

Encouragement in the Age of Empires

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- [0:00] Let's pray. Gracious Father, your word is truth, but we confess that sometimes it is hard for us to follow.
- ! We struggle with the visions.! Now imagine it's the holidays and you're getting ready for a road trip, say from Guqin to Miri.
- But you are not going alone. This is a family affair, which means you've got young kids along for the ride. So if you are wise, you will sit them down for a chat.
- You tell them, Kids, you know, this trip isn't like going to the mall. It's going to take a while, so you better use the toilet before setting off. Expect some bumps and potholes along the way.
- And please, bring something to keep you entertained so you won't be asking, are we there yet? Every five minutes. You are preparing them for the long haul.
- [1:31] And that's kind of what God is doing in Daniel chapter 8. He's having a conversation with his children. He's getting them ready for a long, difficult road ahead.
- He knows the journey will be bumpy, even dangerous, so he's preparing them for what is to come. But of course, even with all that preparation, the journey is still long.
- So, after a couple of hours on the Pan-Boneo Highway, it wouldn't be surprising to find my kids asking, how long more, Papa? How long?
- Are you sure you know where we're going? And if they're tired, they might get grumpy and perhaps even throw a tantrum. And guess what?
- God's children aren't all that different. We too get tired and grumpy. We too sometimes cry out, how long, Lord?
- [2:36] How long? Sometimes we will even want to quit. So, God doesn't just need to tell us what to expect. He needs to convince us to persevere for the long haul.
- And that's exactly what he would do through this vision. He offers not just realism, but reassurance that though the road ahead may be hard, even unbearable at times, this driver can be trusted.
- So, as we open Daniel 8 together, that's how I want you to think of this chapter. It is a conversation between a father and his children.
- So, as his children, let's open the ears of our hearts now and let's listen to our father tell us three essential things. Here's the first one. Firstly, prepare for the pain.
- Prepare for the pain. Last week, you might remember God gave Daniel a vision. And in that vision, God laid out for us the big picture of history.
- [3:49] Monsters will arise like those of Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome and cause real havoc, real damage, real harm.
- But praise God, history doesn't belong to them. Instead, it belongs to the Son of Man. He is enthroned on high. He is the eternal king.

All nations bow before him. And from his throne room, he will judge rightly. This is history on a cosmic level.

That's Daniel 7. But now as we turn the page, fast forward two years, we find God giving Daniel another vision.

But this time, it's a little different. This time, we find the camera lens zooming in. Instead of surveying the whole panorama of history, God focuses on one particular slice.

[4:53] In just ten verses, he gives us a quick rundown of 400 years of history. From Daniel's own day in the 6th century BC all the way to the 2nd century BC.

But remember, because this is apocalyptic literature, what we are watching is less like a National Geographic documentary and more like a Looney Tunes cartoon.

You know, there's animals charging about, body parts growing and snapping off. It is all kind of manic. But thankfully, unlike some other parts of Daniel 7-12, here God doesn't leave us wondering what is what.

The main elements are explained, leaving commentators everywhere, breathing a huge sigh of relief. You know, finally, some specificity.

So what does Daniel actually see? Well, first of all, verse 3, he sees a ram with two horns, one longer than the other.

[6:05] And verse 20 tells us that this is none other than the Middle Persian Empire. Certainly, history lines up perfectly with this image.

At first, the king of media was initially more prominent. But once King Cyrus rose to power and overthrew his median grandfather, the Persian side dominated.

And that fits with the picture of uneven horns. It also matches what we saw last week in Daniel 7, where the bear had one side raised higher than the other.

And I've given this animal a nickname, the battering ram. You can see why, can't you? He never stops charging, verse 4, to the west and to the north and to the south, trampling everything in its path, marking out its territory.

Again, that lines up perfectly with what actually happened. The historians mention Cyrus' conquest in exactly those directions as he took over Babylon and Syria and Judah and Egypt.

[7:23] And for a season, the Persians looked untouchable. 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. But no human kingdom lasts forever and so verse 5, another animal appears.

This time, it's a goat with a prominent horn between its eyes. And I know I've already compared this vision to a Looney Tunes cartoon, but let us switch gears a bit and imagine this to be more like the monster movies from last week.

Except this time, instead of just Godzilla, imagine this time it is Godzilla versus King Kong. That's an actual movie, right?

