

A Vision of a Ram and a Goat

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Date: 25 November 2007

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[0 : 00] Let's pray. Lord our God, we thank you for your word.

We thank you for the Bible that you teach us about yourself and you tell us, Lord, your plans for this world. We pray that even in this difficult passage and one that seems to fit in time so long ago that you will increase our faith in you and help us to come closer to you tonight through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen. Well, new leadership. Whether we voted for it or not, we got it.

The campaign is over. It's Kevin 07 all the way. And if voting was something that was out of your reach because of your age for this election, then at least you can say that the most boring night of television for the last four years and hopefully for the next four years to come is over.

Three stations covering the hours. They had footage of sniffer dogs and an empty auditorium. It was desperate. Anyway, made you want to watch Empire Strikes Back for the 50th time.

[1 : 20] Except Wayne. He was really into it. And Ross. Despite all the celebrations, given the results in our electorate, many in our community particularly might be feeling a little bit anxious about what the future holds with that new leadership.

What will this new Prime Minister really be like? What will happen to the economy? What will happen to ethics in marriage and medicine?

What about the environment? Will interest rates go back up to that terrible figure in the dark days of 18% or something? Will education be more or less expensive?

Will it be more or less available? Will I be able to get a job when I'm older? I think that too, but you also might think that. New leadership always brings uncertainty.

In Australia, our worries are, well, they're almost insignificant given what some countries have had to go through or still have to go through when they face new leadership.

[2 : 33] In our Bible reading tonight, we continue to look into the life of a man called Daniel who was living through a time of great leadership uncertainty in his area of the world.

Daniel was a Jewish man and he lived in Jerusalem about almost 600 years before Jesus was born. And in his own land, every time a new leader came to power, they seemed to be worse than the last.

And in the land surrounding him, every time a new leader came to power, they seemed to be more powerful than the last. When he was only a young man, maybe in his late teens, early 20s or something, another country called Babylon invaded his land and totally conquered it.

But instead of just killing everyone who lived there, they looked around for the cream of the crop and they took them back to Babylon. And when they saw Daniel and his mates, they thought, these guys will make top shelf citizenship material.

You know, they look like they can read. They've got pretty good handwriting. They're good looking. They're smart. They're good at maths. I think they'd be good at politics.

[3 : 52] And their breath doesn't smell too bad, which was quite a feat in those days, given they didn't have any toothpaste. So they were the choice. Bring them into the king's palace in Babylon.

They were put to work there. They were given pretty good jobs, kind of like civil servants helping the king, making Babylon a better place. And so we find Daniel having escaped death and having got this really pretty good job.

But despite these circumstances and despite the fact that he's surrounded by foreign gods, foreign beliefs, and lots of material comforts, he doesn't forget his own God, the true God, the one and only Yahweh God, the God that we know of the Bible.

No matter what risks Daniel had to take, he was willing to put God number one. And even before we get to our passage tonight, Daniel is an amazing role model for us today.

Because isn't it true that we're living in a society where the beliefs, the education, and sometimes the leadership doesn't go with Christian values, doesn't help us to follow what the Bible says. [5 : 16] And yet Daniel is this amazing role model who even was willing to literally be thrown to the lions to stand up for his faith and to show that he trusted his God.

So even before we get to chapter eight, we've got this challenge to dare to be a Daniel. Rod talked about that last year. You might want to check out those chapters in your own reading sometime to see how you can be like him.

Now, the guy that was in charge when Daniel originally got captured was called Nebuchadnezzar. But it wasn't too long before there was new leadership on the block. Belshazzar 550 BC.

Well, it doesn't quite have the same ring to it as Kevin O'Connell, but it's history all the same. Now, under Belshazzar's new leadership, Daniel got relegated to a much less powerful position than he had under Nebuchadnezzar.

Belshazzar didn't really like him. But he still got to have his finger on the pulse of the political scene thanks to God. You see, God was using Daniel to reveal his control of all that was happening across the world on the leadership front in both Daniel's time and in the centuries to come.

