

# The God of History

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[ 0 : 01 ] Well, good evening, everyone. Glad that we can be here together. It's great to be back. We were not able to be here last week. My wife and I were in Indianapolis.

She had a film screening in the Heartland Film Festival, and we had a great time. We saw a lot of great films that were almost as good as her film. Really amazing experience to be around so many people who are doing great work, but happy to be back here.

And for this day that we call All Saints Day. As we get started, I want to start this way.

Scientists are and have long been concerned with a question of consciousness and perception. They've long been concerned with the question of whether or not we're able to perceive reality accurately.

In other words, using our five senses, can we see things as they really are? And this is picking up steam in the scientific community, particularly among cognitive scientists and theoretical biologists.

[ 1 : 12 ] There's a man named Donald Hoffman, who's professor of cognitive science at the University of California, Irvine. And here's what he says. The world presented to us by our perceptions is nothing like reality.

What we see is a magnificent illusion that maximizes evolutionary fitness by driving truth to extinction.

That's an interesting thing to assert. In other words, he's saying, we don't necessarily see things as they are. We see things in ways that are most beneficial to us at the expense of truth and literal accuracy.

So this question is very important. Do we live all of our lives only seeing what we want to see, what we need to see, what is most beneficial to see? Or is it ever possible to actually cut through that magnificent illusion and to see things as they actually are?

And scripture is also very concerned with that question. In particular, there's a genre in the Bible that is very concerned with this question of perception versus reality, and it's called apocalyptic literature.

[ 2 : 35 ] Now, I know that you began looking at this last week with Dan, and many people, when they hear the word apocalyptic, think of great end times battles between good and evil and buildings crashing down and fire and brimstone and all that stuff.

Well, the word apocalyptic really just literally means unveiling. It means revealing. And the function of apocalyptic literature is to reveal, it's to unveil reality.

It cuts through the illusion. It cuts through our perceived reality and illuminates the spiritual reality underneath.

And so we're going to be looking at the book of Daniel as we've been doing for a number of weeks. It just so happens in our series, this week we just happened to come to Daniel chapter 8, and this passage today is one great example of apocalyptic writing.

God gives the prophet Daniel a vision, and then the vision does two things. It describes a number of historical events, and then it cuts through that layer, and it shows us an underlying spiritual reality.

[ 3 : 50 ] And so we're going to look at this chapter together, and even though it's about things that happened a long time ago, what I hope you'll see is that we can use the same approach today to make sense of current reality.

Once you know the underlying story, the underlying spiritual truth, you can overlay events in any historical period and use it as a means of interpreting the times.

And so this is what we're going to do. So first we'll look at the events themselves described in this vision, and then we're going to look at the underlying spiritual reality that is revealed. So let's pray as we get started.

Our Heavenly Father, we do thank you for this gathering of saints here, Lord. We know that all who belong to you, all who have put their faith in you, are made saints, and we thank you for this gathering.

We also thank you for all those who might be here who are still seeking, still searching, still wondering if you're there, and who you are, and what it means to know you, Lord. We thank you for all you have brought here tonight.

[ 4 : 52 ] And we pray that by your wisdom and by your power, you would speak to each one of us as we need to hear you. Meet us where we are, as you promised to do, because you love us. And we ask this in your Son's name.

Amen. So as we look at Daniel chapter 8, I just want to say right off the bat, this is a very bizarre, bizarre chapter. There's lots of crazy stuff happening here.

There's goats and rams and multiple horns coming out of heads and stars and planets getting pulled out of the sky. It's a crazy sort of trippy thing going on here.

And so I want to give you a little context first, in case you're unfamiliar with Daniel. Daniel takes place in the 6th century BC. That's when this story is happening.

And Daniel is an Israelite who is living in Babylon. He's lived in Babylon his entire adult life. And that's because Babylon, the Babylonians, sacked Judah and Jerusalem, and they took the best and the brightest of Israel into captivity.

[ 5 : 52 ] So this is where Daniel has been. He's been serving under a number of kings by this point. And he's gotten famous because of his God-given ability to interpret dreams and visions.

And what we realize here, and what we began to see last week with chapter 7, is not only is Daniel able to interpret other people's dreams and visions, but at some point Daniel began to have dreams and visions of his own.

And so God not only gives Daniel the vision, but he also sends emissaries, messengers, to explain the vision. So that's what we're going to look at. Now I want to say that the historical events that are described in this vision don't actually happen for another 200 years.

So we're moving from the 6th century up to the 4th, 3rd, even 2nd century as we're looking at what is described here. And yet there's a surprising amount of historical accuracy.

