

The Book Of Daniel

And in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his kingdom. (Daniel 1:20 ESV)

but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and he has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days. (Daniel 2:28 ESV)

And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever. (Daniel 12:2-3 ESV)

The Four Beasts

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Daniel 7

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Daniel 7.

As we turn the page from chapter 6 to chapter 7, we are actually switching genres, and for many of us this is likely going to feel a little disorienting. Chapters 1-6 were relatively easy to understand. They were stories and, as a general rule, we as Canadians find stories to be very accessible.

But chapters 7-12 are different animals. Literally. In these final chapters we are dealing with what scholars refer to as apocalyptic literature. These chapters are filled with mysterious dreams, visions, signs and illustrations that serve to both teach us about the way that the world operates now and to prepare us for the coming judgement.

Daniel 7 is one of the most complicated and difficult chapters in the Old Testament. That being said, we're going to do our best to walk through this text with humility. The main point of this text is clear. We all agree on that. However, there are some minor details – some aspects of the vision – that are not as clear as we would prefer them to be.

Therefore, we're going to speak with certainty where the text is clear and we're going to attempt to speak with charity and humility when we are confronted with mystery.

As we have done in previous weeks, we're going to walk slowly through our text this morning, explaining some important details as we go. I've summarized the text in three sections: An alarming vision, a powerful reminder, and an angelic interpretation.

Look with me now at Daniel, chapter 7. Hear now God's holy, inspired, living and active word to us today:

An Alarming Vision

In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon, Daniel saw a dream and visions of his head as he lay in his bed. Then he wrote down the dream and told the sum of the matter. (Daniel 7:1 ESV)

Before we go any further, let's take a moment to get our historical bearings. Chapters 1-6 have been moving chronologically. We started under Nebuchadnezzar's reign, then we jumped to Belshazzar's reign, and last week we left off with Darius' reign. Here in chapter 7, we are moving back in time as it were to the reign of Belshazzar. When Daniel received this vision, he was still living under the reign of the Babylonians. That's the setting. Now, let's jump back in at verse 2:

² Daniel declared, "I saw in my vision by night, and behold, the four winds of heaven were stirring up the great sea. ³ And four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another. ⁴ The first was like a lion and had eagles' wings. Then as I looked its wings were plucked off, and it was lifted up from the ground and made to stand on two feet like a man, and the mind of a man was given to it. ⁵ And behold, another beast, a second one, like a bear. It was raised up on one side. It had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth; and it was told, 'Arise, devour much flesh.' ⁶ After this I looked, and behold, another, like a leopard, with four wings of a bird on its back. And the beast had four heads, and dominion was given to it. ⁷ After this I saw in the night visions, and behold, a fourth beast, terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong. It had great iron teeth; it devoured and broke in pieces and stamped what was left with its feet. It was different from all the beasts that were before it, and it had ten horns. ⁸ I considered the horns, and behold, there came up among them another horn, a little one, before which three of the first horns were plucked up by the roots. And behold, in this horn were eyes like the eyes of a man, and a mouth speaking great things. (Daniel 7:2-8 ESV)

Here, we have the alarming vision. Daniel is inviting us into his dream so that we might see what he saw. So let's do our best to go with him. He's standing on the shore of the sea and the wind is blowing from all directions causing the water to writhe. The sea was a common symbol for chaos. It was also a symbol for the world in general. The sea is unwieldy. It represents a force that is entirely outside of our control. From out of the raging sea arose four, horrific beasts. Like the sea, these dangerous beasts were also representative of chaos and danger. Have you ever tried to tame a winged lion? Exactly. We will get into the interpretation of this vision later in the text, but for now, let's recognize that this was a frightening and disorienting scene for Daniel

But thankfully, the next thing that we find in the text is a powerful reminder. Look with me now at verse 9:

A Powerful Reminder

⁹ "As I looked,
thrones were placed,
and the Ancient of Days took his seat;
his clothing was white as snow,
and the hair of his head like pure wool;
his throne was fiery flames;
its wheels were burning fire.
¹⁰ A stream of fire issued
and came out from before him;
a thousand thousands served him,
and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him;
the court sat in judgment,
and the books were opened.

