

Persecutors in Prophecy

In December, Jews celebrate the festival of Chanukkah, a festival which Jesus Himself seemed to celebrate in Jerusalem according to John 10:22. Chanukkah celebrates a remarkable victory and a possible miracle which occurred in the year 165 BC. Israel had been persecuted by an evil ruler named Antiochus, and forbidden from offering sacrifices. A group of brave Jews under the leadership of Judah Maccabee began a successful rebellion. When he and his followers cleansed the Temple of all the temple idols, they found only one small cruse of oil with only enough oil for one day to light their holy lamps. They decided to light the menorah even with the small amount of oil. To everyone's amazement the menorah miraculously burned for eight days until new oil was available! It is said the oil lasted for 8 days. As a result, Hanukkah is celebrated with the lighting of candles for eight days.

That terrible time of persecution of Israel was not its first, nor its last. But it was one of its worst. Amazingly, it was predicted in the book of Daniel 400 years before the events. It's quite amazing to think that God predicted persecution. Here the Jews had in their hands a book which foretold of future suffering. What were they supposed to do with that? Panic? Fear?

In fact, they were supposed to take courage that God had appointed it, and had appointed a specific time for it. It would not go on forever, nor would it get out of control. The same message exists for believers today. Whatever persecution or wicked governments believers might face, God is in complete control of history.

In this chapter, we'll see Daniel's vision of two world empires, some of the rulers, and a great persecutor of God's people. Once again, we'll be amazed by the precision and accuracy of Daniel's prophecy.

Let's begin by first just walking through the vision as Daniel saw it and experienced it, and then spend most of our time examining the interpretation given by the angel Gabriel.

I. The Place

Daniel 8:1-27 *In the third year of the reign of King Belshazzar a vision appeared to me -- to me, Daniel -- after the one that appeared to me the first time. ² I saw in the vision, and it so happened while I was looking, that I was in Shushan, the citadel, which is in the province of Elam; and I saw in the vision that I was by the River Ulai.*

Two years after the vision of chapter 7, Daniel received another vision. This time, he finds himself hundreds of kilometres away from Babylon in Shushan. This was a city in Persia. In fact, it's where the book of Esther takes place. It's where Nehemiah serves as the king's cupbearer nearly a hundred year later. What's the significance of that? Well, this vision is no longer concerned with Babylon. Daniel already knows that Babylon is on the way out. This vision is concerned with the middle two kingdoms on Daniel's previous vision – Persia and Greece.

II. The Ram

³ *Then I lifted my eyes and saw, and there, standing beside the river, was a ram which had two horns, and the two horns were high; but one was higher than the other, and the higher one came up last. ⁴ I saw the ram pushing westward, northward, and southward, so that no animal could withstand him; nor was there any that could deliver from his hand, but he did according to his will and became great.*

Daniel sees a ram with two horns. Nothing unusual about that. But then he notices that one of the

ram's horns comes up and outgrows the other one, so that it looks lopsided. And then this ram, from its place on the river Ulai, pushes west and south and north. No one can stop this ram, as it enlarges its territory and becomes greater and greater.

III. The Goat

⁵ And as I was considering, suddenly a male goat came from the west, across the surface of the whole earth, without touching the ground; and the goat had a notable horn between his eyes. ⁶ Then he came to the ram that had two horns, which I had seen standing beside the river, and ran at him with furious power. ⁷ And I saw him confronting the ram; he was moved with rage against him, attacked the ram, and broke his two horns. There was no power in the ram to withstand him, but he cast him down to the ground and trampled him; and there was no one that could deliver the ram from his hand.

Daniel now sees a second animal- a male goat. Notice the direction it comes from: west. This male goat comes, apparently at such a speed, that it does not even touch the ground. There's something different about this goat: it has only one horn. It looks more like an unicorn than a goat and he charges the ram in a rage of anger, breaks its horn, tramples him, and no one can save the ram from the goat.

IV. The Goat's Horns

⁸ Therefore the male goat grew very great; but when he became strong, the large horn was broken, and in place of it four notable ones came up toward the four winds of heaven.

Just like the ram had grown great, the goat grows great. And then, the one large horn breaks, and out come four horns pointing to the north, the south, the west, and the east.

