

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)*

Daniel's Vision Of The Four Beasts

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Daniel 7

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Introduction:

Good morning church! I'd like to invite you to open your Bibles this morning to Daniel 7; that's on page 744 in your pew Bibles. Now as I said last week – as of this morning we are leaving the easy stuff behind now. The first 6 chapters of Daniel are all narrative – the last 6 chapters contain a series of visions and dreams. Well to state the obvious, VISIONS are a lot harder to interpret than narratives.

And narratives are a lot harder to interpret than simple statements of law.

“Thou shalt not commit adultery” – can only mean one thing – but “I saw a beast rising out of the sea and it had 4 heads” – alright, let's just admit, that could mean a couple of things – so we want to be cautious and we want to be humble and we want to keep our eye on the main point being made in each passage – that's all I'm saying.

Now, if we're going to make sense of the second half of the Book of Daniel we need to know a little bit about what scholars call “apocalyptic literature” – that's the genre that we're dealing with here. Apocalyptic literature tends to deal in visions, dreams, imagery and symbols. It is VISUAL.

Think of it this way: The visions in Daniel 7-12 are like a series of VIDEOS that Daniel saw that he then attempts to describe to us. So he's seeing a video and texting us a summary – which you are not supposed to do in real life – but that's exactly what is going on here – and that necessitates a two-stage interpretive process.

First, we have to first make sure that we are seeing what Daniel is seeing and then secondly we have to make sure that we are understanding it correctly.

Now if that sounds complicated to you - good! It is complicated and its complicated enough that we need to be cautious and careful with our interpretations. So once again – this calls for humility, particularly with respect to the fine details.

Thankfully, as I said, the main message in each of these visions – and in this one in particular - lie very close to the surface. Nevertheless, given the newness and complexity of the genre, it will make sense for us today to read through this vision slowly, making interpretive and definitional comments as we go, before zooming out in order to make sure that we have seen the BIG PICTURE and received the main warnings contained within the text.

So hear now the Word of the Lord beginning at verse 1:

The Four Beasts

¹ In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon, Daniel saw a dream and visions of his head as he lay in his bed.

Now, let's pause here quickly to get our bearings. I mentioned to you last week that Daniel 6 is the end of the story chronologically speaking. These visions actually occur earlier in Daniel's life than the story told to us in chapter 6. This vision came to Daniel in the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon – so this comes BEFORE the story about the writing on the wall described for us in chapter 5 and that probably explains Daniel's strange attitude toward King Belshazzar - but we're getting ahead of ourselves. We jump back into the story at the end of verse 1. Daniel had a dream and a vision by night:

Then he wrote down the dream and told the sum of the matter.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.

Now, I won’t say too much here in terms of interpretation because the interpretation is given by an angel in verses 17-27. I’ll just point out that obviously this vision parallels to a great extent the dream that Daniel interpreted for Nebuchadnezzar back in chapter 2. Nebuchadnezzar saw a statue that was made of 4 different metals and Daniel told him that the statue represented a succession of kingdoms that would all be ultimately destroyed and supplanted by a kingdom come from heaven. Well here, once again we have four kingdoms – and also a little horn arising out of the 4th kingdom, we’ll come back to that in just a minute.

The Ancient Of Days

In verses 9-12 there is a sudden scene shift. All of the sudden, we aren’t looking at the 4 beasts arising out of the sea of humanity, all of the sudden we are in heaven and we are seeing another story, that immediately, we understand is in fact THE MORE IMPORTANT STORY. We begin to sense that actually THIS STORY is the one that will determine the outcome of the story happening at ground level. This the UBER STORY – the METANARRATIVE - that all other stories must fit into.

