

Daniel 7:9–12

Introduction

Two weeks ago, we saw a very scary picture: The four winds of heaven were stirring up the great sea (Dan. 7:2). Remember that the sea, in this imagery, is something evil; it's a powerful force that threatens to swallow up God's new creation. We can imagine the oceans raging and then breaking through the boundaries that God has set and swallowing up all the dry lands so that all is once again formless and void as it was in the beginning before God spoke. Now the reason this matters to us is because *we are* God's new creation, and so we see that the imagery of the four winds of heaven stirring up the great sea represents a very real threat to us. This imagery, in itself, is something that ought to instill in us a very real fear. What strength or power do we have to resist all the forces of the sea unleashed against us?

And so we fortify ourselves with the reminder that our God is sovereign over the sea. We fortify ourselves with the reminder that the God who goes forth to battle against the cosmic sea in redemption is still the same God who formed the sea in creation and who made Leviathan, the great sea monster, to play in it. We fortify ourselves by praying with the psalmist:

□ Psalm 93:3–4 — The floods have lifted up, O LORD, the floods have lifted up their voice; the floods lift up their roaring. Mightier than the thunders of many waters, mightier than the waves of the sea, the LORD on high is mighty!

We need to fortify ourselves because the next thing Daniel saw was four great beasts that came up out of the sea. All the sinister evil represented by the sea is now embodied, as it were, in these four great cosmic beasts that arise from *out of* the sea. And once again, what we're meant to see—and even to feel—is that there are terrifyingly evil and wicked forces here against which we have no power at all – against which we are totally and completely helpless. As with the sea from which they came, so also with these beasts: their single purpose is to devour and to destroy God's new creation. And yet at first we see encouraging reminders that these beasts are not sovereign. The first beast like a lion has its wings plucked off, is made to stand on two feet like a man, and is given the mind of a man. It's still a beast and its origin is still the sea, but there is one greater than the beast who restrains the beast and even uses the beast for His own good and wise purposes. And yet as the vision unfolds before our eyes each successive beast is described with increasingly terrifying language and depicted as less and less "restrained" by God. The second beast like a bear with three ribs between its teeth is "*told*," "Arise, devour much flesh." The third beast like a leopard with four wings and four heads is "*given*" dominion. And when we finally come to the fourth beast it appears to have no restraints placed upon it at all. There's no "it was allowed" or even "it was told" or "it was given." Instead, we see a beast "terrifying" and "dreadful" and "exceedingly strong." We see a beast with great iron teeth devouring and breaking in pieces and stamping what's left with its feet. We see ten horns symbolizing a power that's apparently complete and absolute. And perhaps most terrifying of all, we see in the end another, little horn, growing up out of the head of this beast in the place of three original horns. In this little horn we see eyes like the eyes of a man, and a mouth speaking boastful and arrogant

words against God. In this little horn we no longer see any of the restraining influence of God but the apparently unrestrained evil of man satanically inspired.

Taken all together, these four beasts stand behind and ultimately represent the whole course of human history until the end. The point of “apocalyptic” is to help us see that back of the human events in this world are real cosmic and spiritual powers that are not visible to us. From our human vantage point and depending on when and where we’re living in history, this might not be how *we* would think to describe the whole course of human history. And yet when we come to see reality as God has revealed it, no matter how bad things ever get for us and for God’s people in this world, we won’t ever be surprised (cf. 1 Pet. 4:12). Instead, we’ll be prepared and fortified and encouraged to trust our sovereign God and to persevere to the end in faith.

Sometimes it’s difficult to discern any of the restraining activity of God. Sometimes it seems that the beast *is* sovereign and that the raging sea *will* swallow up God’s new creation. We can feel this ourselves as we watch with Daniel and see what Daniel sees. And yet Daniel’s vision doesn’t end with the fourth beast; it doesn’t end with that little horn having eyes like the eyes of a man and a mouth speaking great things. Instead, it’s at just this point—when it might seem to all outward, human appearances that evil has prevailed and that all is lost—it’s at just this point that we most need to keep on looking with Daniel and seeing what Daniel sees.