And so, verse 6, we get a beastly fight, except it's pretty one-sided. The goat, verse 6, comes charging straight at the ram and smashes it to pieces.

[8:30] the Persians, who thought themselves as so powerful, are now powerless, verse 7, unable to prevent its own downfall.

And remember, this isn't really a movie, this is reality. For as verse 21 tells us, this is the Greek Empire, and history reveals that horn is none other than Alexander the Great.

Now, Alexander was a whirlwind of motion. Verse 5 tells us that this goat moves at supersonic speed, its feet not even touching the ground, which, by the way, also corresponds to the leopard from last week.

And that perfectly captures the lightning-fast military campaigns of Alexander. In just three short years, he defeated the Persian Empire, who never won a major battle against him.

That's how dominant Alexander was. And then jump ahead a couple more years, and we discover that he had by then taken control of modern-day Iran, Iraq, Egypt, and getting as far as India.

[9:54] Like the ram before him, he did as he pleased. And all this before he turned 30. So, if you're still in your 20s, you can ask yourself, what have I achieved so far?

I'm just kidding. But, once again, this doesn't last. For, verse 8, at the very height of its power, this large horn was broken off.

In 323 BC, Alexander the Great died suddenly in Babylon at the age of 32, and his empire was eventually divided between his four generals.

And one more time, the Bible lines up perfectly with history. Verse 22 tells us this is what Daniel saw.

And it is from one of those generals that a really sinister leader emerges. In fact, he is who the vision really zooms in on.

[11:06] He starts out as a small horn, but he grows in power. In fact, he will become so powerful, verse 11, that he will think of himself as great as the Lord of hosts himself.

And then he will go on to do some really horrific things. He will enter the beautiful land, that's Israel, verse 9, and crush God's people.

More than that, verses 10 to 12, this little horn will go on to commit unthinkable acts of blasphemy against God. He will take away the burnt offerings, he will overthrow God's sanctuary, that's the temple, he throws truth to the ground.

And once again, there is no real debate amongst the commentators who this is. The details line up too well.

people. This is Antiochus IV, who eventually emerged from one of the four kingdoms that came from the Greek empire.

[12:20] And this guy was truly bad news. He took on the title Epiphanes, meaning something like God made manifest.

he forced the Jews to take on Greek practices and customs. He outlawed circumcision, the very sign that marked God's people as his own.

He stopped all sacrifices at the temple in Jerusalem. And then, to mock God even further, he went one step beyond. He sacrificed pigs, unclean animals, on its very altar, and set up a statue of Zeus right in the most holy place.

That was sacrilege of the highest order. And then, he ordered copies of the scriptures to be burned, and had anyone who stayed faithful to God brutally murdered.

It's estimated during that period, up to 100,000 people were killed. He was completely wicked, verse 23, and caused astounding devastation, verse 24.

[13:39] So, that is 400 years of history in 10 minutes. But, let us pause for a bit, catch our breath, and stop to consider why in the world is God telling us all this.

I mean, sure, I guess the history is interesting for the history nerds, but it almost feels like that moment when your father hands you a stack of Sarawak Tribune newspapers from 1955, and you can tell he wants you to read it.

So, you sit down, you dutifully open the first one, and it is full of headlines about politicians you have never heard of, football scores that don't matter anymore, and advertisements for refrigerators that probably weigh more than your car.

And, as you flip through, you are thinking, okay, dad, I get that this matters to you, but why am I reading this? None of this helps me pay my bills or survive Monday morning traffic.

That could be how you are finding all this talk of strange kings and fallen empires so far. But, I want you to put yourself in Daniel's shoes as he receives this vision.

[15 : 09] And, remember, though these are past events for us, these are all in the future for him. in his case, our heavenly father is giving him a glimpse of the headlines in advance. And, as he watches this preview, what must he have been thinking?

Remember what time it is. Verse 1 says it is the third year of Belshazzar's reign. So, that means Daniel, by this point, has been in exile in Babylon for decades.

And, he must have been longing for the day when he could finally go home and rebuild Jerusalem and the fallen temple. Didn't God, after all, promise that their exile to Babylon was not forever?

forever? But, now, the headlines in this vision are showing him peace and quiet are still a long, long way off.

[16 : 23] Indeed, it is almost the opposite. I mean, imagine being told that the temple you're dreaming of rebuilding will one day be violated again in an even worse way.