[6 : 42] Daniel had seen a lot of new leadership come and go and it all seemed to be against God. But God wanted Daniel to see that even when bad stuff happens in the world, even when governments are awful, even when it continues to happen and it looks like it's got no end, there is an end.

God knows all about it. He's in control and he will win and so will his people. Now that's the broad background for this vision that we heard read so well from Daniel chapter 8 and that we've got this awesome, scary picture that Sophie did for us during the week.

Now the start of the chapter gives us a little bit more detail on where we need to be thinking for this vision. It was in the third year of Belshazzar's reign and Daniel says that he felt like he was in Susa by the river Ulai and this is in the heart of the Persian Empire.

So both these things, that was the third year of Belshazzar's reign and that he's located in the heart of the Persian Empire, they're both clues to the next new leadership that would be influencing Daniel's world.

You see, in that very year, a ruler called Cyrus came on the scene and he got two empires, the Medes and the Persians, to join together. And his particular country, Persia, the very place where Daniel saw himself in the vision, became the more dominant of these two.

[8 : 25] Now what happens next seems kind of weird to us. Daniel has a vision of two animals, a ram and a goat. Pretty big ones, it seems.

Now, I did have a picture of both a ram and a goat but I lost the one of the ram but let me tell you, I saw all these amazing pictures and rams really can have like heaps of horns, not just two.

They can have like four or three or... Anyway, so I thought I'd act it out for you to go with the picture of that awesome looking mountain goat. He's kind of cute but the other one was, I mean, the one in this story is like really strong.

So, has Daniel just been watching far too much Animal Planet, David Attenborough and eating chilli before he goes to bed? No.

God is giving him a vision and the symbols in the vision are not symbols that Daniel would have found too difficult to understand because we read elsewhere in the Old Testament that rams and goats are kind of talked about as symbols for leadership, for rulers, kings or powerful nations and of course we heard last week but there's throughout the Old Testament a usage of the word horn or the idea of a horn to mean either a person of great power or just power in general located within a group and so it's not as if Daniel's looking at these going huh?

[10 : 03] A goat and a ram and horns however he doesn't get it by himself and I think that's a great comfort because we see in verse 15 that he's trying to understand it but he can't.

the fact is that yes Cyrus might be coming on the scene for him the first bit the ram but when we hear more about it it's going to be stuff that's like hundreds of years in the future and so he's got no frame of reference it's not like a political cartoon for him where he knows exactly all the people that are being spoken about I think I've got a picture of that where he's got you know the politicians as animals and everybody in the picture is kind of known you know you've got John Howard and Alexander Downer with the really big ears and Peter Costello on a big fat cat you can work that out later but it's not like that he doesn't have a frame of reference for all the characters in this vision

thanks Mike let's get rid of it it's too distracting but so he says well he can't understand it but then we read in verse 16 a voice says

Gabriel help this man understand the vision God is not going to leave Daniel to stress about it he's sending help now we don't have time to talk about Gabriel and angels tonight but we will be talking about them later on in the series so if you want to learn more come back but we do know of course that Gabriel is an angel who used to get lots of messenger jobs from God of course the big one the big gig going to Mary to tell her that she was going to have Jesus but he gets this job here to tell Daniel that this vision concerns the time of the end now before we try and work out what end he's referring to let's try and get our heads around the events predicted by the vision so Daniel sees a ram with two horns and one grows bigger than the other despite growing up later and this it is explained to him is the Medo and Persian empire that Cyrus will bring together that I've already said and the Persian bit becomes stronger even though it came on the scene later and with Persia at the fore this new empire the Medo-Persian empire is going to be such a powerful force that it's going to conquer nations all around it and this happened in Daniel's time then however after a certain amount of time has passed this he goat enters the picture and Gabriel tells Daniel this is the nation of