¹¹ “I looked then because of the sound of the great words that the horn was speaking. And as I looked, the beast was killed, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire. ¹² As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time. (Daniel 7:9-12 ESV)

Let’s stop here. Daniel is lifted up from the chaos on ground level to a serene throneroom in the Heavens. The beasts appear to be unrestrained on the earth, but Daniel is helped to see that the Ancient of Days is seated on His throne and He is entirely in control. He opens books of judgement, and beasts are thrown down because HE REIGNS!

This is all good news, but it is also news that we have already heard in the Book of Daniel. However, the next two verses introduce a new insight into the way in which God will exercise His authority over this world. Look there with me now:

¹³ “I saw in the night visions,
and behold, with the clouds of heaven
there came one like a son of man,
and he came to the Ancient of Days
and was presented before him.

¹⁴ And to him was given dominion
and glory and a kingdom,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him;
his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
which shall not pass away,
and his kingdom one
that shall not be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13-14 ESV)

Do you remember the statue in chapter 2? What was it that brought the statue down? There was a stone that crushed the statue and that grew to be a mountain that covered the whole earth. Here, in this vision, Daniel is given greater clarity as to the identity of that stone. The one who will shatter the rebellious kingdoms of this world and inaugurate a new kingdom will be this divine man of Daniel 7.

We’re going to unpack this later, but let me just say that these two verses are the most theologically significant verses in all of Daniel.

Now, let’s get back into the text. Daniel is perplexed by all that he has witnessed so he turns in his dream to one of the angelic beings that was with him in hopes that he would be given an interpretation. That’s what we find next. Look with me at verse 15:

An Angelic Interpretation

¹⁵ “As for me, Daniel, my spirit within me was anxious, and the visions of my head alarmed me. ¹⁶ I approached one of those who stood there and asked him the truth concerning all this. So he told me and made known to me the interpretation of the things. ¹⁷ These four great beasts are four kings who shall arise out of the earth. (Daniel 7:15-17 ESV)

Let’s stop here. These four great beasts are four kings who shall arise out of the earth. At this point, the vision from chapter 2 should be coming back into your mind. There, Nebuchadnezzar had a dream of a giant,

fourfold statue that represented four kingdoms. While we can't speak with 100% certainty, the four beasts likely represent the same four kingdoms that we saw in chapter 2.

First, we find a lion with eagles wings and this almost certainly represents Babylon. As Daniel passed through the Processional Way in Babylon, he would've walked past numerous images of winged lions. It was a common image in the kingdom. Eventually, the wings of the beast are stripped, and it was made to walk like a man. This reminds us of the story of chapter 4 when Nebuchadnezzar was humbled by God.

The second beast is represented by a bear-like creature. For some reason he is raised up on one side and he has three ribs in his mouth. This seems to represent the Medo-Persian empire which succeeded Babylon. The beast is uneven because the Medo-Persians were uneven. The Medes proved to be less formidable than the Persians, thus, one side of the beast was elevated higher than the other.

The third beast is represented by a leopard with four wings and four heads. This appears to be represent the Greeks. Alexander the Great overthrew the Persians, and his kingdom was marked by its rapid conquest. The Greeks moved quickly and ferociously. The four heads likely represents the four kingdoms that came about after the death of Alexander.

Finally, the fourth beast is not named, but it is unlike the rest. It is a terrifying beast with iron teeth, feet that crushed its foes and ten horns upon its head. This beast would seem to represent the colossal power of Rome.

