Daniel 8:1-27

Introduction

There's been a lot said recently about our readiness as a country for war. Or rather, our perceived lack of readiness. People are warning that we've got complacent as a nation and let our defences down. They're saying that we need to rediscover a wartime mentality. The Prime Minister even suggested this week that we should all stockpile a three-day supply of basic foods as an emergency disaster box… although he didn't necessarily agree with Angela Rayner that that should include a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc. But the point is that we we're living in dangerous times, and we need to rediscover a wartime mindset.

The same could be said of the church.

Last week, we started reading the second half of this book of Daniel, and we've discovered that the style of writing is very different to the first half. Narrative has given way to apocalyptic literature. I said last week that if you prefer watching a movie to reading a novel, you'll feel right at home in these chapters. They appeal to our senses. God is communicating truth through pictures and symbols. He's drawing back the curtain of history to show us where everything's heading. And we saw last week that we're in a battle. The outcome is secure. God wins. The victory has been won by Jesus at the cross. He has been crowned King. And it's *his* kingdom that will prevail at the end of history. But nonetheless, for this period of history, between Christ's first appearing and his return, we're in a battle; a spiritual battle. And these chapters of Daniel are preparing us for it. They're urging us to adopt a wartime mindset. My hope is that we'll better understand what that means by the time we've read our passage this morning.

The chapter we're looking at this week records another vision that appeared to Daniel; this one, two years after the dream we read about last week. Chapter 7 gave us a panoramic view of history. Chapter 8 concerns a specific period of time. So, this morning, we'll read what Daniel was shown, and then we'll see what it has to teach us about the Christian life today. It concerns a ram and a goat. And that's our first heading.

A ram and a goat

Please look down again at verse 1. **In the third year of King Belshazzar's reign, I, Daniel, had a vision, after the one that had already appeared to me. In my vision I saw myself in the citadel of Susa in the province of Elan; in the vision I was beside the Ulai Canal.** In other words, Daniel saw himself in the capital city of Persia. And he says: **I looked up, and there before me was a ram with two horns, standing beside the canal, and the horns were long. One of the horns was longer than the other but grew up later. I watched the ram as it charged towards the west and the north and the south. No animal could stand against it, and none could rescue from its power. It did as it pleased and became great.**

Daniel then says that he paused to think about this when, suddenly, a goat appeared, with a prominent horn between its eyes. The goat **came from the west, crossing the whole earth without touching the ground.** It's an indication of the speed with which this goat travelled.

It came so fast that its feet didn't touch the ground. And the scene Daniel describes is violent. The goat charged at the ram in a great rage and attacked it furiously, knocking it to the ground and trampling it. And then the goat became great. But at the height of its power the large horn was broken off, and four prominent horns grew up in its place.

If you're finding this all quite bewildering, don't worry. That's the nature of apocalyptic literature. But thankfully, we're told what it means. The vision is interpreted by none other than the angel Gabriel, who, many centuries later, would reveal more of God's plan of salvation to a virgin called Mary. The interpretation is recorded in the second half of the chapter, starting at verse 15, so glance across there. Gabriel begins by telling Daniel that this vision concerns the appointed time of the end. What he means by that will become clearer as we read on. So, please bear with me as we work through the details.

We saw last week that animals often represent nations in apocalyptic literature. And that's the case here. The ram with two horns that charges west, north and south represents the two kings of the Medo-Persian Empire. The horns of different lengths probably reflect the fact that one part of the Medo-Persian Empire was stronger than the other. But it was a vast empire, that covered most of the known world at that time. This is the kingdom that would replace the Babylonian Empire. But *this* kingdom would, in turn, be replaced by another kingdom. In verse 21, Gabriel tells Daniel that the goat with the large horn is the first king of Greece. In other words, this is Alexander the Great. By the age of 21 Alexander was a general in the Greek army. By the age of 26 he had virtually conquered the world. He did so with astonishing speed and ferocity, just as the vision foretold. But then, at the age of 32, he died suddenly of illness. Following his death, Alexander's kingdom was divided into four regions, each with its own ruler. And those are the kingdoms represented by the four horns we read about. So, we're dealing here with a very specific period of history. And all of this sets the scene for what we read of next, which is a period of rebellion and devastation. That's our next heading.