So the first thing Daniel sees in this vision as it opens, it says, you know, Daniel ate one, in the third year of the reign of King Belshazzar, a vision appeared to me, Daniel. And the first thing he sees in this vision is a ram.

[ 7 : 03 ] And the ram has two horns, one slightly longer than the other. Interesting detail. And this ram is very powerful. It's able to do anything it wants. It can go north or east or south or west.

It can do anything it wants, and nobody can challenge this ram. Very powerful, right? So this ram is sort of hanging out in the vision, and then Daniel looks, and all of a sudden, out of nowhere, a goat appears.

And so, you know, right now things are starting to get strange. So how do we begin to understand this? Well, it's interesting. History tells us that, and later in the interpretation, we find out that the ram actually represents the Medo-Persian Empire.

And you say, well, why a ram? Well, it actually turns out that a ram is a good symbol for the Medo-Persian Empire because the Persians often had rams, ram's heads, on their armor.

So this is what this symbol represents. And then out of nowhere, this male goat appears. And the male goat just has one prominent horn sticking out of his head, so it's like a unicorn goat. And the unicorn goat starts racing toward the ram, and it's going so fast that the feet aren't even touching the ground.

[ 8 : 14 ] It's just flying over the land, and it's coming at the ram, and it, you know, takes the ram down. And it says that the ram is utterly powerless against this goat.

The goat totally crushes the ram. So how do we make sense of that? Well, a little later in the vision, this is explained that the goat actually represents Greece, the Greek Empire.

And history tells us that Alexander the Great rose to power at a very young age. He unified Greece, right? People said, we're not going to follow this kid.

So he rose up, took his army, slaughtered them all. Said, anybody else have a problem with me? Okay, good. And then from that point on, they were unified. And then, like most 20-year-olds, he said, you know, this isn't enough.

I want to conquer the whole world. And so he sets out to conquer the whole world. And in order to conquer the world, he says, well, I have to take out the Medo-Persian Empire. Because they're the big threat.

[ 9 : 13 ] So he gets his army, and he goes after the Medo-Persian Empire. And he crushes them. Obliterates them. Now, what's interesting in the vision is that it says that right after the goat is victorious, at the height of his strength, this prominent horn is broken.

What's going on there? Well, we know from history that after Alexander, conquered the Medo-Persian Empire, at the height of his strength, at age 33, he contracts malaria, and he dies prematurely.

So after he dies, pretty quickly his sons are killed off because nobody wants them ascending to the throne. And then his four generals divide up his kingdom.

And in the vision we see in verse 8 and verse 22, after this prominent horn is broken, four smaller horns rise up in the place of the one horn.

Four generals, the kingdom is divided. By the way, why is Greece represented by a goat? Seems kind of random. Well, history tells us that as Alexander and his army sailed toward the Medo-Persians to attack them, guess what was on the sail of Alexander's ship?

[ 10 : 32 ] It was a goat. So we have this story of the Medo-Persian Empire falling, Alexander conquering them, but then Alexander himself falling, and his generals dividing up his kingdom.

Then the vision skips over about two centuries of history, and the focus goes immediately to one particular horn. And by the way, you should know by now that horns represent rulers or kings. One particular horn comes into view. This is a new ruler. And this ruler grows out of one of the four horns that replaced Alexander. But this ruler is worse.

Scholars almost universally agree that this horn represents the 2nd century B.C. ruler, Antiochus Epiphanes. Now, Antiochus Epiphanes started out small, but he became very powerful. He got big fast. And he gained a lot of power. It says in the text that this ruler is one who understands riddles. And we know about Antiochus Epiphanes that he was a master of political manipulation.

[ 11 : 36 ] He was a crafty type of king. He was exceptionally brutal, exceptionally wicked. He had an agenda to eradicate all cultures except for Greek culture.

You know, the approach in the past had been bring the cultures in. Our culture will become richer as these cultures are integrated into our culture. But he said, no, make the world Greek.

And so he began the process of Hellenization. And as a part of this, he put an end to the Jewish temple worship. Put an end to it. And when the Jews tried to revolt, tried to fight this, he slaughtered them by the thousands.

He sold just as many into slavery. So if you're a Jew in this time and you're looking and you're looking at what's happening, you had to be baffled. How is all of this happening? Right? You look back to the exile and many of the Jews who celebrated being freed from the exile were probably thinking, well, that was great compared to this. You know, what's God doing?

[ 12 : 39 ] This is a confusing, violent, upsetting vision. It actually says in verse 27 that the vision makes Daniel sick. Right? For several days.

And it says that even when he got up and started to be about the king's business, he continued to be appalled by the vision. And he was confused. He didn't understand it.

