

DANIEL'S VISION OF THE KINGDOM

Daniel 7:1-28

Key Verse: 7:14

"He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed."

Let's ask the obvious question first: why are we studying Daniel 7 in the middle of our study of Revelation? Our goal is two-fold. The first is to establish some principles for understanding the apocalyptic portion of Revelation in chapters 4-22. Apocalyptic literature is a type of Jewish and early Christian literature, the bulk of which stems from the years 200 BC-AD 100, containing visions or revelations (hence the term "apocalyptic," from the Gr. *apokalypsis*, meaning "a revelation" or "a disclosure"). It can be defined as: symbolic visionary prophetic literature, composed during oppressive conditions, consisting of visions whose events are recorded exactly as they were seen by the author and explained through a divine interpreter and whose theological content is primarily eschatological (that's just a fancy word for teachings about the end times).

Each genre has certain principles of interpretation. For example, the gospel genre isn't always chronologically accurate because its intent is to help us understand events and believe, not learn history. Or in the parable genre we should only understand Jesus' main point and not go beyond Jesus' meaning picking apart every metaphor. So there are certain principles of interpretation of apocalyptic literature. First, apocalyptic literature is symbolic not literal so we should not try to use symbolic times to find out literal dates of Jesus' coming or identify the Antichrist in our times—remember Jesus said no one knows that day or hour, not even the Son but only the Father (Mt 24:36), so don't try to be smarter than Jesus! Second, it may have an immediate interpretation and also a future one as well so approach it with humility. Third, its purpose is to give hope to persevere through present suffering—it is not a genre for teaching theology that we should debate about. Last, it is written to hide the meaning so only those with background knowledge and insight could understand its meaning. That means that to understand the symbols in Revelation, we have to understand the Old Testament passages that they assume we know—one of which is Daniel 7.

Our second goal, is to understand the context for the beast. In Revelation 13 John tell us of a super beast that is an amalgamation of the beasts of Daniel 7. Don't be like me, as a young Bible student I thought Godzilla was going to come up out of the ocean in the end times. That is not the case. From Daniel we're going to learn that it is a symbol for the kingdoms of the world. The purpose of writing the book of Daniel, we're going to see, is the same as the purpose of writing Revelation: that is to encourage God's holy people, in the

midst of the intense pressures of an ever changing and increasingly hostile world, to remain faithful and have hope in God to the end. So let's get into it.

First, God is sovereign over the beastly powers of this world (1-8)

The book of Daniel deals with life for the people of Judah in exile. Part 1 of the book of Daniel, chapters 1-6, tells the story of four exiles Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah as they struggle to remain faithful in a pagan society under intense pressure. Part 2, chapters 7-12, are God's visions to Daniel (whom he had given the ability to understand dreams and visions) concerning the kingdoms that would rise and oppress them and the end times. The purpose of the Book of Daniel was first and foremost to encourage his people that he is sovereign and he will fulfill his purpose in history. And second, to encourage them that it is possible in the midst intense pressure, to remain faithful to God and persevere to the end. The overwhelming theme of Daniel is God's sovereignty.

The exile, which began in the first chapter of Daniel with some of the nobility in 605 BC, culminated in the exile of some 10 to 20 thousand of the wealthiest, most able people of Judah in 597 BC and the total destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC by king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. When God gave the Israelites the land of Canaan he had warned them, "If you are not careful to do all the words of this law that are written in this book, that you may fear this glorious and awesome name, the LORD your God, then the LORD... will scatter you among all the peoples, from one end of the earth to the other, and there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone" (Dt 28:58,64). Yet, throughout their history God's people worshipped God among a pantheon of other gods, leading God to carry out all he had promised in his word. This gives us the context for understanding the suffering that God was going to allow, as we will see in this chapter. All human suffering is the result not of a capricious, uncaring God but because of our sin.

