

Daniel's Vision of the Beasts

Daniel 7:1-8

Last week we began to study Daniel 7 and his vision of the four beasts. I gave an outline of the chapter, gave some principles by which we should interpret the vision, and summarized the message of the vision.

I summarized the message of this prophecy this way:

Daniel 7 teaches us that the course of humanity is determined in the throne room of God Almighty. Before the kingdom of God is established on the earth, four earthly kingdoms will rise and fall. These kingdoms go from bad to worse. Arrogant, boastful, and even blasphemous kings will reign over the nations, opposing God and oppressing His saints. All of this is by divine design. When the sin and oppression of evil men reaches a predetermined point, God will remove them and establish His promised eternal kingdom. Then the saints will receive the kingdom which will never end.

We are now ready look into the details of the vision and what they mean. First of all, in verses 1-8 we see the vision of the four beasts and the significance of this picture is the apparent power and the evident depravity of the world empires. Daniel sees a panoramic vision of world empires but it serves merely as the backdrop of the inauguration of the reign of the Son of Man in the kingdom of heaven. The central section of this passage, of the chapter, and of the book of Daniel itself is verses 9-14 where we see the coronation of the Son of Man as king and His heavenly kingdom.

So I think it is important for us to emphasize that the vision of the four beasts which represent the kingdoms of this world in all their power, in all their brutality simply serves as a backdrop to a greater reality, the establishment of God's kingdom. That is the one clear message we must gain from this vision.

When and how the visions were given (Dan. 7:1)

The time when these visions were given to Daniel is stated in the first verse where it says, **"In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon, Daniel had a dream and visions of his head [while] on his bed. Then he wrote down the dream, telling the main facts."**

Belshazzar, you will remember from chapter 5, was King of Babylon at the time it was overthrown. He was the one who made a feast to his lords; and it was to him that the handwriting appeared on the wall. But this vision takes place in the first year of Belshazzar, probably 14 years before the fall of Babylon and Belshazzar's death.

THE VISION OF THE FOUR BEASTS (Dan. 7:2-8)

In verse 2 it says,

2 Daniel spoke, saying, "I saw in my vision by night, and behold, the four winds of heaven were stirring up the Great Sea.

These words are an introduction to the whole chapter, and indicate the nature of the material presented. As I said last time, we must recognize that the language used in these verses is figurative or symbolic and must be interpreted as such.

The four winds of heaven and the great sea (Dan. 7:2)

It is necessary for us to decide, if we can, what is meant by the expression, "the great sea," as it is used in this passage. I believe that the expression has both a literal and a symbolic interpretation. Literally speaking, in the Bible "the great sea" generally refers to the Mediterranean Sea. Around this great sea the great empires of history have risen and fallen.

In a symbolic sense, however, the great sea refers to the great unorganized masses of mankind. For example, in Revelation 17:15, it says, "**Then he said to me, "The waters which you saw, where the harlot sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues."** Jesus uses that image in Matthew 13:47 in His parable of the dragnet. Isaiah (8:6-8) and Jeremiah (46:7-8; 47:2) also picture the nations as waters. In verse 17 when Daniel is given the interpretation of the vision the sea is identified with the earth. The sea seems to be representative of the mass of humanity and its nations.

In his vision, Daniel observed the sea being stirred up into a raging storm by the "four winds of heaven." Four is the biblical symbolic number for the earth (i.e. the four corners of the earth, cf. Dan. 8:8; 11:4; Zech. 2:6; 6:5). We talk about the four corners of the earth. The wind comes from the four areas, north, south, east, west. But notice that it is the winds of heaven that blow upon the earth. **The four winds of heaven were stirring up the great sea.** While humanity and the nations of the earth appear to be in chaos, all the while God is sovereign and it is the winds of heaven that control the rise and fall of nations in the world.

This is the repeated theme of Daniel. God is sovereign over the nations of the earth. He controls the world and all earthly kingdoms and powers and controlled by heaven.

The four beasts

In the third verse Daniel said,

3 "And four great beasts came up from the sea, each different from the other.

Again, verse 17 interprets the symbol of the beasts for us, "**Those great beasts, which are four, are four kings which arise out of the earth.**" These four beasts which Daniel saw in his vision represent the four kings or kingdoms which were to rise and fall in history.

Now it should be obvious to us that this vision of four kingdoms is similar to Nebuchadnezzar's vision of four kingdoms in chapter 2. In that dream the king saw a vast statue made of four metals: head of gold, chest of silver, thighs of bronze, legs of iron, feet of mixed iron and clay. A stone cut out of a mountain hits the statue at its feet (the iron and clay part), smashing it to bits. Then the stone grew until it filled the whole earth.