And, did you notice also that in this vision, he gets taken out of Babylon but not home to Jerusalem? Instead, verse 2, he finds himself in Susa, a Persian city, one that would eventually become Persia's budrajaya.

So, it is like God is hinting to him, sorry, Daniel, but the road home is still rocky. There's more empires, more turmoil, more heartache to come.

The future isn't bright just yet. As one commentator puts it, this turbulent history is simply the address where the people of God have to live.

There is pain ahead and God is preparing his people for it. God says, God says, this isn't just a Daniel thing, this is a Christian thing.

[17 : 46] For what did Jesus tell his disciples just before he headed to the cross? John 15, verse 18, if the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.

And then later on in verse 20, remember what I told you? A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.

The Apostle Paul echoes this in 2 Timothy 3, verse 12, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

Same with Peter, 1 Peter 4, verse 12, dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery audio that has come on to test you as though something strange were happening to you.

Pain will come. And we see that this holds true throughout history, not just with Antiochus in the 2nd century BC, but with Nero in the 1st century AD, Diocletian in the 3rd century, the Islamic Caliphate in the 10th, and right on and on up till today.

[19 : 06] You see, my brothers and sisters, God wants us to know today that days may come when life for Christians becomes really hard because that is how history in a fallen world works.

And yes, there are seasons of ease. Daniel, even though he was in Babylon, was still tolerated and even had royal privileges.

But the generations after him wouldn't necessarily find themselves in the same boat. It's the same for us. What's coming could be far more difficult.

Maybe 10, 20, 30 years from now, meeting freely as Christians wouldn't be allowed. Maybe owning a Bible would be illegal. Maybe we have to choose between our faith and our jobs.

There will be real tests of faith. And recognize this. What I am describing is not something far off in the future for many of our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world today.

[20:20] It is their present living reality. And we can't assume it could never happen to us because of where we live.

The Bible never says living in Malaysia means we will surely be spared. And that's why God tells Daniel and us all this.

So we'll know what to expect and be ready. As Jesus says in John 16 verse 1, all this I have told you so that you will not fall away.

His purpose isn't to cause panic but to give us resolve. He's preparing us. Now we might not like this word from the Lord.

After all, none of us like being losers. I mean that's basically what God is telling Daniel, right? Prepare to lose. And all of us prefer to win.

[21:26] We like to be on the winning side whether it's in business, in social circles, in politics. And so we might ask, why does the road ahead look this way?

Why does it have to be so painful? And God's answer is because that is the very shape of the gospel. You see, at the heart of the Christian faith is the cross.

And that cross presents us with a paradox. It says to us, if you spend your life trying to win, to get ahead, to hold on to the world, you end up losing the very thing that matters most, your soul.

Yes, there are people in this world who seem to be conquering everything, building empires, securing their legacy, lording it over the weak, but their victory is actually their defeat, because in gaining the world, they have given up themselves, and in the end, they will stand before God with nothing to show.

! But on the other hand, the one who loses their life, who gives up comfort, reputation, even safety for Jesus and his good news, that person is the one who truly gains life.

[22:58] That's what God promises. For God's promises in Christ are not that we will gain power, win political victories, or even shape the culture.

God never promises that we will win in the world's eyes. The hope we are given in scripture is not about triumph in this present age.

It is about triumph in the age to come. But the way through involves pain. It involves the willingness to be weak, powerless, dependent.

So we have to choose. It's either the way of the cross or the way of the world. And if it is the cross, then prepare for the pain.

And let that pain refine us so we won't fall away. I've started reading some sermons and pastoral letters by Wang Yi, who is a prominent house church leader in China who is currently in prison.

[24:10] In one of his letters, he gives 20 theses as to how God's persecution shapes us. And one of the things he says is this. It should be on the screen.

Persecution tests us if we are truly crazy for the gospel. When you are threatened with death for the gospel, you find out for whom you really live. When faced with the risk of job loss, you know for whom you really work.

When you may lose fortune and position for the sake of the gospel, you find out whether you are crazy for money or for the gospel. so prepare for the pain.

But just because we know pain is coming doesn't make it any easier. It doesn't mean we can necessarily get our head around it.

Daniel, back in the 6th century, certainly couldn't. It says in verse 27, he was appalled at this vision and found it all too much.

[25 : 18] And I am sure that those living four centuries later, during the time of Antiochus, couldn't either. Now just put yourself in their shoes, living under Antiochus.