Okay, so how do you preach that? Okay? I've been trying to figure that out all week, right? So what does this have to say? And I think that this actually is the place where it begins to get relevant to us. Because I think as we look at the world around us, I think that we all see all kinds of things that are upsetting. And we see all kinds of things that are appalling.

You know, you look at the election that's happening in two days, and I don't care what side of the aisle you're on, I think we're all more or less appalled. It's an appalling state for our country to be in, right?

[ 13 : 39 ] I think as we look beyond that, we realize that as appalling as that is, there are things that are a lot worse, right? If you look around the world, even in our own country, the ongoing racism and violence that divides our country, right?

South Sudan, the ongoing refugee crisis, right? The ongoing reality of human trafficking that's happening all around the world right under our noses. All of these things are appalling realities, and I could list them again and again and again.

And I think one thing we need to see is that like Daniel, we are right to be appalled by these things. And if we begin to get to the place where we're no longer appalled by them, that's a problem. We should be appalled. We can't allow ourselves to ever get so numb that we lose our sense of horror. But I think the danger lies in thinking that this is all there is, that things will never get better, that there is no hope, and so the beautiful thing about this vision is that it not only narrates historical events, but it also, as I said before, lifts the veil.

It unveils them. It points beneath them, beneath the surface, to a deeper story that is unfolding. So now I want to turn our attention past the story itself and below it into the unfolding spiritual reality that is anchored by three certainties.

[15:06] The underlying story is anchored by these three certainties. God will be opposed. God will be victorious because God is in control.

God will be opposed, but God will be victorious because God is in control. And so I want to look at what each of these means. By nature, the Bible says that all human beings are from birth born in opposition to God.

We are born opposing God and the truth of God, right? So this vision makes it very clear that underneath the political conflicts and the military conquests and the elections and all of that, there is a deeper cosmic conflict raging.

And it's not between Democrats and Republicans. It's a deeper cosmic conflict where evil is opposing and fighting God and God's truth and God's people in every way possible with all of its might.

If you look at Antiochus Epiphanes as he's represented in this vision, he's larger than life, right? He's putting himself up as a rival to the prince of the hosts, right?

[16:23] To God himself. He's taking stars out of the sky and flinging them to the ground, right? This is no mere mortal. This is no human being. He's portrayed as a kind of antichrist.

He's a, what we call a type. He's a type that points to this cosmic conflict and the personification of evil.

And look how he gains and keeps his power in verses 11 and 12. It says that he puts an end to the worship of God. So the first thing he does to gain and to keep power is to put an end to all worship of God.

And the second thing he does, and this is a very interesting image, is it says he throws truth to the ground. We didn't read that part. It's a little earlier in the chapter. He throws truth to the ground. So he wants ultimate power, which means he has to get rid of anything that might threaten his autonomy, namely God and God's truth. So if you're the most powerful king in the world, if you're the most powerful king in the world and nobody can challenge you politically, the only thing left that is above you is God and God's truth.

[17:35] And so if you do away with that, then you have total power, right? Or so he thinks. We see the very same thing today, right?

I think in our culture, I think as human beings by nature, we throw truth to the ground. We throw truth to the ground. We say, you know, everyone should be able to believe whatever they want and then we go beyond that and we say, not only does everybody believe what they want, but all of those beliefs are equally true.

And if you challenge that idea or challenge the truth of somebody's beliefs or if you make the claim that you believe in a truth that is absolute, a big T truth, then you are automatically seen as closed-minded, ignorant, bigoted, intolerant, all of those labels that we fear.

So the first point is this, the illusion that we prefer to see, right? The illusion, our perception of reality is that there are a lot of different approaches to God and a lot of different approaches to truth and a lot of different approaches to these things and that they're all equally true, all equally valid.

Right? Now there's a kind of pluralism that says we should fight for the rights of everybody to believe whatever they want and I think that Christians should be leaders in that fight. We should fight for a pluralistic society where people have religious freedom and they're able to believe whatever they want, they are free to disagree.

[18:59] But that is not the same thing as saying that all of those beliefs are equally true. And yet more and more in our society, I think that we're hearing not only are we able to believe what we want but all of those beliefs are equally valid, equally true.

The only way that that would be possible is if there is no such thing as capital T truth. Right? So we have this illusion that everything is equally true, everybody believes what they want and it's all true, but if we begin to lift the veil, this vision shows us loud and clear that the underlying reality is that there is only one God, that there's one truth and that human beings by nature are opposed to those things.