Daniel explained to the king that the four metals represent four successive world kingdoms or empires—decreasing in value from top to bottom but increasing in strength. Daniel clearly identified Nebuchadnezzar (and the Babylonian empire) as the head of gold. Three other empires would succeed it. The identity of these other three kingdoms has been debated ever since Daniel wrote these words. I encourage you to read some good scholarly commentaries and ask the Spirit of God to give you understanding into these pictures.

My understanding from what Daniel writes and from history is that those succeeding three empires were Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. Daniel explained that the feet of iron and clay represented the final form of the fourth kingdom as partially strong and partially weak. The stone that hit the feet represented the Second Coming of Jesus Christ to destroy all manmade kingdoms and to establish His kingdom on the earth.

I believe it is reasonable to conclude that the four world empires of chapter 2 are identical to those in chapter 7. In other words what we have in chapter 7 is a revelation of the march of earthly empires represented by four beasts instead of by the metallic image which Nebuchadnezzar saw.

The question is, why are the same four empires referred to as metals in one dream and beasts in another?

The difference between the two chapters is this: King Nebuchadnezzar saw these kingdoms, and the march of empire, from a human point of view. Consequently the image which he saw was that of a man with its head of gold, its breast and arms of silver, his belly and thighs of brass, his legs of iron, and his feet part of iron and part of clay. His perspective was the outward splendor of these empires. The statue of Nebuchadnezzar's dream shows us the empires of the world as man sees them - beautiful, precious, highly valued, and deserving of our praise.

In Daniel 7 we see the same kingdoms as God sees them. They are ferocious beasts, bent on conquest, plunder, destruction, and domination. God sees beyond the glitter of the world to the depraved nature inside the heart of every human ruler. He isn't fooled by mighty armies, hanging gardens, vast palaces, and sumptuous feasts. He knows that the heart of man is the heart of a beast. It is "desperately wicked" and full of evil.

But in chapter 7 Daniel was given to see and to understand these kingdoms, and the march of empire, as GOD sees them. Strange enough, they are symbolized in this chapter, not by the glorious image of a man but by hideous, wild beasts which indicate the ferocious character the world kingdoms. Daniel 7 shows us the nature of every kingdom built by man. They are earthly, brutal, destructive, and ultimately temporary. Nothing made by the hands of man lasts forever. One kingdom falls, another rises only to fall and have its place taken by yet another kingdom. The lion rises only to be defeated by the bear who falls to the leopard who is crushed by the terrible beast. So goes the story of the kingdoms of men.

Man, you see, sees his kingdoms as something marvelous and thrilling and colossal. And God sees man's kingdoms as something ugly and wild and murderous and bloody. And so that's why the difference. Man doesn't see things the way God sees them. To man, his great day is colossal, impressive, triumphant, powerful, strong. To God, man's day is wild and bloody, and that's the difference. Man looks on his empires as achievements. God looks on them as brutal and oppressive.

This is the history of humanity until the end when Jesus Christ finally comes back to earth. Then (and not until then) all earthly kingdoms are finally replaced by the kingdom of God. And that kingdom will last forever.

Viewed from GOD's point of view, each of the four successive world empires is justly and fittingly represented by the wild beasts named and described in Daniel's vision.

The Winged Lion (Dan. 7:4)

4 "The first [was] like a lion, and had eagle's wings. I watched till its wings were plucked off; and it was lifted up from the earth and made to stand on two feet like a man, and a man's heart was given to it.

In this passage the lion refers to, and symbolizes the great Babylonian kingdom over which Nebuchadnezzar was king. This kingdom corresponds to that of the head of gold of the image which Nebuchadnezzar saw.

The lion is generally spoken of as "King of beasts." Therefore, when GOD sought and purposed in his heart to choose certain beasts to symbolize the march of empire it was fitting and proper that he should choose the lion to represent the great world empire of Babylon. Strange as it may seem the lion which Daniel saw in his vision had eagle's wings. The wings on the lion seemed to indicate that the Babylonian kingdom was able to lift itself up, as it were, above the other kingdoms over which she held dominion. The wings also may indicate swiftness of conquest. Jeremiah and Ezekiel describe Nebuchadnezzar using the image of the lion and the eagle and we know that Daniel read those prophets closely. And so the lion and the eagle is Babylon.

But verse 4 also says there came a time when the wings of the Babylonian king were plucked off, which of course, indicated a weakened condition of the empire.