By chapter 7 we're told that it is the first year of king Belshazzar, the grandson of Nebuchadnezzar who reigned from 552-539 BC. Judah has been in exile 53 years at this point. The complete destruction of Jerusalem has taken place and Judah no longer existed as a kingdom. Israel's situation is depicted in verse 2, "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me were the four winds of heaven churning up the great sea." This churning sea is a metaphor for chaos in the Bible (Gen 1:2). If you've ever seen movies like "The Perfect Storm," you can imagine the terror of winds blowing from all four compass directions creating hurricane waves towering 300 feet in the air—it was simply a terrifying scene! Any ship in the midst of this churning sea would be powerless to do anything but hold on until the storm took them where it wished.

To make this terrifying scene even worse, up out of the ocean came four great sea-monsters that could barely be described (3). A heavenly interpreter tells Daniel that these four beasts are four kings and their kingdoms that would arise on earth (17,23). The

traditional view of this passage is that chapters 2-7, uniquely written in Aramaic, form a chiasm—in other words, the stories in chapters 2-4 are then repeated in reverse order in 5-7 to form a mirror with chapter 2 being linked to chapter 7. So we can assume that the statue in Nebuchadnezzar's dream that represented his kingdom and the three to come after it, is the same interpretation of chapter 7.

As such the first beast, a lion with the wings of an eagle (which is literally the symbol for the Babylonian Empire), would be the Babylonian Empire (4a). And the tearing off of its wings and its being given the mind of a man refers to God's humbling of Nebuchadnezzar through making him lose his mind until he acknowledged that God is sovereign over the kingdoms of the earth (7:4b 4:3,17,37b).

The second beast, a bear raised up on one side with three ribs in its mouth, would then be the Medo-Persian Empire under the rule of Cyrus (5) which was known for their brute force through overwhelming numbers. And the raised side of the bear suggesting the greater power of the Persians to the Medes with the three ribs referring to their 3 decisive victories (Babylon, Lydia and Egypt).

The third beast, a leopard with four wings like a bird and with four heads, would be the Greek Empire under the rule of Alexander the Great (6) who was renowned for the incredible speed of his conquest from Greece down to Egypt and all the way to the border of India in just 13 years! The four heads represent the dividing of his kingdom among his four generals after his death.

The fourth beast, which was beyond description and was simply terrifying and frightening and very powerful, was then the Roman Empire—which was different from all the kingdoms that came before it both in size, structure and endurance (7). It devoured the whole earth—the Greek kingdom as well as everything surrounding the Mediterranean Sea, most of Europe even Brittan trampling down and crushing it (23).

God depicts human history as a progression of beastly monsters devouring each other in an endless struggle for power. This is a timeless vision relevant to all of human history. As such, people have reinterpreted this chapter applying it to their times and rulers in each successive generation. In the same way, the beast of Revelation 13, which is an amalgamation of all four beasts of Daniel, with the body of a leopard, the feet of a bear, a mouth like a lion and ten horns and ten heads, is an image of all the kingdoms of the world that rule with absolute beastly power. Before such terrible beastly kingdoms we feel we are powerless and helpless. But the heavenly interpreter of verses 15-27 doesn't focus on the beasts but on God's sovereignty over the beastly kingdoms of the world—and we should do the same. Look at verses 17-18. "The four great beasts are four kings that will rise from the earth. But the holy people of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it forever—yes for ever and ever." In the scope of history, the kingdoms of this world rise and

fall in an instant and are gone forever—we should not fear them. Only the kingdom of God is eternal. God wants us to live with this eternal perspective.

Where things start to get interesting, is that the fourth beast had 10 horns and from among the horns another little horn grew up among them; and three of the first horns were uprooted before it. This horn had eyes of a human being and a mouth that spoke boastfully (7b-8). The heavenly interpreter tells us that the horns are kings, among whom would rise a king different from the ones before and who would subdue three kings (24). Yet, the numbers and the imagery don't really fit the Roman Empire. What these horns and little horn represent have been endlessly debated to being Roman emperors, Greek kings and generals, the Roman Catholic Church, Islam or even the USA. Some read this part very literally and see the vision fulfilled in a future revived Roman Empire, which is highly-problematic. Interestingly the heavenly interpreter doesn't spend a lot of time identifying the little horn—in fact not enough information is given to definitively say one way or another. But he focuses on what the horn will do and God's sovereignty over him. In this way, we don't need to precisely nail down the exact interpretation of every aspect of the vision. Rather, we must think about what was God's intention in giving this vision? What was he trying to tell to Daniel and his suffering people and even future generations?