That is the general consensus regarding the identity of these four beasts but, regardless of whether we have identified them correctly or not, the point is clear: Kingdoms will rise and rage against God but they are temporary powers. They boast, and they roar, but they will ultimately fall because, as we go on to read in verse 18:

¹⁸ But the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever, forever and ever.' (Daniel 7:18 ESV)

That's what this passage is all about! That's what this Book is all about! The nations rage and the wicked scoff but GOD WINS! He will right every wrong. He will judge every tyrant. He will restore to His people all that they have lost and more. This is the story of four temporary kingdoms that don't matter and one eternal kingdom that matters more than anything else in the world! Thanks be to God!

That's the point of this vision, and there's nothing vague about it. However, as we read through these final verses we are going to discover some peripheral questions that are harder to answer. But – and this is an important but – but the answer to those questions does NOT affect the main point of this passage, so we're not going to get hung up on them.

With that disclaimer in mind, look with me now at verse 19:

¹⁹ "Then I desired to know the truth about the fourth beast, which was different from all the rest, exceedingly terrifying, with its teeth of iron and claws of bronze, and which devoured and broke in pieces and stamped what was left with its feet,²⁰ and about the ten horns that were on its head, and the other horn that came up and before which three of them fell, the horn that had eyes and a mouth that spoke great things, and that seemed greater than its companions. ²¹ As I looked, this horn made war with the saints and prevailed over them, ²² until the Ancient of Days came, and judgment was given for the saints of the Most High, and the time came when the saints possessed the kingdom.

²³ "Thus he said: 'As for the fourth beast, there shall be a fourth kingdom on earth, which shall be different from all the kingdoms, and it shall devour the whole earth, and trample it down, and break it to pieces.

²⁴ As for the ten horns, out of this kingdom ten kings shall arise, and another shall arise after them; he shall be different from the former ones,

and shall put down three kings.

²⁵ He shall speak words against the Most High,
and shall wear out the saints of the Most High,
and shall think to change the times and the law;
and they shall be given into his hand
for a time, times, and half a time. (Daniel 7:19-25 ESV)

Who or what are the ten horns on the last beast? And, more importantly, who is this last horn? Christians have long disagreed about the identity of this figure because the text is not explicit. Some have argued that this horn is symbolic of Antiochus Epiphanes. He was a Seleucid king who did horrific things to the Jewish people. Others identify this horn as Nero. Others identify him as representative of all of the kingdoms united against God for all time while others identify him as the antichrist. Good Christians disagree on this one.

That being said, we're going to face this "antichrist" figure in chapter 8 and then again in chapter 10, so we've decided that it would be best to do an entire excurses sermon on this point after the Daniel series is complete.

For now, I need you to try to turn that train of thought off in your mind because it is outside of the main point in today's text. Whoever this final horn represents, he will be judged just like every other world power that has ever stood in opposition to God. THAT is the main point and that's where we pick up in verse 26:

²⁶ But the court shall sit in judgment,
and his dominion shall be taken away,
to be consumed and destroyed to the end.

²⁷ And the kingdom and the dominion
and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven
shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High;
his kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom,
and all dominions shall serve and obey him.'

²⁸ "Here is the end of the matter. As for me, Daniel, my thoughts greatly alarmed me, and my color changed, but I kept the matter in my heart." (Daniel 7:15-28 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Understandably, we have devoted more time than usual this morning to the task of reading and explaining our passage. Quickly now, with the time that we have remaining, I want to deal with the implications and warnings that we find in this text.

Implications and Warnings

First, this text warns us that:

1. **There will be opposition until the end**

The first stage of Daniel's vision is unpleasant.

Kingdom after kingdom rises up from the chaos. Each one has its own unique characteristics – its own strategies for usurping the rest – yet, each is after the same goal: Power.

That's an unpleasant picture, but it also reaks of reality, doesn't it? It sounds like a poetic illustration of world history.