Rebellion and devastation

Please look across the page again to verse 9. Daniel describes a horn that came out of one of these four kingdoms. He says it **started small but grew in power to the south and to the east and towards the Beautiful Land.** The Beautiful Land is Israel. So, for Daniel and the exiles this is all getting very close to home, quite literally. Daniel had lived through the sacking of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple by the Babylonians. And now he's seeing a vision of it happening all over again. No wonder, by the end, that he's traumatised by it all. What he sees in verses 10 to 12 is a scene of complete devastation. And in verse 23 onwards, the angel Gabriel confirms what it means: **…a fierce-looking king, a master of intrigue will arise,** he says. **He will cause astounding devastation and will succeed in whatever he does. He will destroy those who are mighty, the holy people. He will cause deceit to prosper, and he will consider himself superior. When they feel secure, he will destroy many and take his stand against the Prince of princes.**

Scholars have little difficulty in identifying this fierce-looking king with a ruler called Antiochus Epiphanes, who rose to power in the second century BC. Epiphanes was a

blasphemous name he claimed for himself. It meant, 'The Glorious God'. But he was a power-hungry and ruthless ruler. Others referred to him not as Epiphanes but as Epimanes, which means 'The Madman'. History records that he waged a ruthless war against the Israelites who lived in the Beautiful Land. It's reported that forty thousand of them were killed in just three days when he sacked Jerusalem, entered the temple and sacrificed a pig on the altar. He outlawed Jewish religion and ordered the worship of Greek gods. As a result, the temple was left without the daily sacrifices of the Jewish law. Human sacrifices were made instead. And a statue of Zeus was placed in the temple. That situation remained for a period that could well equate to the 2,300 evenings and mornings in verse 21, until someone called Judas Maccabeus led a successful rebellion against Antiochus around 166BC. He retook Jerusalem and restarted the temple sacrifices. Jews still celebrate his victory today with their annual celebration of Hannukah.

It seems, then, that the time of the end that Gabriel referred to in verse 17 describes a period of suffering for God's people at the hands of Antiochus Epiphanes, before salvation would come.

What Antiochus reveals is the essence of human sin. He is deceitful. He is self-centred and arrogant. He thinks he is superior. He will even stand against the Prince of princes, God himself. That's the essence of all sin. It's what each one of us would be like if God didn't graciously restrain us. Not one of us is as sinful as we could be. But that is only by God's grace. And once again, there are hints in the passage that God is in control. We can see that in verse 24, which describes the rise of Antiochus: **He will become very strong, but not by his own power.** Antiochus is dependent on God for his strength, even as he rebels against God. It's true of all of us. And we can see God's control in verse, 25, which describes his fall: **Yet he will be destroyed, but not by human power.** This is where all sin leads. It leads to judgement and destruction.

The message for Daniel and the exiles is the same as in chapter 7. There's a hard road ahead. Deliverance will be a long time coming. But God is in control. So, keep trusting him. And we saw in chapter 7 that, although apocalyptic literature speaks of specific figures and events in history, they also serve as a pattern for things that will repeat throughout the whole span of history. In that sense, we can see here a foreshadowing of the time of the end before the close of history when Jesus returns. The destruction of this fierce-looking king foreshadows the destruction of all God's enemies at the end of history. And the message for us is the same. There's a battle on. The devil will keep waging war against God and his people until that day comes. But God is in control. So, keep trusting him.

So then, if this is the case, how should we live? Well, we should take our cue from Daniel. Verse 27 says: **I, Daniel, was worn out. I lay exhausted for several days. Then I got up and went about the king's business.** Daniel knows that the dream concerns the distant future. And it troubles him. But he gets up and carries on doing the work God had given him to do.

God has revealed to us in the Bible what lays ahead. He has shown us where everything's heading. And he's done that so that we might get up and get on with serving him today. Hard times may come. But he's in control. So, keep trusting his promises. Keep obeying his

commands. Keep doing the work he's given you to do. That was the message for the original readers. It's the message we need to hear today. If your head's spinning and that's all you take from this sermon, then you've got the main thing: though hard times may come, keep trusting God and keep doing the work he's given you to do.

But there's more this chapter can teach us if we step back a little and consider what it's showing us in the context of the whole of the Bible. This book of Daniel is urging us to adopt a wartime mindset. And the reason this chapter can help us in the Christian life today is that the devil's tactics never change. We can trace them all the way through the Bible. Here in Daniel 8, God is showing us what they are, so that we might know how to stand against him. In sport, coaches have playbooks that contain their tactics. So, before we end, it's worth noting what this chapter reveals about the devil's playbook. That's our final heading.