We also notice a shift in imagery. Down there in the lower story, the figures are all of BEASTS but up here in the UBER STORY the figures are all of human like characters. Tremper Longman III says helpfully here:

“In essence, we have gone up the chain of being. Evil human kingdoms were described as horrifying hybrid animals; the divine realm is imaged as human beings. The association is perfectly appropriate in a broader biblical view because, after all, Genesis 1:27 tells us that God created men and women in his own image.”¹

Ok, so, we’ve gone up a level. This is the UBER STORY and it is a story about how God’s original plan will in fact come about despite the seeming detour that was caused by human sin. Remember, the FALL effected an INVERSION of the created order. A created thing – an angel masquerading as a serpent – deceived the humans and incited them to reach up for FULL AUTONOMOUS DEITY without reference to their Creator. In reaching up THEY FELL DOWN and UNDER the temporary dominion of the SERPENT – A BEAST. All the kingdoms of this world have been just so many KINGDOMS OF BEASTS. Animal powers, demonic powers, seeking to oppress and suppress the people of God.

But now!

In the UBER STORY we see that pieces have begun to move and the plan is beginning to unfold. Let’s read about that now in verses 9-12:

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.

So what was happening in heaven IMMEDIATELY began to AFFECT what was happening on the earth. The court sat in judgment! Books were opened – and kingdoms on the earth began to shift and fall.

¹ Tremper Longman III, *Daniel* in The NIV Application Commentary, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 186.

The vision continues in verses 13-14:

The Eternal Kingdom

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.

Pause here and zoom in on this scene. This is the UBER SCENE within the UBER NARRATIVE. I saw, one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven.

Now where else in the Bible do you hear that language?

You hear it out of the lips of Jesus at the absolute climax of his encounter with the Jewish authorities during the trial that led to his crucifixion. Mark 14:61-62 says:

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)

Are you hearing that?

The High Priest asks Jesus: Are you the Christ, the Son of God – the Son of the Blessed One? And Jesus says: I AM and more than that, High Priest, I am the Son of Man from Daniel 7 who takes his seat at the right hand of the Ancient of Days and who comes with the clouds of heaven. I am the STONE that smashes every earthly power and that becomes a mountain that fills the whole earth. I am the KING – the HUMAN GOD KING before whom every knee will bow and every tongue confess that I am LORD – I am GOD – I am KING - to the glory of the Father, forever.

That’s who I AM, Jesus says.

And the reaction of the High Priest tells us plainly that he understood the message:

And the high priest tore his garments and said, “What further witnesses do we need?
⁶⁴ You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?” And they all condemned him as deserving death. (Mark 14:63–64 ESV)

Alright – so that’s the scene in heaven. Jesus comes into the heavenly court room, riding on the clouds, sits down at the right hand of POWER and is given DOMINION and GLORY and a KINGDOM, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him and he is told that his kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom which shall never diminish and never be destroyed – PRAISE THE LORD!

That’s what we’re seeing there.

And Daniel, as you might well imagine, is having a hard time dealing with all that he has just seen and heard. We pick up the story at verse 15:

The Future Explained

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.

Alright now get ready. Here comes the BIG IDEA. Just so that there can be no confusion here, an angel gives us the MAIN INTERPRETATION OF THIS VISION in verses 17-18. Here we go. This is what the vision is all about:

¹⁷ ‘These four great beasts are four kings who shall arise out of the earth. ¹⁸ But the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever, forever and ever.’

Boom!

That’s it right there. That’s the main idea. There are a succession of kingdoms and kings coming Daniel – who do not really matter. They will all fall. None of them will last. Because the kingdom has been given to the Son of Man and he will share the reign with all the saints of God Most High.

That's it!

That is the main message – everything else from this point on is detail – so any conflicts that emerge with respect to those details should be held in proper perspective.

Nevertheless, Daniel does have some further questions, and that's ok. We hear about those questions in 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.

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 7:1–28 ESV)

Alright – as I mentioned here is where theological systems diverge.

Not with respect to the main point – but in terms of how we are to interpret the answer that the angel gave to Daniel’s follow up question.