Right? So think about it just for a second. Right? The reason that we prefer to believe that there are multiple truths, the reason that we want to reject the absolute truth of God is not because we've thought deeply about it.

I mean, for most of us it's just not. We haven't reasoned it through, right, and said that's the best way to make sense of things because saying there is no truth is actually nonsense.

In other words, it doesn't hold up to scrutiny because the minute you say there is no such thing as absolute truth, you're making an absolute truth claim. It undercuts itself, right?

[ 20 : 21 ] It's contradictory. It doesn't hold up if we really think about it. The reason that we reject the idea of absolute truth and fling it to the ground is the same reason Antiochus Epiphanes did.

It's about accountability. We don't want to be held accountable, right? We know that if we get rid of truth we can live and do as we please and that's why we do it, right?

So when I was, you know, years ago before I was a believer in college I loved to say well, there's no such thing as absolute truth that's so arrogant and people believe what they want and I'm an agnostic and you have no right to tell me what I can believe and that was my rhetoric and I said that to everybody, right?

Is that because I had spent years reading all the philosophers, reading all the great thinkers throughout history, reasoning my way through their arguments and arriving at this conclusion as a kind of a well-founded statement of existence?

No, no, no. It's because I wanted sex without consequences and so I knew that the only way to do that was to fling truth to the ground. You can't hold me accountable, how dare you?

[ 21 : 29 ] What makes your truth any more true than my truth? Right? So all of history shows human beings doing this, fighting against God, fighting against the truth of God because we would rather be our own gods, right?

Like Adam and Eve at the fall, we would prefer to decide right and wrong to decide truth for ourselves. So this is the first thing we see. God will be opposed.

Now the second thing is this, that despite that opposition, nevertheless, God will be victorious. It says in verse 13, for how long is the vision concerning the regular burnt offering, the transgressions that make desolate, and the giving over of the sanctuary and host to be trampled underfoot?

And he said to me, for 2300 evenings and mornings, then the sanctuary shall be restored to its rightful state. Now don't get locked in on the number 2300.

That can be misleading. There are lots of ways, both literal and poetic, to interpret that number. Jesus himself says, no one will know the hour or the day when all of this will take place.

[ 22 : 36 ] He says no one's going to know, not even the son of man knows, only the father knows, right? So that's Jesus' way of saying, this is not about getting out your calculator and trying to figure it out, right? People like Harold Camping who think that they have decoded this and they know exactly when all this is going to happen.

That's not the point. The point is that God has fixed a time when he will bring deliverance, restore the sanctuary, and reinstitute worship.

That there will be a time and God has it. It's not in our calendar but it's in his calendar and he knows exactly when it's going to happen. It is a certainty. So even though in the vision God's people suffer under one tyrant ruler after another, even though things seem to get worse and worse and worse, this is saying that eventually God will overcome.

God will be victorious. Eventually the tyrants will be thrown down. And see, this is the second point we need to see. The illusion, our perception, is that we live in a world where things seem to be getting worse.

They're getting worse and they're getting worse and they're getting worse and there seems to be very little hope of that ever changing. But what this does is lift the veil and it shows us that despite appearances God's plan will ultimately lead to victory.

[ 23 : 59 ] It is unfolding exactly as he established it. Right? So the time will come when we see in the book of Revelation another work of apocalyptic writing. The time will come when the heavens and the earth will be joined as one.

Oh, don't think this is talking about the temple in Jerusalem. The reestablishing of that temple. No, no, no, no. This is talking about the time when the heavens and the earth are joined. When we are reminded that in Genesis chapters one and two God created the entire world as a sanctuary. And that one day the new Jerusalem will come and it will be established here and all of creation will become one great sanctuary devoted and centered on the worship of God. That one day that will happen.

And it says very amazingly in Revelation that Jesus at that time will come and he will wipe away every tear. Which means every single tear shed will be accounted for.

There will be a reckoning. Even though we don't understand the suffering and the tyrant rulers and all of that now even though it doesn't make sense and all we do is cling to God and trust him.

[ 25 : 10 ] But we don't understand the evil. We don't understand the suffering. We don't understand why it all has to happen. That one day we will. Because Jesus will account for every tear personally.

Right? So no matter how bad things might seem our hope is certain. Which really brings us to a question right? How can we be so sure?

How can we be so sure? Right? As we look at the the kind of juxtaposition of these two certainties. On the one hand this is saying God will be opposed and on the other hand it's saying but God will be victorious.

How is that possible? And it's possible because God is in control. God is in control. And this is the refrain that you find in the book of Daniel in the earlier chapters.