Greece and its horn symbolizes the first king of Greece who we now know as Alexander the Great I think we've got a picture of him there on his wild stallion and this we read as this goat can cross the earth without touching the ground but that's not really a magical goat it's like a roadrunner goat that you know in the roadrunner cartoons when the legs start moving so fast that all you can see is this blur and it looks like the roadrunner is just kind of flying over the road well this is the goat this is Alexander the Great moving so quickly that you can't even see his feet touch the ground and if you've watched any of those nerdy slash kind of dodgy historical documentaries on SBS about Alexander the Great over the last couple of years or if you've had to look at him in history you might know that this is a very accurate description of Alexander the Great's time as a leader he was very swift very aggressive he was young but he was bold and strategic and it took him only a few years to gain control of the whole of the known world and he was only in his twenties and early thirties amazing man however as we see in this vision the horn is broken off quite suddenly and so it was with Alexander the Great he died when he was 32 quite a lot of intrigue about why that happened and I'm sure SBS has many theories but four generals took over from him and that's the four horns that come up after that big one's broken off and the fourth man the fourth general was called Seleucus Nicanor now that rolls off the tongue and I'm sure you'll go home and remember that but it was from this guy this fourth horn that another empire called the Seleucid empire arose now at this point you might be thinking I didn't come here for a history lesson I'm no Paul Barker I can't remember dates let alone you know when you tell it to me on a Sunday night and it's a hot day and what do I have to remember so far simply this God knows the future God knows the future all of this happened Daniel wrote a long time before it he didn't understand it he didn't even name the kings it's not like someone at that time when it happened has kind of adjusted it to make it more accurate there's not those details there this is a genuine vision that Daniel had hundreds of years before and it happened

[16:14] SBS will say yes it happened that way God really does know the future and not only does he know the future he knows your future he knows your future and he wants to help you out so that you can be ready for all the different things that he knows are coming your way whether they might have to be bad things or whether they are good things he knows and he will help you I've been thinking a lot about this lately some people think that as you grow older you grow out of your faith you know as life kind of brings stuff along and stops you from being so idealistic and stamps out your youthful passion I think my parents thought that would be the case for me when I became a Christian when

I was in year 10 when I is preparing us for everything that is to come our faith won't get smaller it will get bigger as we get older because we will see how God has known what was coming and prepared us for it we didn't know why it was that God sent us to this church but so many things have happened in our own lives and in the lives of the people that we've been interacting with especially over the last year that we know for certain that

God knew that those things were going to happen and God had us in this place got us here for that very reason and so my faith is growing even though I'm extremely old at the age of 29 and your faith will grow too as you see that God knew and he was putting stuff in place to help you now that's

the first point that we need to remember that God knows the future he got it all perfect and we're not talking about the numbers tonight the 2300 but if you're really interested in that you can come and talk to me later but we are going to talk about numbers next week because there's a lot of them but the first point to remember God knows the future and he knows your future now the second point to remember and don't worry there's only two so this is the last one it does require us

I'm sorry to go back to our history lesson and we pick up with Mr Seleucid and the Seleucid empire the fourth horn now verses 9 to 12 give us lots of details about this Seleucid empire which was in Syria and there was a particular leader in it Wayne gave the game away last week but many of you weren't here so the suspense is no doubt mounting there's a particular leader who would make the most impact within this Seleucid empire let's read from verse 9 to 12 just to see these details that it gives about him out of one of them out of one of the four horns came another horn a little one which grew exceedingly great toward the south toward the east and toward the beautiful land Jerusalem it grew as high as the host of heaven the stars or the angels it threw down to earth some of the host maybe some of the angels or showing there's a spiritual battle or maybe talking about just some of God's saints his precious people and some of the stars and trampled on them even against the prince of the host God himself it acted arrogantly it took the regular burnt offering away from him and overthrew the place of his sanctuary the temple because of his wickedness because of wickedness the host was given over to it together with the regular burnt offering it cast truth to the what it did now this little horn signified a leader Wayne introduced last week called Antiochus Epiphanes even his name Epiphanes means I am God among you like when we're talking arrogant he was the king of arrogant and he would be a man who would cause many Jewish people to question what God was doing in their midst but not in Daniel's time although there were lots people doing that in

