REBELLION THAT CAUSES DESOLATION

Daniel 8:1-27
Key verses: 8:13-14

“Then I heard a holy one speaking, and another holy one said to him, ‘How long will it take for the vision to be fulfilled—the vision concerning the daily sacrifice, the rebellion that causes desolation, and the surrender of the sanctuary and of the host that will be trampled underfoot?’ He said to me, ‘It will take 2,300 evenings and mornings; then the sanctuary will be reconsecrated.’”

In last week’s passage, we studied Daniel’s vision at night of the four beasts representing four kingdoms, the court of the Ancient of Days, and the coming of the Son of Man, to whom an everlasting kingdom will be given. Through this vision we could understand that God is sovereign over the kingdoms of men, and gives them to whomever he chooses. We thank God who gives the eternal kingdom to the Son of Man, Jesus, who was without sin and who rules in truth and love. Daniel, however, was distressed by his vision, because of the suffering that preceded the coming of the final kingdom. The price that must be paid to redeem the saints from sin, as seen in his vision, made Daniel pale. Indeed, Daniel could not believe it, and did not tell anyone about it. In today’s passage, Daniel is given another vision, two years after the first. This vision is not a comfort to Daniel. Rather, through this vision Daniel is once again confronted with the prospect of tremendous suffering and loss for his people. No one likes to think about suffering or desolation. But suffering and desolation surely come to those who rebel against their Creator God. It is not for the sake of destruction, however. God judges the rebels so that his people might be reconsecrated for his world salvation purpose.

First, The ram and the goat (1-8; 19-22). This second vision came to Daniel in the third year of his service to king Belshazzar. Perhaps he was on a journey to the summer capital of the Medes and Persians at the citadel of Susa. Regardless, he saw himself in his vision standing beside the Ulai canal, which connected the two rivers between which
the citadel was situated. In Daniel’s vision he saw a ram with two horns, coming from the east. The ram represented the empire of the Medes and Persians, who would conquer Babylon, Egypt and Turkey. It was under Persian rule, the longest horn that grew up later, that this empire reached its greatest extent.

Then, in Daniel's vision, a shaggy goat with a large horn between its eyes came flying from the west and charged so furiously at the ram that it broke its two horns and trampled the ram underfoot. The goat grew in power, but at the height of its power, its large horn was broken off, and replaced by four prominent horns that grew up toward the four winds of heaven. The goat represented the Greek empire, led initially by Alexander the Great, which crushed the Persian empire in a series of three devastating battles and conquered its territories with lightning speed. Alexander added to these territories even parts of India, before he died suddenly at the age of 33, most likely due to his arrogant and dissolute life. It is important to know that Alexander was not content with mere territorial conquest. He adored Greek culture through the influence of his tutor, Aristotle, and determined to spread Greek culture and influence throughout the world. Four generals eventually took over Alexander's empire and divided it among themselves. Another general, Seleucus, took over one of these kingdoms and, starting from Syria, came to possess most of the land north and east of Palestine, the beautiful land of verse 9.

The vision Daniel sees regarding the ram and the goat, and the interpretation given by the angel Gabriel concerning this vision (19-22), coincides precisely with the historical events that took place for the next three hundred and eighty years after Daniel. For us, it is a clear indication of the divine origin of Daniel's vision. God indeed used Daniel to reveal to his people what the future held for them and for the world. God is the sovereign ruler of history, and he gives the kingdoms of men to whomever he chooses (Da. 4:35).

Second, The great horn (9-12; 23-26). Look at verse 9. “Out of one of them came another horn, which started small but grew in power to the south and to the east and toward the Beautiful Land.” As this verse implies, the Seleucid Empire grew until, under Antiochus III, it gained
control of Palestine and the Jewish territories. What happened next? Look at verses 10 and 11. “It grew until it reached the host of the heavens, and it threw some of the starry host down to the earth and trampled on them. It set itself up to be as great as the Prince of the host; it took away the daily sacrifice from him, and the place of his sanctuary was brought low.” The angel Gabriel's interpretation of Daniel's vision clearly shows that this horn would be a king from the Seleucid Empire who was not satisfied with the territorial conquest of Judea (23). Instead, he would begin to fight a spiritual battle against the holy people, in order to lead them into complete rebellion against God and God’s purpose for them to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:5,6).