Now, I actually don’t think that this is a good time for us to dig too deeply into this issue. For one thing, we’re almost out of time, but the more important reason is that this isn’t the last time that we will encounter some kind of “antichrist” character in the Book of Daniel. In chapter 7 we have this LITTLE HORN speaking arrogant things and making war on the saints and for a time anyway, prevailing against them. But then we meet him again – or at least something like him, in chapter 8, and then we have Antiochus IV Epiphanes in chapter 11 – who becomes a symbol or type of the antichrist in the New Testament – so it would seem to make sense to hold off until we have read all of those references. We’ll do an excursus type message at the end of this series dealing with what the bible says as a whole about this character that we now refer to as “the antichrist”.

For now, here is all you need to know. Daniel is curious about this fourth kingdom – which conservative scholars generally identify as Rome. This kingdom isn’t like the others - it didn’t look like a lion or a bear or a leopard – it was like no kind of beast that Daniel had ever seen before. It was demonic. It was a killing machine. And out of it came 10 other kings or 10 other kingdoms – scholars debate that point; the language allows for either - and then after the 10 comes another – and he is the worst of the lot! He speaks words against God, he harasses and persecutes the saints, he tries to change the times and the law – and he will have a leash – he will have permission from God to persecute and wear out the saints for a particular length of time.

Now as I said, we’re going to deal with this character – with this pattern – with this person in weeks to come. For now think of it like this – think of Rome as being like one of those Russian dolls. It’s got other dolls inside of it and these little dollies have a particular demonic animus toward the people of God. They keep coming and the last one is the worst one of all.

He blasphemes God.

He persecutes the saints.

He changes the times and the law – but he is brought to a sudden end by the Word and judgment of God.

That's all you need to know for now.

As I said, we'll get into that in greater detail at the end of this series.

But now we need to return to the main idea. We get distracted with that juicy detail don't we? Some of you right now are trying to calculate the number of the beast – take the numerical value of the name Barack Obama, divide that by Adolph Hitler, subtract the name Donald Trump – and STOP IT!

That's not what we're supposed to be doing here. Goodness gracious friends - that was a follow up question! The angel already gave us THE BIG IDEA.

The Big Idea:

So let me bring that back into focus. The big idea here is that all the kingdoms of this world will fall but the kingdom of the Son of Man will rise and endure forever.

That's the main idea – and there is no dispute about that. How could there be any dispute? The angel gave you the interpretation:

'These four great beasts are four kings who shall arise out of the earth. ¹⁸ But the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever, forever and ever.' (Daniel 7:17–18 ESV)

That's what this vision is about!!! 4 Kingdoms that DON'T MATTER and ONE KINGDOM THAT DOES.

It's not rocket science.

It's a pretty straightforward picture and it commends some pretty straight forward thinking. In the time we have left I want to ZOOM OUT and think about some of the obvious implications and warnings associated with this text. The first one I think is this:

Implications And Warnings

1. God's people better prepare themselves for perpetual conflict

These beasts – these Russian dolls – these little horns – they are all just PUPPETS and fronts for our demonic adversary – and he is not happy! He has been dealt a mortal blow. His future is sealed and he is seething with wrath and resentment.

It's not a happy picture.

The Bible says in Revelation 12:

“Woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!” (Revelation 12:12 ESV)

You see, the bible says that Jesus dealt a mortal blow to the devil through his life and death and resurrection. When Jesus died on the cross it was like a SWORD SLASH to the bowels of our ancient foe. The end is sure. But the dying itself, may be greatly protracted.

And as everybody knows, there is nothing more dangerous than a dying foe.

That is our situation according to the Bible.

In a sense we are living in a time that is analogous to the several months between D Day and V Day in World War 2. After the allies landed on the beach in Normandy, the war was over. Nevertheless, there was a great deal of bleeding and dying still to do. Hitler lashed out in desperate fury – he made terrific gambles, as per the Battle of the Bulge – and yet, as any outside observer knew, the war was over. It was just a matter of time before Nazi Germany bled out.

So it is here.

The cross struck a mortal blow.

That was the rock that struck the feet of the statue: the first coming of Jesus Christ! At that moment every demonic power in this universe began to SQUIRM, SQUEEL and EXPIRE.