Concerning the lion, as symbolizing the Babylonian empire, Daniel also said, "**it was lifted up from the earth and made to stand on two feet like a man, and a man's heart was given to it.**"

These words may have some reference to the humbling of King Nebuchadnezzar which he suffered when he lifted up himself in pride and boasted of the great things which he had done. Daniel records that account Nebuchadnezzar's humiliation and restoration in chapter 4. By far, this first beast is the best of a bad bunch. He is more beastly in the beginning and more human in the end,

paralleling the character of Nebuchadnezzar. This also underscores that these four kingdoms go from reasonably good to unbelievably bad.

Thus, my friends, we see that the lion with its wings plucked off, and which was caused to stand upon its feet as a man, was a fit symbol of the Babylonian Empire which became weak and was finally overthrown.

The Bear (Dan. 7:5)

The second beast comes in verse 5,

5 "And suddenly another beast, a second, like a bear. It was raised up on one side, and [had] three ribs in its mouth between its teeth. And they said thus to it: 'Arise, devour much flesh!'

I believe the bear is used to symbolize the Medo-Persian Empire which succeeded the Babylonian Empire in world dominion. We have already seen in chapters 5-6 that the Medes and the Persians under Darius the Mede and Cyrus the Persian conquered the Babylonian empire. In chapter 6 a combined kingdom of the Medes and Persians is mentioned repeatedly as in verses 8, 12, and 15. In Daniel's vision in chapter 8 he is told specifically that two of the future kingdoms will be the kingdom of Media-Persia (Dan. 8:20) and the kingdom of Greece (Dan. 8:21).

Here in chapter 7 the bear is spoken of as raising up on one side which may indicate that the Persian side of this dual kingdom was the stronger. The three ribs which the bear had in its mouth seem to indicate victories already accomplished, in her conquest for power.

The command was for the bear to arise and devour much flesh, and that is exactly what the Medo-Persian empire did as confirmed by secular history. Thus we see that the period of history represented by the bear corresponds to the breast and arms of silver, in the image which Nebuchadnezzar saw.

The Leopard (Dan. 7:6)

6 "After this I looked, and there was another, like a leopard, which had on its back four wings of a bird. The beast also had four heads, and dominion was given to it.

If the bear represents the kings of Media and Persia, then following the sequence of the vision of chapter 2 and also the interpretation given to Daniel in chapter 8, the leopard must symbolize the world empire of Greece under Alexander the Great and those who succeeded him after his death.

It had four wings upon its back which were used to denote its swiftness. We are also told that it had four heads. We are not surprised at this, for after the death of Alexander, the Grecian Empire was eventually divided into four divisions and each division was taken by one of Alexander's four leading generals. The divisions of the empire are given as Syria, Egypt, Macedonia and Asia Minor.

Therefore, we must agree that a leopard with four wings and four heads was a fit symbol of the Grecian Empire. This would also correspond well with the four horns of the Grecian ram in Daniel 8:8.

The period in history represented by the leopard corresponds to the belly and thighs of brass in the metallic image which Nebuchadnezzar saw.

The terrible beast (Dan. 7:7)

7 "After this I saw in the night visions, and behold, a fourth beast, dreadful and terrible, exceedingly strong. It had huge iron teeth; it was devouring, breaking in pieces, and trampling the residue with its feet. It [was] different from all the beasts that [were] before it, and it had ten horns.

This fourth beast is almost indescribable. This figurative beast is used to describe the fourth world empire which was Rome. Perhaps the reason no living beast was chosen to symbolize the Roman Empire was because no beast living was adequate to symbolize the fierceness and the strength and the cruelty of the Roman Empire. Therefore, a nondescript beast was provided for our imagination to symbolize the cruelest and most heartless of world empires.

Not only was this fourth beast dreadful and terrible and strong, and not only did it devour and break in pieces and stamp the residue with its feet, but it was different from all the beasts before it. Notably it had iron teeth which remind us of the legs and feet of iron from the fourth kingdom of Nebuchadnezzar's image. It is described as having ten horns. From verse 24 we know that the ten horns are ten kings who will arise from this fourth kingdom.

This period of history, therefore, corresponds to the legs of iron and the feet of the image which Nebuchadnezzar saw which were part of iron and part of clay. The ten horns of the nondescript beast, could easily correspond to the ten toes of Nebuchadnezzar's image.

The little horn (Dan. 7:8)

8 "I was considering the horns, and there was another horn, a little one, coming up among them, before whom three of the first horns were plucked out by the roots. And there, in this horn, [were] eyes like the eyes of a man, and a mouth speaking pompous words.