And indeed, this happened under Antiochus Epiphanes, the son of Antiochus III. Antiochus Epiphanes had been kept as a captive in Rome for 12 years to ensure that the Seleucid empire paid taxes to Rome. But soon after his father died, Antiochus Epiphanes was able to return and take his father’s kingdom. Because of his heavy debts to Rome, he looked to the treasuries of the temples of the various nations, and began to rob them one by one. Finally, he set his eyes on the treasures in the temple of God in Jerusalem. When he met resistance to his plan, he determined to crush the faith of the Jews so that he might have his way with their treasures. He forbade Bible reading and destroyed every copy of the Bible he could find. He forbade circumcision, and cruelly executed those mothers and their children who did it. He replaced one high priest with another, seeking one who would comply with his effort to replace completely Jewish faith in God with Greek culture and idolatry. Finally, he put an end to all sacrifice to God, and erected an altar to Jupiter in the temple of God. There, he sacrificed pigs to his god, of which he claimed to be the human manifestation on earth. Whoever resisted him faced immediate death.

Look at verses 24 and 25. “He will become very strong, but not by his own power. He will cause astounding devastation and will succeed in whatever he does. He will destroy the mighty men and 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. Yet he will be destroyed, but not by human power.” The loss of the daily sacrifice and the use of the temple as an altar for sacrificing pigs to Jupiter was an incredible blow to the Jews. The temple of God was their pride and joy. It marked their unique status as the chosen people, and the keepers of God’s sanctuary on earth. What is more, the morning and evening sacrifices were the means by which his people were forgiven of their sins and made acceptable to God. In short, the temple of the Jews and its use as the place of sacrifice and worship was the heart of the Jews as a people, as God’s chosen people on earth. Under Antiochus Epiphanes, this heart would be taken and desecrated beyond imagination. Of course, in Daniel’s time, during the exile to Babylon, the temple was lost to the Jews. But it was never given over to someone else. It simply lay dormant for 70 years, until the exiles could return and claim it once again. Now, someone else was laying claim to the Jewish heart, not just politically or territorially, but spiritually. In this way, the horn would set itself up against the very Prince of princes in a fight for the heart and worship of God’s people.

How might this come to be? The root of the problem was not the stern-faced king, but the rebellion among God’s own people. Look at verse 12. “Because of rebellion, the host of the saints and the daily sacrifice were given over to it. It prospered in everything it did, and truth was thrown to the ground.” It was no accident that the Jews nearly lost their heart. In fact, it was they who would give it away, due to their rebellion and sin. It was because of the desire of many among the Jews to give up in their struggle to please the holy God through their sacrifices and obedience to his word. They were enticed by the humanistic Greek culture and thought, which excused them from this burden, and offered them the freedom to live however they saw fit. Indeed, Antiochus Epiphanes did not come to Jerusalem by surprise; he was invited by a number of men who swore to him that they were ready to give up their Jewish identity and worship of God entirely. And Antiochus Epiphanes did not have to fight to gain entrance into Jerusalem, he was welcomed as a man promising peace. The spiritual invasion begun by Alexander the Great was finally about to overwhelm the Jewish nation and God’s people would have been lost forever.
Here we can begin to understand why this moment of Jewish history was so important to Daniel and to God, and why it is still important to us. When Daniel was captured as a young boy and brought to serve Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon, he had a choice to make. He could either go along with the king's training program, and be swallowed up into the Babylonian culture and history, or he could take a stand and keep his identity in God as God's servant. Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the king’s food, and ate only vegetables and drank only water. To the king's amazement, Daniel grew healthier and more able than all the other wise men of Babylon. Daniel served God continually, even as he served one foreign king after another. In this way, he led many to repentance, even among the kings. Still it was not easy for Daniel to keep his decision. Even at the age of 80, he had to be willing to face the lions' den, rather than stop praying or serving his God. Why did God put Daniel in such a situation? It was to use Daniel as a shepherd and a source of good influence in the world. Daniel’s struggle to maintain his spiritual identity while living in an unbelieving world was the personification of God's world salvation purpose for his people, the Jews. It is the meaning of God’s prayer topic for them and for us as Christians: A kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