I. Daniel 7:9a — As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat;

Whereas just a moment ago everything seemed completely out of control, whereas just a moment ago the raging sea seemed ready to swallow up God’s new creation, whereas just a moment ago it seemed that the whole world was in upheaval, now suddenly our eyes are captivated by this picture of the utmost stability and calm. Daniel says, “*As I looked.*” In other words: “*As I was looking* at all these things—at the raging sea and at the four beasts that came up out of the sea, and at the little horn with eyes like the eyes of a man and a mouth speaking great things—*as I was looking at all these things* thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat...” And so the first thing that strikes us is that here’s something (or Someone) wholly unaffected—untouched—by all the tumult and upheaval of the last eight verses. In the midst of all the raging of the sea, here’s a place where all is “solid,” a place that’s established firm and immovable, a place that can’t be touched no matter how high the breakers of the sea should ever mount. And so it’s as we contemplate this part of the vision, it’s as we meditate on this scene, that we ourselves can find peace, and hope, and even great joy as we face the tumult and the upheaval that’s all around us in this world.

But, of course, what we really see in this vision is not a place, but a Person – one that Daniel describes as “the Ancient of Days.” Why doesn’t Daniel say that God (*Elohim*) took His seat or that the Lord (*Yahweh*) took His seat? Why does he tell us here—the only one out of all the biblical authors—that the *Ancient of Days* took His seat? Because what we’re meant to see in this title is that above all the change and flux and upheaval and going from bad to worse in this world, there is One who has been, and is, always the same. While the beasts all came up from out of the sea, here is One who has not come up from out of anywhere, but who has always been, and therefore always will be. While even the sea had a beginning, this one who alone can be called the Ancient of Days already was *before* the sea and therefore will still be after the sea is

no more. If He is the Ancient of Days, then He is as the psalmist says, “from everlasting to everlasting.” And the point of these things is not just to make our minds whirl but rather to assure us that there is one who is an everlasting rock – a constant, unchanging fortress and refuge to all those who will cling to Him in humble and simple faith.

□ Psalm 90:1–2 (cf. 102:25–28; Job 36:26; Isa. 41:4) — Lord, you have been *our dwelling place* in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

“*As I was looking* at all these things thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat...” Was the Ancient of Days not always sitting enthroned and ruling over the world? Obviously He was, or He wouldn’t be the Ancient of Days! The psalmist writes:

□ Psalm 93:2 (cf. 9:7; 29:10; 45:6; 55:19; 102:12) — Your throne is established from of old; you are from everlasting.

The only reason the Ancient of Days can take His seat now is *because* He has always been the sovereign King of kings and Lord of lords. And yet there’s still this very real sense in which the Ancient of Days has not yet taken His seat – and this should be a great comfort to us. Why does the sea still rage? Why is the beast still speaking great things and devouring and breaking in pieces and stamping what is left with its feet? Only because the thrones have not yet been placed and the Ancient of Days has not yet taken His seat; only because that final day of judgment has not yet come. And yet here in this vision what we’re given is this amazing privilege of seeing that day with Daniel as though it *had* already come. “As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat...”

II. Daniel 7:9b — ...his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool;

Remember that this is “apocalyptic,” and so while the imagery is meant to communicate literal realities and truth, it’s not meant to be taken literally. God doesn’t literally wear white clothing or literally have white hair. But if that’s the case, can you see how we were justified in asking *why* He’s described in this way? This isn’t a literal physical reality; it’s a symbolic picture. And so what is it that we’re really meant to “*see*” here? What is the meaning of His “clothing” being white as snow and the “hair of his head” like pure wool?

In the New Testament, whiteness is associated with radiance and glory. Matthew says of the angel who appeared to the women at the empty tomb:

□ Matthew 28:3 — His appearance was *like lightning*, and his clothing *white as snow*.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all describe the appearance of Jesus at His transfiguration in similar ways:

□ Matthew 17:2 — His clothes became *white as light*.

- Mark 9:3 — His clothes became *radiant, intensely white*, as no one on earth could bleach them.
- Luke 9:29 — His clothing became *dazzling white*.