So you've grown up hearing stories of how God rescued his people from Egypt, how he split the sea, how he brought his people home. But now, all you see is the temple being defiled, God's truth being mocked, the enemies of God prospering.

And so naturally you'll start to wonder, is God really in charge? Has he lost control? Has evil actually won? Maybe you'll even start to think, if this is what happens to those who stay faithful, is it really worth it?

And I'm sure those of us living in the 21st century can find the pain of suffering and opposition just as hard to bear. As you are laughed at for taking Jesus seriously, or as obedience to him seems to cost you more than it gives back, you can start wondering, is God really winning here?

is following him actually worth it? And that is why God then goes on to tell us a second essential thing in Daniel 8.

[26 : 52] Persevere, for you know, God reigns. God reigns. You see, consider this for a moment. what if during the time of Antiochus, you actually had Daniel chapter 8 open in front of you?

And what if you realize, as you should, everything that is happening right now was written down centuries before it ever took place?

Would that blow your mind? you look around at all the chaos, all the pain, and yet realize none of this has taken God by surprise.

He caught it all. Wouldn't that make you begin to see that God is even bigger than you imagine? Because one of the most remarkable things about Daniel 8 is just how detailed it is.

[27 : 59] Usually apocalyptic visions paint with broad sweeping strokes rather than such fine detail. But Daniel 8 sketches 400 years of world history with such precision that even many non-believing scholars just throw up their hands and say, there is no way this was written beforehand.

They can't accept it. Because the only explanation left is that God really foretold all this. And that is exactly the point.

God is demonstrating he reigns by the way he reveals the details of the future. You see, isn't the only reason God can describe the future so precisely and so accurately because he already occupies it?

In other words, he reigns over every moment. Past, present, future. He lays it out in such stunning detail, not because he is really good at guessing, but because he alone has that kind of divine foreknowledge.

And here is what he is saying through it all. Yes, the world is a mess. Evil seems to win. People get away with awful things, but I know exactly how this story ends because I wrote it.

[29 : 32] That's the God we trust. Our hope isn't wishful thinking, it is anchored in his perfect knowledge and total control over history.

Our hope is in a God who is not just good, but sovereign. For if he wasn't sovereign, his goodness isn't such good news to us, is it?

Because that means he can't really do anything about evil. But this vision shows us he is both. That's why this vision exists, to reassure us, to remind us that God is never caught off guard.

He pays attention to every detail and he has a purpose for every single one of them. So persevere for God reigns over the future, but that is not the only way he reigns.

He does so too by the way he puts human power in its place. Consider Greece for instance. In Daniel 7, Greece is pictured as this fearsome leopard with four wings and four heads.

[30:48] But in Daniel 8, it becomes just a goat. And I think that is deliberate. God is showing us his point of view.

To him, this wow mutated beast is nothing more than a domesticated animal. Oh, but wait a minute, doesn't this goat have a great horn?

Well, look again at verse 8. Remember what happened to Alexander the Great? At the height of his power, when he should have been in the prime of his life, he is struck down.

To us, these horns look strong, but to God, they are incredibly brittle. They are easily taken down. That's exactly how it keeps happening in history, doesn't it?

Take the mighty Berlin Wall, for instance. It stood for 30 years as the ultimate symbol of communism, but was famously and suddenly brought down in 1989 by a simple communication error from a confused government official.

[31:59] If you're not sure what I'm talking about, go and read up the Wikipedia entry on it later on. But that perfectly illustrates how easily God can strike down even the greatest horns of human power when their time is up.

Or if you need another example, check out verse 24. Notice how the rise of Antiochus is described. Yes, he will become very strong, but notice, not by his own power.

You catch that. He might look invisible, but his strength isn't really his own. There is something, or rather, someone behind the scenes allowing it.

His power is borrowed power. And the moment God decides to withdraw it, verse 25, this invisible king will be utterly destroyed.

For even when evil looks overwhelming, it is still on a leash. It can only go as far as God allows. evil may rise for a time, but it never, ever rules on its own.

[33:12] And though the specific threats change, so that it is no longer Antiochus, but any powerful world leader, hostile regime, or earthly empire, God is still the one holding the reins.

And God also reigns by the way he limits the days of distress. In verse 13, even the angels are wondering among themselves, when does this end?