V. The Little Horn

⁹ And out of one of them came a little horn which grew exceedingly great toward the south, toward the east, and toward the Glorious Land. ¹⁰ And it grew up to the host of heaven; and it cast down some of the host and some of the stars to the ground, and trampled them. ¹¹ He even exalted himself as high as the Prince of the host; and by him the daily sacrifices were taken away, and the place of His sanctuary was cast down. ¹² Because of transgression, an army was given over to the horn to oppose the daily sacrifices; and he cast truth down to the ground. He did all this and prospered.

¹³ Then I heard a holy one speaking; and another holy one said to that certain one who was speaking, "How long will the vision be, concerning the daily sacrifices and the transgression of desolation, the giving of both the sanctuary and the host to be trampled under foot?" ¹⁴ And he said to me, "For two thousand three hundred days; then the sanctuary shall be cleansed."

From those four, comes another one, which grows. And as it grows it seems to do some extraordinary things- casting down stars, taking away sacrifices, casting down truth, casting down the sanctuary, and prospering while he did it.

Just like in Daniel 7, there are angelic watchers. One asks the other about this little horn's activity, how long he will be allowed to cast down sacrifices and the sanctuary. The answer is: 2300 days, which is just a little over six years.

VI. The Angelic Intervention

¹⁵ Then it happened, when I, Daniel, had seen the vision and was seeking the meaning, that suddenly there stood before me one having the appearance of a man. ¹⁶ And I heard a man's voice between the banks of

the Ulai, who called, and said, "Gabriel, make this man understand the vision." ¹⁷ So he came near where I stood, and when he came I was afraid and fell on my face; but he said to me, "Understand, son of man, that the vision refers to the time of the end." ¹⁸ Now, as he was speaking with me, I was in a deep sleep with my face to the ground; but he touched me, and stood me upright. ¹⁹ And he said, "Look, I am making known to you what shall happen in the latter time of the indignation; for at the appointed time the end shall be.

Daniel's encounter with these angels becomes far more up-close and personal. One calls to Gabriel to give Daniel understanding. Gabriel comes near to Daniel. Gabriel's effect on Daniel is to first terrify Daniel to where Daniel simply collapses from fear. In fact, Daniel faints into unconsciousness. At the end of the chapter, Daniel has a similar feeling.

²⁷ And I, Daniel, fainted and was sick for days; afterward I arose and went about the king's business. I was astonished by the vision, but no one understood it.

This is not altogether surprising. Gabriel is one of only three angels, who are named in the Bible: Lucifer, if you count him, and Michael, the archangel. Gabriel seems to be God's selected messenger angel, the angel who is charged with the most important news and messages. It was he who spoke to Zecharias and gave the news of the birth of John. It was he who spoke to Mary and told her that she had been selected to bear the Messiah. Perhaps Gabriel, Michael, and Lucifer formed some kind of triumvirate of chief angels before Lucifer's fall.

Gabriel is one of the most powerful beings in the universe, and his appearance, even to a man with all the godliness and experience of Daniel is simply overpowering. Daniel is face down in the ground, his unredeemed, unresurrected body having simply collapsed through the stress of encountering a heavenly being. Once Gabriel has woken Daniel up, he tells him when this vision will Take place. And he then goes on to explain the whole vision.

The Explanation of the Vision

²⁰ "The ram which you saw, having the two horns -- *they are* the kings of Media and Persia. ²¹ "And the male goat *is* the kingdom of Greece. The large horn that *is* between its eyes *is* the first king. ²² "As for the broken horn and the four that stood up in its place, four kingdoms shall arise out of that nation, but not with its power. ²³ " And in the latter time of their kingdom, When the transgressors have reached their fullness, A king shall arise, Having fierce features, Who understands sinister schemes. ²⁴ His power shall be mighty, but not by his own power; He shall destroy fearfully, And shall prosper and thrive; He shall destroy the mighty, and *also* the holy people. ²⁵ "Through his cunning He shall cause deceit to prosper under his rule; And he shall exalt *himself* in his heart. He shall destroy many in *their* prosperity. He shall even rise against the Prince of princes; But he shall be broken without *human* means. ²⁶ "And the vision of the evenings and mornings Which was told is true; Therefore seal up the vision, For *it refers* to many days *in the future.*"

So here we have the vision explained. We can summarise Gabriel's explanation in three parts: the ram, the goat and its horns, and the final horn.