Quote, the most high rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will. So if you look closely you see this right here. I don't know if you caught it in the reading but in verse 24 it says about Antiochus Epiphanes his power shall be great but not by his own power.

[ 26 : 23 ] Verse 25 finally he shall be broken but by no human hand. It's making this point that God is firmly in control. God is in control of Antiochus Epiphanes rising to power and God is in control of him being thrown down out of power.

That God is firmly in control that it's all part of his plan. Right? So this is our third point. The perceived reality is that life is chaotic.

It's meaningless. There is no God. Nobody's in control. There is no plan. We're on our own. We're abandoned. We're just matter and dust and energy playing out randomly according to the laws of physics and there is no ultimate plan for any of this.

That's the perceived reality. But this vision lifts the veil and shows us that God was, God is, and God will remain completely in control.

We're not going to understand the hows and the whys until the end of things. But it says that until then we trust that God is in control. So really on Tuesday, regardless of who becomes our next president, right, regardless of how that plays out, on the one hand as Christians we need to be involved.

[ 27 : 42 ] We need to be engaged politically. We need to be thoughtfully voting and participating and lending our voice to the shape as best as we possibly can. And we're called to fully integrating our faith.

We need to be doing that as best as we possibly can. And we're called to submit to the rulers and the authorities in our lives. We're called to be fully a part of the system. But this is saying that ultimately, regardless of who becomes our next president, God is firmly in control.

Regardless of who becomes our next president, that person is there because it is a part of God's plan. And one day that person will step out of power because that is a part of God's plan.

But somehow this will fit into God moving all things toward his victory despite the opposition. And that's the truth that we need to hold on to.

So underneath the illusion, underneath the perception, I think the more we look underneath it, the more we begin to realize that it's not such a magnificent illusion. It's not so beneficial to see things in this way.

[ 28 : 47 ] Underneath it, we see an even better story, that God will be opposed, but God will be victorious because God is in control. And I want to, as we're kind of bringing this together, I want to address one potential sort of objection or question that this might raise.

And that is the question of how. Right? If God will always for certain be opposed, and yet at the same time it is certain that God will be victorious, just on a practical, logistical level, how does that actually work?

Right? If there are two certainties, opposition and victory, how does that happen? Wouldn't that mean that one was more certain than the other? And the answer is no, they're both equally certain. Opposition and victory. So if you're God, how do you do that? And this is the genius of the Christian faith. Right? How do you, if you've created people and you love people, and yet they all, without exception, turn their backs on you, rebel against you, oppose you, try to kill you so that they can be gods and live as they choose, right?

If all human beings do that, then how do you bring about a victory over that opposition that on the one hand upholds your justice and vindicates you as God, but on the other hand, because of your love, doesn't annihilate everyone that you've created?

[ 30 : 11 ] How do you do that? The only way you do it is if you bring the victory through the opposition. That's the only way it works. And that's the beauty of the cross.

When Jesus Christ died on the cross, on the one hand, what you see at the cross is the ultimate defeat. The opposition has won, right? All those who oppose God and the truth of God, they win. They finally get the Son of God in their grasp and they put Him to death once and for all, the greatest defeat in history. And yet, simultaneously, no one could have known that God had made that person, Jesus Christ, to be a representative of us and our sins.

So the moment we killed Him, we actually paid the price of our sin, all of our sin, including that sin, in full. Right? So the moment He died, we were set free, even though it was our hand putting Him to death.

And I think that that's one of the most beautiful things I could possibly imagine. God bringing victory out of defeat. So that shows us that we have every reason to remain hopeful. So the encouragement I hope that you leave with is this.

[ 31 : 24 ] Let us not live with and accept the illusion of our perceived reality that God and truth are just ideas and don't really mean much, that things are just getting worse and hope is failing, or that life is random and that we're on our own.

Let us not content ourselves with that perception of reality. Let us go deeper, let us trust what this vision shows us as the underlying story.

Let us trust what this vision promises and what the cross of Christ proves, that God will be opposed, but God will be victorious because God is firmly in control.

Let's pray. Our Father, we do trust You, and we know that You know better than us what we need. And we know that right now there are things that each of us needs to hear from Your Word.

And so we pray that by the power of Your Spirit, You would take those things that are meant for each of us and drive them into our hearts, Lord, that they would be planted like seeds that begin to grow and give life.

[ 32 : 29 ] Lord, we pray as we are reminded this day of the communion of saints. We pray for all of those who have come to know You, to come to a deeper knowledge of You through Your Word.

We pray that all those who may not know You, that perhaps through these words and these promises, there would be in them a hope kindled that can be answered through Your Son, Jesus Christ.

Lord, we pray all of this in His name. Amen.