And that is such a human question, isn't it? I'm sure that's the very cry going out from our brothers and sisters right now in places like North Korea and Myanmar.

How long? And here is God's reply, verse 14. for 2,300 evenings and mornings.

That's how long it will take. Now, if you are a student of biblical prophecy, then you might know much ink has been spilled trying to interpret this number.

[34:23] is the 2,300 referring to days? So we're talking about a period of six years plus? Is it referring to the sacrifices of which there are two each day being performed in the Jewish temple?

So we're now talking about 1,150 days. And each of these proposals have their pros and cons, things. But whichever way it is, its great symbolic meaning is clear.

God will not allow evil to go on forever. And Tyarchus was not allowed to go on forever. The days of pain and persecution will be limited.

And maybe the ambiguity of the numbers is exactly the point. You know, whenever we cry out, how long, Lord, as the psalmists frequently do, God is telling us, don't worry, there is an appointed day when such suffering will come to the end.

You just don't know when. You can try to guess, but you don't really know. But the point is, I do. And God says that is comfort enough for us.

[35 : 47] And we can find true comfort in all these instances of God's reign, ultimately because of Jesus.

Fast forward with me about six centuries from Daniel's time. An angel appears again, but this time to a young woman named Mary.

man and he informs her he will be with child and he is to be called Emmanuel. And his uncle, Zachariah, actually has another name for this child in Luke 1 verse 69.

He calls this child the horn of salvation. And this horn that would deliver them from all their enemies, all these little horns.

Jesus will put human power in its place. And as Jesus grows up and exercises his ministry, we discover he knows all the details of the future.

[36 : 57] He says to Nathaniel, before Philip caught you when you were under the fig tree, I saw you. As he approaches Jerusalem, Jesus describes in detail how his disciples will find the donkey he is to ride.

And everything unfolds just as he said. And as he takes the last supper, he foretells who among his disciples will betray him.

He knows everything down to the last detail. But notice how he uses his foreknowledge.

Instead of using his perfect knowledge to avoid his death, he does the opposite. He prepares for the pain.

He knew exactly what awaited him. The betrayal by Judas, the denial by Peter, the scourging by the Romans, the abandonment by his friends, the crushing wake of sin placed upon him.

[38 : 09] And yet he repeatedly told his disciples, that's why I have come. The Son of Man must die. And so on the cross, Jesus submitted himself to injustice and let evil do its worse.

He put all the distress of the world upon himself. And by doing so, he didn't just predict the future, he secured it.

The day Jesus died and rose again is the day he set an expiry date on evil's reign. And that is exactly why we can persevere.

I said earlier, the reason we go through pain is because of the shape of the gospel. It conforms our lives to its pattern if we're Christians.

But the reason we can walk through that pain is because Jesus is at the core of that very same gospel. He guarantees our story will end in glory.

[39 : 20] That's why we can keep going. So what does that look like today? Again, verse 27 shows us Daniel is worn out by this vision.

You can understand that. He needs some recovery time. But notice what he then goes on to do. He went about the king's business.

In other words, he continued on as he always had, living for the Lord in Babylon. And that is the third essential thing God asks us to do.

Proceed with the king's business. You see, we too have been given a vision of the future. We know Jesus is coming back.

But that doesn't mean we should certainly obsess with trying to chart out every detail and map out a timeline of the end times and get lost in all of that.

[40 : 23] No. We should just get on with living for Christ in the world. We live out godly lives. We love our neighbor. We make the most of every opportunity to share the gospel.

We endure every hardship that comes our way. And yes, we are allowed to lament when it is especially hard. But we stay faithful.

we prepare for the pain, but we persevere since God reigns. That's what we are called to do.

So whatever awaits us, let's make sure we do that. As we go about the king's business in the days to come, don't go trembling, but trusting because the king who reigns is walking with us.

That's the essential message of Daniel 8. Let's pray. Father, this morning we have seen how you rule over the rise and fall of many nations.

[41 : 45] And so Father, as we ponder that, teach us to rest in that truth that you reign over every detail of our lives. Whenever we face pain of any sort, show us Jesus, the one who knows the future, who suffered for us, and who will bring all things to their appointed end in glory.

help us to lose our lives for your sake, so we might gain it. And as we go into this week and the weeks ahead, give us the strength and the courage to keep going about your business, as we love and serve others, as we persevere in trials, so that you might be made known.

All this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.