Indeed, my friends, couched in this strange language you have a prophetic introduction to none other than the coming Antichrist, who is here called "The little horn." According to Daniel he will arise and subdue three of the first horns, or Kingdoms so that only he and seven of the kings, (represented by the ten horns,) will remain. We know that the little horn, well represents, the coming Antichrist because it says, "In this horn were eyes like the eyes of a man, and a mouth speaking great things."

The title of "little horn" is only one of several different titles given to the Antichrist in the Word of GOD.

- Not only is he called the "little horn," but
- he is spoken of in the scriptures also as "The king of Babylon,"
- in Isaiah 14:4, "the Assyrian,"
- in Daniel 9:26 he is spoken of as "the prince."

- In Daniel 8:23 as "the willful king."
- In II Thessalonians 2:3 he is called "the son of perdition,"
- and "the lawless one."
- And in Revelation 13:1 he is called the "beast."

Thus, my friends, you see the importance of that dreadful personality which is introduced to us in Daniel 7:8 as the "little horn." This is somewhat confusing because in chapter 8 we also have a little horn (8:9-14) that seems to refer to the Grecian Seleucid ruler, Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-164 b.c.) who comes from the third kingdom during the Maccabean Period. He is a type of anti-christ which is always among us (cf. I John 2:18).

In Daniel these "little horns" are both arrogant and boastful. They reject the worship of the Lord God and try to destroy His people. They are both allowed by God to prosper and both will be destroyed by God. They come to epitomize rebellious, egocentric, fallen humanity.

We will study this more as we get to the interpretation of the dream in the latter part of the chapter.

Let's summarize and apply what we have learned. Daniel 7 teaches us some important lessons about history from God's point of view.

1. Though we glory in our accomplishments, God sees human history as a succession of empires built on immorality, greed, and violence.

We see the pomp and the glory, we revel in our prosperity, and we claim that the state of the union has never been better. But God sees through all the smoke and mirrors. He isn't fooled. Not for a second. What we worship as beautiful, he sees as ugly, decadent, and violent.

How do you view the world? Are you allured by the glitz and glamor, by the power and prestige, by wealth and possessions? All these pursuits characterize the godless empires of the world. Does it impress you?

It does not impress God. So we shouldn't be too impressed with the glories of whatever version of human self-promotion stands out at the moment. Human accomplishment and human authority cannot sustain itself over time. God sees behind the veil into the heart of men and their kingdoms.

Only the kingdom of heaven will be forever and ever.

Knowing this should wean us away from our trust in the kingdoms of this world. The kingdoms of the world, and the companies of the world, and the careers of the world, they come, they go, they rise, they fall, and soon they will all be destroyed by God. Use the world but don't fall in love with it.

2. Human history will come to a terrible climax of evil kingdoms and rulers.

This is the logical end of humanism and paganism. When you leave God out and worship false gods, you get the antichrist. When you dispense with God, you must fill the void with something else. And that something else will be against

God and will reject Christ. This is the spirit of antichrist that John says is already in the world. It will eventually come to a terrible climax.

3. Human History will again see the direct intervention of God.

This is wonderful news for believers and terrifying news for everyone else. Men say, **“Where is the promise of his coming? All things continue as they have from the beginning of creation. Nothing ever changes. All those miracles that happened back in Bible times, and all those plagues, that could never happen again”** (see 2 Peter 3:1-9).

Wrong! Jesus said “Just as it was in the days of Noah, so also will it be in the days of the Son of Man” (Luke 17:26-27). And what were they doing in Noah’s day? Eating, drinking, and getting married. That is, it was life as usual. Then one day without warning, the rains came down and the floods came up.

God will intervene again to destroy the kingdoms of the world. Certainly this was a message the Jews in exile needed to hear. It’s all going to happen just as God said it would. Be patient, child of God. The Lord will complete that which concerns you.

Our call is to be strong and of good courage while we wait for the Lord to return from heaven.

4. When Christ sets up His Kingdom, His saints will rule with him.

I ran across a sentence this week that stuck in my mind: *“All the threads of history lead to the throne room of God.”* How true that is. So many times the “threads” of life seem to dangle meaninglessly. Or they are entangled in a hopeless knot. If we could see the big picture, we would discover that every thread of life leads to the glory of God.

This is our hope for the future. We who have joined ourselves with Christ by faith will rule and reign with Him. He will win the victory and we will “receive” the kingdom from Him.