It is that the suffering of God's holy people is also under God's sovereignty, so be faithful to the end. The little horn spoke boastfully against God and oppressed his people and tried to change the set times and laws (25a). That is, he would try to eliminate the worship of God. He had the audacity to make God his enemy. He waged war against the holy people and was defeating them (21). And for a time they were delivered into his hand (25b). Many believe this to be the Antichrist who will appear in the end times (2 Th 2; 1 John 2:18; Rev 13:1-10). But in fact, 1 Jn 2:18 says that many antichrists have already come. When we examine history, every tyrant has tried to eliminate religion and force people to worship them as god. At the height of his power Alexander the Great tried to unify his people by forcing them to worship him. Antiochus IV Epiphanes desecrated the temple and tried to change the dates and laws and eliminate the Jewish sacrificial system. Refusal to worship the Roman Emperor was the number one reason that Christians were martyred in the Roman Empire. To remain faithful in such times was almost impossible. The first 6 chapters of Daniel are meant to give us an image of the intense pressure put on God's people and how they should stand firm to the end. Not only in Daniel's time but in many parts of the world today, Christians—God's holy people—are under attack: churches are bombed, believers are beheaded, burned and shot. In many parts of the world believers know that to confess Christ means facing death every day. How easy it would be to simply give up their testimony about Jesus and end their suffering but they remain faithful.

Many also understand this horn to represent the demonic systems that set themselves up against God, try to eliminate worship of God and oppress God's people. Systems like relativism, secular humanism, gender and marriage issues, abortion, pornography, human

trafficking, inequality are like huge beasts in our times. When we look at these entrenched systems of sin that set themselves up against God, we can easily feel we are powerless to do anything about them. How can an individual stand against the enormous beastly powers of our time?

Second, The Ancient of Days and the Son of Man (9-14)

Suddenly, the scene changed. This cycle of destruction and oppression did not continue forever. God came to judge the world. Look at verses 9-10. As Daniel looked, “thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat.” This is the only place in the Bible where God is called the “Ancient of Days.” He has the image of a judge with absolute wisdom and experience spanning from everlasting to everlasting (Ps 90:2). “His clothes are white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze. A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him” (9-10a). God is a judge with absolute purity, wisdom and power to carry out his judgments. “Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him” (10b). This the image of the kingdom in Revelation 5 and 7, where God is forever surrounded with glory encircled by 100 million angels shouting his praises and where an uncountable number from every nation, tribe, people and language were gathered before the throne in worship, awaiting the final judgement (Rev 5:11,7:9,14). “The court sat in judgement and the books were opened” (10b ESV). While the little horn continued to defy God, the beast was slain and its body destroyed and thrown into the blazing fire (11). According to Revelation 21:12-15, all are judged not arbitrarily but according to the facts of what they have done in life, as recorded in these books and all whose names are not written in the Lamb’s book of life are thrown into the lake of fire.

In an instant the great powers of this world will be stripped of their power and destroyed forever (12,26). This helps us to keep our world in perspective. There are a few points that we should consider.

The first is that we should see our world from an eternal perspective and not become discouraged by the present reality. Every day we must renew our mind to see the Ancient of Days ruling over history. Otherwise we may begin to become filled with a despairing fatalism about our world. When fatalism about our times fills our heart we can’t preach the gospel to unbelievers because we think they are our enemy. We cannot live our lives for God because we think it is useless. We must remember that nothing is happening in this world outside the sovereignty of God, even in our personal life. May God help us to see the progression of history from his perspective.

The second is that we should not put our hope in beastly powers but in the Ancient of Days. We may think that the solution to all our country’s problems and the increasing immorality of our times, lies in our vote. However, we must remember that the governments of this

world are just part of the beastly powers of this world. In many parts of the world America, the first country in history with the power to destroy the world multiple times over, is just another terrifying beast in the succession of beasts of this world. American triumphalism cannot be our hope.