Of course, we know today that “white” is the “color” we see when an object reflects back to us *all* of the different visible wavelengths of light. And so there’s a sense in which we could say that light is itself white. I think, then, that what we’re meant to imagine here is not hair that’s white because the light shines on it and reveals it to be white, but rather hair that’s “white” because of its own intrinsic radiance and brilliance and glory. The “clothing” in this vision of the Ancient of Days is not white because the light is shining upon it and revealing it to be white, but rather because it is, in itself, “white as light.” And it’s this dazzling, and radiant, and intense “whiteness” of God’s glory that symbolizes for us His incomprehensible purity. We must not think of God’s purity as only the absence of any moral defect or blemish. God’s purity is first of all the sum total of all His infinite perfections – of every different wavelength of light perfectly balanced and blended together in a blinding glory of “white.” This is God’s purity. God’s purity is not just the absence of any darkness in Him, but rather the reality that He is, in Himself and by His very nature, light. “God,” the apostle John says, “*is light*” and so standing before this “Ancient of Days” whose clothing is white as snow and the hair of whose head is [white] like pure wool [cf. Rev. 1:14] everything is brought into the light and exposed and laid bare (cf. Rev. 20:11-12). Here, then, is the only righteous Judge whose judgments are just and true (cf. Rev. 16:7; 19:2). Here is the one who sees all and knows all.

But having said all this, the purity of God does still mean that there is no moral defect or blemish in Him and therefore that He can never look with favor upon anything that is evil or perverse or morally unclean. The Apostle John writes:

- 1 John 1:5 — God is light, *and in him is no darkness at all*.

And the prophet Habakkuk speaks of God as the one who is “of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong” (Hab. 1:13). On the one hand, God is sovereign over evil – over the sea and over the four beasts that arise from out of the sea. We remember the language in the first eight verses: “it was lifted up... [it was] made to stand... the mind of a man was given to it... it was told, ‘Arise, devour much flesh,’ dominion was given to it.” On the one hand, God is sovereign over evil, and this is a source of unspeakable comfort to us. On the other hand, God is of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong, and this, too, is a source of unspeakable comfort to us. In Daniel’s vision, we see the Ancient of Days clothed in garments white as snow with the hair of his head like pure wool and we know that here is one who must abhor and loathe and hate the evil of these beasts that He is sovereign over. He hates the evil of these beasts with a perfect hatred, and so here is a powerful guarantee for us that the final day of judgment *will* come. It will come because it *must* come – because of the whiteness and glory of God’s purity. And so we go on to read:

III. Daniel 7:9c–10a — ...his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and came out from before him;

Once again, these are not literal, physical realities. This is a symbolic picture that's intended to communicate something very true – we could even say something literally true. So what is the meaning of God's throne being fiery flames, its wheels burning fire, and a stream of fire issuing and coming out from before him? One commentator writes: "He who descended on Mount Sinai in fire and spoke to his people from the midst of that fire still consumes in the white heat of his purity everything that is unworthy of himself" (Bruce on Heb. 12:29). In other words, this consuming fire is just the natural and necessary outworking of God's glorious purity. How could a God this pure not be at the same time a consuming fire? How could a God who is light not be at the same time a devouring flame (cf. Isa. 10:16-17)? And so when God reveals Himself to Israel at Sinai we read:

- Exodus 19:18; 24:17 — Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire... The appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain.

Looking back on that day, Moses reminded the Israelites:

- Deuteronomy 4:11 — You came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, while the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven.

And then Moses concluded:

- Deuteronomy 4:24 — The LORD your God is a consuming fire.

"He who descended on Mount Sinai in fire and spoke to his people from the midst of that fire still consumes in the white heat of his purity everything that is unworthy of himself." On the one hand, this should cause us to worship God with reverence and awe – because we see how infinite are His mercies to us in Christ (Heb. 12:28-29). On the other hand, this should cause us to rest *now*—in the *present*—in the certainty of that *future, final* judgment. "His throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and came out from before him."

- Isaiah 33:14 — The sinners in Zion are afraid; trembling has seized the godless: "Who among us can dwell with the consuming fire? Who among us can dwell with everlasting burnings?"
- Isaiah 66:15–16 (cf. 10:16-17; 29:5-6; 30:27, 30, 33; 31:9; Ezek. 22:20-21; Ps. 18:8; 21:9; 50:3; 97:3; Lev. 10:2; Num. 16:35; Deut. 9:3) — Behold, the LORD will come in fire, and his chariots like the whirlwind, to render his anger in fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. For by fire will the LORD enter into judgment, and by his sword, with all flesh.