The Ram – Gabriel says that the ram stands for the kings, or the kingdom of Medo-Persia. This vision skips the first animal from Daniel's vision of chapter 7, and the head of gold from chapter 2. It begins with the kingdom of the Medes and the Persians. Being a kingdom made of the Medes and the Persians, it was a dual kingdom. It had two horns. But one came up higher than the other. History tells us that eventually the Persian side of the kingdom came to dominate. And if you remember the description, it pushes north, south and west, which is what the Persian empire did, it didn't push east. It went west, and it took Syria, and it took Asia Minor, and it took Babylonia. It then pushed north, and it took Armenia and all the region around the Caspian Sea. It pushed south, and it took Egypt, and it took Ethiopia. And it already occupied the east, and that's how it became the empire of that entire part of the world. Just exactly as Daniel said, it moved west, north, and south. And when this kingdom was on top, no one could stop it.

The Goat – Gabriel plainly tells us that the goat is the kingdom of Greece, and the large horn is the first king of Greece when it becomes a world empire. This was none other than Alexander the Great. With an army of 35 000, Alexander set out at the age of 22 to conquer the world. He had stunning success against the Persian forces, swiftly moving through their territories. In eleven years, he had not only conquered all of the former Persian empire, but he went beyond it. He had the largest empire of any ancient king until the Romans. And while the Romans had built theirs over hundreds of years, Alexander built his in eleven years. His army truly moved from its place in the west, and moved swiftly, like he was flying. And historians also tell us of the great contempt that the Greeks had for the Persians. They regarded the Persians as barbarians, lacking in Greek culture. When they attacked, they attacked with a rage and ferocity that was devastating. It was as if Alexander's men truly were in a rage, and sought not only to break the Persians but to trample them down. And that's exactly what they did.

Alexander's forces could not take all of India, and he returned with a demoralised army. After a binge of drinking, Alexander fell ill, so ill that he lost the ability to speak. All he could do was sit propped up in bed, while his army generals filed past, and he acknowledged them with a motion from his eyes.

Gabriel explained what would happen after Alexander's death:

"As for the broken horn and the four that stood up in its place, four kingdoms shall arise out of that nation, but not with its power."

Alexander's massive world empire was split four ways. Four of Alexander's generals each took a piece of the empire. Ptolemy, Seleucus, Cassander and Lysimachus. And it didn't happen overnight. It took 22 years of political intrigue and wrangling before that happened. As Gabriel says, their divided kingdom will not have the kind of power which Alexander's had.

Then Gabriel tells Daniel who that *little horn* was. He says that from one of the kingdoms will come another king.

"And in the latter time of their kingdom, When the transgressors have reached their fullness, A king shall arise, Having fierce features, Who understands sinister schemes. ²⁴ His power shall be mighty, but not by his own power; He shall destroy fearfully, And shall prosper and thrive; He shall destroy the mighty, and also the holy people. ²⁵ Through his cunning He shall cause deceit to prosper under his rule; And he shall exalt himself in his heart. He shall destroy many in their prosperity. He shall even rise against the Prince of princes"

This happens towards the end of the Greek kingdom, so this is something which happens before the Roman empire is on the scene. Was there anyone like this who matched this description? Yes there was. From the Seleucids, came a ruler named Antiochus. He was the eighth ruler of this kingdom, and ruled from 175 to 164 B.C. This is a good 150 years after Alexander. Gabriel says he is cunning. He actually got the throne by stealing it when the rightful heir had been taken hostage.

As Gabriel said, he would be powerful, and destructive, and prosper. Antiochus became more and more powerful, and in 171 B.C., he turned his hatred towards the Jews. He tried to stamp out the faith of Israel, and establish Greek religion and culture as the religion of Israel. He built a place of exercise right next to the temple, where athletes competed naked. This was defiling and scandalous to Jews, but the more it operated, the more Jews were drawn in. Indeed, many of them began to despise circumcision as a result of this.