The third is that we should remain faithful to the end knowing that God will be victorious. The greatest temptation in times of persecution and pressure against our faith is to shrink back and give up our testimony, to blend into the world to avoid persecution. But when we remember that God will be overwhelmingly victorious in the end, we don't trade temporary comfort for eternal victory. Only those who overcome will share in God's victory. Therefore, we must be faithful even to the point of death, that God may give us the crown of life (Rev 2:10b).

God's victory did not end with the defeat of the beasts. Verse 13 says, "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence." If you look down at the footnote in your Bibles for verse 13, you'll see that the Aramaic phrase *bar enash* literally means human being, he is the representative of the holy people (18,22,27). But this one like a man came on the clouds of heaven into the presence of God, signifying his divine authority. He is the promised Messiah, Jesus who referred to himself as the Son of Man more than any other title based on this prophecy of Daniel. In contrast to the monstrous beasts, Jesus who is in very nature God humbled himself and became like a mere man (Php 2:5-8). As the Son of Man, he did not use his authority to rule but he was born in a stable and lived as a carpenter's son in the lowest village. His ministry was not wealthy and elite but he was a friend to sinners and embraced lepers, ate with tax collectors and prostitutes and shared the good news with the poor. He cared for the hungry and healed the sick and yet he had no place to call his home. As the Son of Man Jesus allowed himself to be put to death by the very people he came to save. It seemed that he was crushed by the terrifying fourth beast. Yet, in convicting himself, Jesus said, "But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Mt 26:64). Through his death on the cross and resurrection from the dead, Jesus was confirmed to be the Son of God (Ro 1:4) and God "seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come" (Eph 1:20-21). Therefore, Jesus said before his ascension to heaven, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." (Mt 28:18). Let's read verse 14 together. "He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed."

Interestingly when we look at the interpretation of the vision in verses 15-27, it is not to Jesus that the kingdom is given. Let's read verse 27, "Then the sovereignty, power and

greatness of all the kingdoms under heaven will be handed over to the holy people of the Most High. His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship and obey him.” Jesus who became a son of man, as the representative of the holy people, did not receive the kingdom for himself, but in order that he may share it for ever and ever with his holy people. When Jesus died, God “rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves” (Col 1:13). Jesus’ kingdom is not far off in heaven, nor is it in a particular country exclusively (Luke 17:21). Jesus came to this earth so that his kingdom would be in the midst of those who believe in him. Nero, Hitler, Stalin, Mao all tried to stop the advance of God’s kingdom but all failed, in the midst of darkness, God’s kingdom spread all the more in the hearts of those who believed. Right now China has tried to kill and imprison and outlaw and regulate the kingdom of God but many have said that China is on course to become the world’s most Christian nation in 15 years¹!

This kingdom does not spread with the beastly power of government. Every time in history that church and state have been combined the result has been tragic. This kingdom cannot be spread by force, by laws, or with money. This kingdom does not operate from the place of power, privilege or the majority. This kingdom has always operated from the place of the cross. This kingdom spreads through the love of Jesus. The more dark the world becomes from the beastly powers of this world and the more that Christianity becomes the minority, the more people’s hearts will open to the pure gospel as they see the power and beauty of His Kingdom lived out in the lives of his subjects. In our time, the great beast of racism and injustice has continually been forced into the public eye. It seems like the roots of this system go too deep to be changed and we can feel helpless. Or we can think that our vote can fix everything. But it wasn’t too long ago that one man named Martin Luther King Jr. decided to trust God. He shunned using force to solve the problem and instead chose to teach the truth of God. The environment was hostile the problem insurmountable but he chose to have faith. He chose to follow Jesus and love his enemies and speak the truth in love and live with the hope that God’s kingdom would come on earth as it is in heaven. With this dream in his heart, he went the way of the cross and changed the world in our time. This is how Jesus’ kingdom spreads and beasts are defeated. If there is one lesson we should learn from the book of Daniel and take into our study of Revelation it is that we can change our world with the gospel. And we can persevere and live such good lives among unbelievers that we can move kings and kingdoms. I’m looking ahead to the day when “all nations, and peoples of every language...[and] all rulers will worship and obey [Jesus].” May God be with us and help us to be faithful and inherit this eternal kingdom. Amen.

¹ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/10776023/China-on-course-to-become-worlds-most-Christian-nation-within-15-years.html>