Rather than getting caught up in trying to identify the precise identity of each beast, we should step back and learn the lesson that this vision is meant to teach us: The statue of chapter 2 and the beasts of chapter 9 represent a pattern of persecution that will persist to the end. One commentator notes:

Even in his interpretation of the vision Daniel does not name it's historical referents, and thus he permits it's reapplication to subsequent situations¹

Daniel doesn't name these kingdoms because he wants us to see that this vision illustrates more than 700 years of Mediterranean history. This vision presents a pattern that will persist until God finally brings an end to the rebellion.

Listen friends, don't allow yourselves to be lulled into a false sense of security in this life. There is a war raging on all around us! There is an enemy of our souls that is prowling about like a lion looking to steal, to kill, and to destroy. He uses kings and kingdoms for his purposes. He uses businesses and enterprises for his purposes. He uses relationships and families for his purposes. Have you felt the sting of his attacks?

Don't be surprised by this. The New Testament is filled with warning after warning reminding us that there is an enemy that is going to take swings at us in this life. Jesus said:

In the world you **will** have tribulation. (John 16:33b ESV)

Peter wrote to a church that was surprised by the sudden persecution that they were facing. They had forgotten about the battle that was being waged and they were frightened by the arrival of a new "beast" in their political world. Peter reminded them:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. (1 Peter 4:12 ESV)

Perhaps more so than any other generation in history, we need to be reminded of this truth. We have been blessed to live with peace and religious freedom that was unheard of in previous generations. We forget the horrors of war. We don't know what real persecution for our faith feels like. Most of us have never really been forced to count the cost of following Christ. And let's be clear – we are THANKFUL for the peace that we have enjoyed. Amen?

However, people who have been birthed and raised in peace can be surprised and disoriented when the enemy finally attacks. How many of us have watched as our friends fell away from the faith when the first storm blew in? They were caught off guard. But we shouldn't be. Because this is the pattern.

Therefore, we need this reminder. Until Christ returns, our enemy will continue his assault against the people of God.

But, thanks be to God, we also learn in this text that:

2. God sits enthroned over every kingdom

¹ John E. Goldingay, *Daniel*, WBC (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 188.

Daniel was lifted up out of the chaos of the sea and the beasts. On the heavenly plane, he was helped to see an entirely different scene. He saw the Ancient of Days clothed in dazzling white and seated on a throne of fire! Flames were before Him and thousands upon thousands stood to worship and serve Him!

He saw one like a son of man riding in on the clouds, presented before the Father and receiving glory, authority and dominion. He saw all the nations, tribes and tongues worshiping the Son of Man. He watched as the saints of God received the kingdom after the beast had been thrown down!

I don't know about you, but I often ask myself the question: "Will I be able to stand when persecution comes?" I read about the martyrs in history and I receive reports from our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world and I wonder how it is that they stand.

We find part of the answer to that question in this text, don't we? If you want to stand against the enemy's attacks, you need a proper perspective. You need to see with the eyes of faith that, while there may seem to be chaos all around us, God's throne room is unaffected by the enemy and his schemes.

God is never surprised by the election results.

God is never wringing His hands when rumors of war are whispered.

God is not intimidated by the tyrants who think themselves to be untouchable.

At the end of the day, as one commentator so helpfully puts it:

The pretense to heavenly authority yields to the reality of heavenly authority.²

Nebuchadnezzar was forced to stand before God and to give an account. Belshazzar kneeled before the judge. Cyrus, Alexander the Great, Pompey, Herod, Caesar, Titus, Hitler, Stalin – every one of them will answer to the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords.

So too will you. In the same way that the book was opened for these tyrants, your book will be opened as well. Are you ready for that day?

We spend far too much time worrying about the beasts and far too little time making sure that we are right with the One who sits on the eternal throne. As Jesus taught us:

And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. (Matthew 10:28 ESV)

That leads to the final thing that we learn in this text:

3. We must decide which king we will serve

As I mentioned, Daniel saw a vision of one like a son of man coming on the clouds, but as far as we know, Daniel was never enabled to understand who he was seeing. The Jews had long looked forward to a King like David. They had long looked forward to a prophet like Moses. But the man in Daniel's image exceeded

² John E. Goldingay, *Daniel*, WBC (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 190.

any of those expectations. He was riding in on the clouds – and the clouds are symbolic of divinity in the Old Testament. This man was more than a king or a prophet. He was a divine man – a godman! More than that, this man received worship from all the nations.