Antiochus declared that any mother who circumcised her son was to be killed, along with the baby.

The baby would be killed, tied around her neck, while she would be marched out of town to be thrown off a cliff and crushed. He had copies of the Law ripped up. He stopped the Jewish sacrifices of the Temple. He went into the temple and stripped the gold. He entered the sanctuary, a defiled it. He had a pig sacrificed on the altar, and dedicated the Temple to Zeus. He forced the priests to eat pork. He called himself Antiochus Ephiphanes, and had coins minted with the words *Theos Antiochus Epiphanes* on it, which means Antiochus, God Manifest. Who else do we know about who will declare himself to be God?

Look again at verse 9:

And out of one of them came a little horn which grew exceedingly great toward the south, toward the east, and toward the Glorious Land. ¹⁰ And it grew up to the host of heaven; and it cast down some of the host and some of the stars to the ground, and trampled them. ¹¹ He even exalted himself as high as the Prince of the host; and by him the daily sacrifices were taken away, and the place of His sanctuary was cast down. ¹² Because of transgression, an army was given over to the horn to oppose the daily sacrifices; and he cast truth down to the ground. He did all this and prospered.

In verses 11 and 12 you see a clear prophecy of Antiochus – he opposed God Himself, and stopped the sacrifices by force. What does it mean that he grew up to the host of heaven, and cast down some of the stars? Comparing this Scripture with 12:3

Daniel 12:3 ³ *Those who are wise shall shine Like the brightness of the firmament, And those who turn many to righteousness Like the stars forever and ever.*

It probably means that he martyred and killed many of the righteous. In his short reign, he had 80 000 Jews killed, sent another 40 000 into slavery.

Now, here's what's amazing. Remember that the angels had said that this would go on for 2300 days. Well, things went sour between the Jews and Antiochus in 171 B.C. And we don't know exactly what date the decisive event was in 171 B.C. But we do know that it was on December 25th, 165 B.C. That Judas Maccabeus, the brave Jewish leader who led the revolt against Antiochus came in and cleansed the Temple. And if you go back in time 2300 days from December 25 165 B.C. You land up in what year? 171 B.C., the year things went sour. Just like God said – 2300 days, not more and not less.

How did Antiochus meet his end? Verse 25 said *But he shall be broken without human means.*

As it turns out, Antiochus was not killed by a spear, a sword or an arrow. He died of a disease in 164 B.C. Daniel's prophecy did not miss a detail or get a things wrong.

The message to God's people in advance was, it's going to get worse, before it gets better. But all this is being permitted by God. God has not forsaken his people. God has a timer in his hand, and this abomination will not go longer than 2300 days. This persecutor of God's people will not go any further than God allows. The same God who is sovereign over empires and can write history in advance, is able to protect and deliver his faithful people.

And that message remains for God's people. In fact, there may be more intended here than simply Antiochus Epiphanes. That's because Gabriel says to Daniel:

"Understand, son of man, that the vision refers to the time of the end. Look, I am making known to you what shall happen in the latter time of the indignation; for at the appointed time the end shall be".

And since we know that the period of Antiochus was not the end of the age, or even the end of the

old covenant period, it's quite likely that this little horn also refers to someone in the end time. Someone who, like the little horn of Daniel 7, persecutes God's people, speaks great blasphemies, stops religious practices, and seeks to stamp out the faith of God's people.

Scripture sometimes will speak of one individual but in speaking of one person, it morphs into someone behind or beyond that person. God speaks to the king of Tyre in Ezekiel 28, but it's clear He is eventually speaking of someone behind the king of Tyre – Satan.

So, although Antiochus Epiphanes fits the description, Antiochus is one of many little antichrists who help us to understand the final Antichrist. The final man of lawlessness will act just like Antiochus, but be worse. The persecutors of God's people throughout history, the Antiochuses, the Neros, the Hitlers, the Stalins, they help us know what sort of man the final enemy of God's people will be like.

And when he finally comes, how should God's people react? With fear? With doubt? With bewilderment? No, with the same sense that the God who put a deadline on Antiochus's persecution, will put a deadline on his as well.