where do you see God in action for the long-term good of everyone?

3. ACT: Which Bible passages or prayers would you choose to help you to fully trust God? Who in everyday life inspires you in that trust? How can you help others by DOING something or simply BEING there for them?

**Live trustfully.
Easter is coming**