[21 : 35] Daniel's time but this would be in the second century BC so we're talking 100 and something before Christ so if this is like 300 years after Daniel why would God reveal this to him especially when we read in verse 26 that he tells him to seal up the vision because basically it isn't about his own time why would he reveal that well I think it's because of this people God's people in Daniel's day went into exile we've talked about that into Babylon and they questioned the way they'd been living out their faith because of that they realized that God had punished them by allowing them to be sent into exile because they'd turned away from him and so many of them turned back to God and eventually when they were allowed to go home we'll talk about that more in the weeks to come they wanted to rebuild the temple and live a faithful life and they did rebuild the temple and there was a great celebration and they thought this is it all

God's promises have come true it's just going to be smooth sailing from here on Seleucid Empire then Antiochus Epiphanes came and Antiochus he just hated the Jews he put sweeping reforms throughout all the area that he controlled to make everything Greek and so he wanted the Jewish religion to be turned Greek he put his own person in as high priest he made he burnt the Torah he made people who he put people who believed in the Jewish religion to death and we see that the final thing that he did was to build an altar over the altar in the temple and sacrifice a pig on it to Zeus now I guess it's like on a small scale if we can imagine someone coming in here and pasting up big picture in

Arabic saying Muhammad is the true prophet and then maybe putting like a massive statue of Buddha or something on the communion table now it kind of makes you shudder just at a local church level and that is nothing compared to what it would have been like for a people who saw the temple as the absolute heart of God's presence with them they thought where's God gone evil has triumphed over our God just look at how defiled God's house is he is gone and yet there were still many who wanted to fight against this and so this vision is to say to those people and to the ones who are suffering keep going there is an end in sight God knew about this in fact he predicted it so long ago because that's how in control he is and he will in verse 25 he will destroy this little horn it says without warning the little horn shall destroy many and shall even rise up against the prince of princes but he shall be broken and not by human hands the people of the second century had this prophecy now that was going to be sealed up for them that when they would fight against Antiochus Epiphanes it wouldn't be their hands that would overthrow him but it would be God's it would be God's strength that they would be fighting with God would fight for them and he would give them the victory and he did that is exactly what happened now we don't have the time to look over all the rest of the details tonight but I'm sure then you can see what the second point is going

to be God not only knows the future but he will make the future a good one for his people Daniel would reflect on the exile situation in his own day and he does so in the next chapter and he would conclude that although it was absolutely terrible and they needed to repent God did have good in store the people of the second century could read these words and know that God would bring their fight to a good end the disciples who saw

Jesus die on the cross and thought this is over they would see him rise again to life that never ended to reign at God's right hand and of course we know as God's people as those who put their trust in him in the fullness of revelation that there is the best yet to come for us when Jesus returns no matter what our new leadership brings in Australia or even around the world God has a good plan for his people and that doesn't mean that everything will be rosy we can't make that mistake Daniel himself it says in the last bit was sick and appalled for days after he'd seen the vision knowing what future generations of his people would have to go through knowing that this was not going to be the end of suffering but he could then get up and go about the king's business because he had an unshakable conviction and he had the inside word that

[27 : 48] God was good and he would bring everything to a good end and this chapter is not even the end of the big story we do get there and actually the youth service in January we get to the big end which will be extremely exciting I look forward to seeing you there but we know that one day Jesus will return and make all things good and new all will be well we will know true peace true happiness true contentment in God through Jesus in the meantime our parents might have separated we might have failed our exams or lost our job we might have been dumped or we might get sick or we might even see a family member die but if we put our trust in Jesus or if we choose to do that even tonight we know for certain that

God has a good future for us there may indeed be things to go through before we get there but God knows the future he knows how to help you to handle that future and he's in control to make it turn out good all we have to do is trust go about our lives serving him like Daniel did in the midst of all the mess but grow in faith take risks for him and wait for Jesus to return let's pray Lord our God we thank you for the amazing truth that you know the future you know our future and that because of Jesus Christ dying for us the future will turn out well for those who believe in him Lord grow our faith as we see what you are doing in our lives and for those here tonight who might not have made that step to put their trust in

Jesus so that they can know that they have a truly good future please stir their hearts to help them do that tonight give people to them to answer their questions and help us all to love you more each day Amen