In the final judgement, God will throw down the beasts and all those who are aligned with them, but He is going to give the kingdom to the Son of Man and the saints who are aligned with him. Who is this that Daniel is seeing in his vision?

Fast forward to Mark 14. During the trial before his execution, the high priest was interrogating Jesus. He knew that Jesus believed himself to be the Messiah – the coming king – but he wanted to hear the confession from Jesus' mouth. But he received more than he bargained for:

Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" ⁶² And Jesus said, "I am, and you will see the **Son of Man** seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." (Mark 14:61-62 ESV)

Do you hear what Jesus is saying? "I am the Christ. I'm the king that you have been waiting for for all of these years. But I'm so much more than you realize! I'm the Son of Man that you read about in Daniel 7. I'm the one who will come riding on the clouds. I'm the one who will receive glory, and authority and a kingdom from the Ancient of Days. I'm the one before whom every knee will bow, and every tongue confess 'Jesus is Lord!' I'm the one who will inherit the kingdom and who will share it with those who are surrendered to me."

Here is the most important question that you will ever answer: To which kingdom do you belong?

The Bible tells us that there are only two options.

Some of us here today belong to the kingdom of the world. The beasts in Daniel 7 are representative of the kingdom of man apart from God. They live for pleasure, power and autonomy. They promise life, but they can't deliver. The kingdom of this world is a cheap, temporary counterfeit of the real. Daniel needed to be lifted up out of the chaos to see that there was another reality that was outside of his view. The frightening beasts and their kingdoms seemed so imposing until he saw that the real story – the only story that matters – is taking place on another plane. The self-exalting, back-biting, power-chasing kingdoms of this world will leave you empty. Worse than that, they will lead you to eternal ruin. The Book of Revelation picks up this imagery and warns us:

"If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, ¹⁰ he also will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. (Revelation 14:9-10 ESV)

To receive the "mark of the beast" is to identify with him. Every time that you reject the gospel of Jesus Christ you are effectively saying: "I am already claimed. I belong to another." You need to know where the story ends for those who choose to follow the powers of this world.

However, there is an alternative to the life that these beasts offer you. They are a cheap counterfeit, but the Son of Man has come to teach us how we were meant to live. As we look to Jesus, we can say:

Here there is a vision of man as he was intended to be, perfectly embodying all his potential in obedience to his Creator.³

I have yet to meet the person who can honestly find fault in Jesus. I meet people all the time who find faults in the church. I meet people who don't like the doctrines that they find in the Bible. I meet people who don't think they need a saviour. But I have never met a person who has read the Gospels and came away saying: "I don't like this Jesus."

Jesus is the real. In him, we find what humanity is supposed to look like. In him, we find what leadership, and dominion is supposed to look like. In him we find perfect justice, perfect mercy, perfect humility, perfect righteousness and perfect love. In a world full of temporary, fake, misleading kingdoms, there is only one King who will stand in the end.

Are you standing with him?

When the judge looks at your life, will He see a life that is marked by unbelief and rejection of His Son? Will he see someone who has chosen to identify with the temporary kingdoms of this world? Or will He find the mark of the Lamb? Will he see someone who has turned away from sin and who has placed their trust in the saving work of Jesus Christ?

There is only one kingdom that will endure, and there is only one entrance into that Kingdom. Jesus said:

I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:6 ESV)

So, which kingdom do you belong to? Who are you following? Where does that road lead?

This is the question that Daniel confronts us with. This is the most important question you will ever answer. And this is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

³ Joyce G. Baldwin, *Daniel: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Madison, WI: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 154.