The Jews were proud of their history as a great nation under David and Solomon, and they looked forward to a time when, according to God’s promises, the kingdom would be restored to David’s heir (2 Sa 7). But God did not exalt the Jewish nation after David. Instead, it remained a relatively small kingdom sandwiched between huge superpowers seeking world domination. Israel remained independent for a time, but eventually, it had been swallowed up, and the Jews were exiled to Babylon. They had God’s promise through Jeremiah that they would return in 70 years, but they returned as subjects to another kingdom. Still, they held on to their pride and fought hard to keep their worship of God pure, in hope that one day they would become the superpower nation of the world through God’s intervention. But their dream was frustrated. They were tired of the struggle to keep their identity. They despaired of ever seeing God’s kingdom come. The humanistic ideas of Greek culture tempted them to forget about all their struggles to live apart for God. Antiochus Epiphanes’ invasion and desolation of the temple in fact only revealed the desolation that had been creeping into
the Jews’ hearts as they fell deeper and deeper into compromise with the worldly standards of conduct and despair at ever seeing God’s promise fulfilled.

Third, “How long?” (13-14; 15-18). Daniel’s vision stops there. We don’t see any salvation. We don’t see the coming kingdom of Christ Jesus. There is only desolation brought on by the peoples’ rebellion. But that doesn’t mean that there is no hope. Look at verses 13 and 14. “Then I heard a holy one speaking, and another holy one said to him, ‘How long will it take for the vision to be fulfilled—the vision concerning the daily sacrifice, the rebellion that causes desolation, and the surrender of the sanctuary and of the host that will be trampled underfoot?’ He said to me, ‘It will take 2,300 evenings and mornings; then the sanctuary will be reconsecrated.’” The angels’ conversation clearly reveals that God is sovereign, even over the desecration and desolation of the temple! How can this be? How could God allow his temple to be so abused? How could God allow his people to become so helpless? The dispassionate conversation of the angels belies the deep pain and sorrow that God felt over his people. It is almost surgical. And surgery is exactly what God did for his people during this terrible time of wrath. God was not writing his people off. God was determined to save a remnant from among his people who could fight to keep their identity in him and live as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation in this lost and dark world. It was painful, but it was necessary for a time. Temple sacrifice was indeed restored after 1150 days, including 2300 sacrifices missed, including the evening and morning. And Antiochus’s fall was as abrupt as his rise to power. The temple was reconsecrated, and the Jews even enjoyed a brief period of independence again under Judas Maccabeus.

The struggle of the Jews to keep their identity and to keep their mission in God did not end here. However, through this struggle, they could hold fast until God sent his Son Jesus through them to establish the everlasting kingdom for the people of God. Now, we as God’s people through faith in him are also struggling to live as a spiritual remnant in a humanistic and rebellious world. We must remember that God is sovereign. We must remember that God has a hope for us to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation as shepherds and one to one
Bible teachers for the world. We must remember that we belong as citizens to the kingdom of God and our inheritance and treasure are there. May God give us endurance in the face of unbelief and persecution. May God give us faith to serve sinners one by one to lead them to salvation and eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. May God reconsecrate us throughout our lifetime to be faithful to this task. And in God’s time we will be fully cleansed and we will see with our own eyes the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ to establish his everlasting kingdom!