The devil's playbook

Let's read verses 11 and 12 again. They reveal three ways the devil consistently assaults God's people. These are three of the devil's tactics that we need to be on guard against. They're describing the horn of verse 9. **It set itself up to be as great as the commander of the army of the Lord; 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.**

Here are the three tactics. First, in verse 11, the daily sacrifices were taken away. Those daily sacrifices were essential to the Israelites for their relationship with God. But from the beginning, from the Garden of Eden, the devil has sought to destroy the relationship between God and his people. They were essential because they taught the Israelites that sin is serious and that a Holy God must punish sin. They taught that the only way for their sin to be forgiven was for a substitute to take the punishment they deserved in their place. Only then could fellowship with God be restored. That's why they offered those sacrifices daily. They're no longer part of the Christian life today because they have been fulfilled perfectly in the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. The animal sacrifices of the Old Testament all pointed forward to Jesus. His is the one sacrifice that can take away sin and bring us into fellowship with God. We live each day by faith in him. And the devil will do all that he can to draw us away from him. Just as Antiochus brought an end to the sacrifices in the temple, so the devil will seek to draw us away from the cross of Christ and destroy our relationship with God. He will do all he can to shift our confidence away from Christ to anything else: our good deeds, our moral character, our religious observances, and whatever else we might trust in. We mustn't let him. Adopting a wartime mindset means reminding ourselves daily of what Christ has accomplished for us at the cross, so that we might keep trusting in him and him alone for our relationship with God.

Here's the devil's second tactic, at the *end* of verse 11: God's sanctuary was thrown down. Antiochus desecrated the temple; the dwelling place of God on earth. And the devil is just as determined today to do whatever he can to overthrow the new temple of God, which is the church. He has no shortage of ways to try. As he did through Antiochus, he will try to destroy the church through persecution from outside. We need to pray for our brothers

and sisters around the world who are suffering hatred because of their faith. And we need to be ready for life as a Christian to become harder for us in this country too. But the devil will seek to destroy the church not only from the outside but also from the inside. If he can use our pride and vanity to make us fall out with each other, he will. Jesus made a point of praying for our unity on the night before he died. We need to be vigilant. We will only resist the devil's attacks if we have clothed ourselves with humility and learned to forgive one another and resolve our differences. That's a wartime mindset. And of course, there's another way the devil will seek to destroy us from within. He'll seek to desecrate the church through the immoral behaviour of its members. Sadly, we see it time and time again, especially with sexual immorality. We mustn't get complacent. Adopting a wartime mindset means fighting sin and pursuing holiness every day with all the strength God gives us.

And here's the third tactic, in verse 12: truth was thrown to the ground. Antiochus caused deceit to prosper and sought to turn God's people away from the worship of the living God to the worship of the false Greek gods. Many years later, the apostle Paul warned the Ephesian elders that after he was gone wolves would come. They would destroy the church by distorting the truth. It was the tactic Satan used in the Garden of Eden, when he twisted God's word to deceive Eve. It's the tactic he's always used. And he continues to find ways to throw truth to the ground today. It's happening in churches the length and breadth of the country. It can happen anywhere, even here at Emmanuel. We need stay alert and to test everything we hear against the plumbline of scripture. And if we come across any teaching that deviates from the truth of God's word, we must reject it and make sure that it doesn't take root in our lives personally or in the life of the church.

Here then is the devil's playbook. He seeks daily to draw believers away from our one means of salvation, the cross of Christ; to overthrow the church, through persecution, division and scandal; and to exchange the truth about God for a lie.

Conclusion

This chapter is reminding us that we're in a battle. The battle is won but we mustn't let our defences down. God is in control. He wins. We need to keep trusting him. It might get harder to live as a Christian in this country, but we mustn't give up. And we mustn't get complacent. We need a wartime mindset so that we can resist the devil's attacks. It's exactly what Paul tells us in Ephesians 6. He says: **Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes**. And as we put on our armour, we must get up and get on with the work that God has given us to do.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, thank you for the confidence we have that you are in control of history and are guiding it to its goal. Thank you that we can look forward to the day when Jesus will return and establish his kingdom for ever. Please help us to be on our guard until that day. Help us to resist the schemes of the devil. And help us to keep doing the work that you have given us to do as we make Christ known here in Hastings. We ask it in his name. Amen.