It's over – though as this text makes clear, there is still some fighting and dying that must be done.

That's what Daniel sees in the vision! He sees the devil lashing out – and making war upon the saints and being given leash to do so for a limited time. But then very quickly – when we shift our perspective back up to the heavenly story, his leash is pulled, his time is spent and he is no more. His dominion is taken away to be consumed and destroyed utterly.

And the Son of Man REIGNS and shares his REIGN with the saints of God Most High.

So – WAR NOW – GLORY LATER – that is the obvious implication and warning within this vision.

Secondly, the vision that we've just seen suggests to us particular investments and priorities.

2. God's people better invest in the right things

Let me put it this way – if all the kingdoms of this world are going to crumble, fall and be forgotten then OBVIOUSLY that implies, for example, a certain level of disinterest in human politics – does it not? I mentioned that this vision happened BEFORE the story we read two weeks ago about the writing on the wall. In that story – Daniel certainly did seem DISINTERESTED in the political process. The King offered him the third highest OFFICE IN THE LAND – do you remember that?

INFLUENCE!!!!

POSITION!!!!

A chance to make a difference!!!!

All the stuff we are after as God's people in this world – right?

And what did Daniel say?

“Let your gifts be for yourself, and give your rewards to another.” (Daniel 5:17 ESV)

Stuff it – right? That's what he said. “You're going to make me First Mate on the Good Ship Titanic? Yeah, thanks but no thanks!”

All of these kingdoms are going down – so what sense is there in our being obsessed with the political process?

Now – should we vote?

Of course!!

Should we make our voices known on the issues of the day?

Of course.

Should some of us run for political office?

Of course – we are supposed to be salt and light so we want to be everywhere representing and proclaiming Jesus Christ – yes!!

But – my point is that we as God's people **MUST UNDERSTAND** that ultimate solutions are never going to come through the political process. We will not **VOTE** or **LEGISLATE OUR WAY** into the Kingdom of God – that's what I'm saying. A person **OBSSESSED** with politics – has obviously **NOT** properly understood this vision.

These earthly kingdoms will ALL FALL AND FADE AWAY – therefore, what did grandma used to say?

*Only one life, twill soon be past,
Only what's done for Christ will last.²*

If this vision means what we think it means, then it makes sense to invest heavily and primarily in the kingdom that is coming.

And then finally, this vision of Daniel commends to us a certain clarity and urgency.

3. God's people better make it clear where they stand

The last earthly kingdom – the last opposing kinglet – comes to a sudden and shocking end in this story. In verse 25 he has a length of leash with which to harass and persecute the saints – and then suddenly in verse 26:

the court shall sit in judgment, and his dominion shall be taken away, to be consumed and destroyed to the end. (Daniel 7:26 ESV)

No great battle.

No protracted struggle.

Just SUDDEN and FINAL JUDGMENT.

You know, the more I read the Bible – the more I study for preaching and the podcast and everything else - the more it seems to me as though history is really just a series of plagues, earthquakes, troubles and upheavals designed to shake all mankind into one of two categories: the people of the Lamb and the people of the Beast.

² Poem by C.T. Studd. <https://paulhockley.com/2016/05/24/quote-only-one-life-twill-soon-be-past-poem-by-c-t-studd/>

The Book of Exodus was that pattern in miniature: Plague, upheaval, earthquake, FIRE! All designed to chase people under the blood of the Lamb.

Daniel's vision reflects that same pattern played out over the entire course of human history.

PLAGUE!!

PERSECUTION!

EARTHQUAKE!!

UPHEAVAL!

Followed by sudden judgment!

And just like that game you played as a kid – when the music stops it's super important that you are sitting in the right chair! It's super important that you're trusting in the right things!!! It's super important that you have identified with the people of God and the coming Kingdom of Jesus Christ. Because everything else will fall and fade. But the mountain of the House of the Lord will RISE and be established forever.

That's the vision – that's the future and this is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God! Let's pray together.