"His throne was fiery flames; its *wheels* were burning fire." The imagery here is of chariot wheels (cf. Isa. 5:28; Jer. 47:3) and therefore of a chariot throne. On the one hand we can picture God's throne fixed and established and immovable – unassailable. On the other hand, it would be just as accurate to picture God's throne as a chariot on which He rides through the heavens. "Behold, the LORD will come in fire, and his chariots like the whirlwind" (Isa. 66:15). The prophet Ezekiel saw a vision of four cherubim with a wheel beside each one – a wheel within a

wheel. Over the heads and the outstretched wings of the cherubim there was an expanse and above the expanse there was the likeness of a throne (cf. Ezek. 1:15-26; 10:9-19; 11:22). So here also in Ezekiel we see a picture of God riding on His chariot throne.

So what do these wheels symbolize? What message do they communicate to us? They're a reminder, here in Daniel, that God is not distant and far off, but a God who rides through the deserts (as He did with Israel in their wilderness wanderings) and who rides through the heavens and who ultimately comes in salvation and in judgment.

- Psalm 68:4 — Sing to God, sing praises to his name; lift up a song to him who rides through the deserts; his name is the LORD; exult before him!
- Psalm 68:32–33 — O kingdoms of the earth, sing to God; sing praises to the Lord, to him who rides in the heavens, the ancient heavens.
- Deuteronomy 33:26–27 (cf. Ps. 104:3) — There is none like God, O Jeshurun, who rides through the heavens to your help, through the skies in his majesty. The eternal God is your dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms.
- Psalm 18:4–10 — In my distress I called upon the LORD; to my God I cried for help. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry to him reached his ears. Then the earth reeled and rocked; the foundations also of the mountains trembled and quaked, because he was angry. Smoke went up from his nostrils, and devouring fire from his mouth; glowing coals flamed forth from him. He bowed the heavens and came down; thick darkness was under his feet. He rode on a cherub and flew; he came swiftly on the wings of the wind.

What do the wheels in Daniel's vision symbolize? What message do they communicate to us? God is not a God who is distant and far off. His chariot throne is a reminder that He will finally *come* – that He will finally, decisively intervene in the affairs of men and of nations in salvation and in judgment. What a wonderful thing it is, then, to have this picture of the Ancient of Days seated on His chariot throne vividly etched in our hearts and minds.

“His throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and came out from before him...”

IV. Daniel 7:10b — ...a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him;

A thousand thousands equals *one* million whereas ten thousand times ten thousand equals *one hundred* million. So the point of putting these two expressions together, one after the other, is to help us visualize what we really can't even imagine – the innumerable, uncountable hosts of angels that stand before the Ancient of Days always ready to do His will (cf. Ps. 103:20). In the New Testament, we see especially that the angels are those who enforce and who carry out the righteous judgments of God. So Jesus spoke of the day when He would “come... in the glory of His Father *with the holy angels*” (Mk. 8:38). Paul speaks of the day when “the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven *with his mighty angels*” (2 Thess. 1:7). And Jude writes:

- Jude 14 — Behold, the Lord comes *with ten thousands of his holy ones*.

When the Ancient of Days speaks, all the hosts of heaven act. What the Ancient of Days decrees, all the innumerable armies of heaven carry out and accomplish – authorized and empowered by His sovereign Word. And so we come to the last words of verse ten and the end of this part of Daniel’s vision:

V. Daniel 7:10c — ...the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened.

Once again, we’re not to imagine that there *are* literal books any more than we’re to imagine that God literally has white hair or wears white clothing or that His throne is literally fire or that there are literal wheels on His throne or that there are literally one hundred and one million angels standing before Him. So then, why do we have the imagery of books being opened? What truth is this meant to communicate to us?

On the one hand, inscribed in these books is the true and infallible record of all of history (cf. Rev. 20:11-12; Exod. 32:32-33; Dan. 12:1; Mal. 3:16). On the other hand, inscribed in these books is the true and infallible record of all God’s righteous decrees and judgments unto the very end (cf. Jer. 25:13; 30:2; 51:60; Ezek. 2:9-10; Dan. 10:21; Ps. 139:16). We can read, as an example, verses like these:

- Exodus 17:14 — The LORD said to Moses, “Write this as a memorial in a book and recite it in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.”
- Isaiah 30:8 — And now, go, write it before them on a tablet and inscribe it in a book, that it may be for the time to come as a witness forever.
- Isaiah 34:16 — Seek and read from the book of the LORD: Not one of these shall be missing... For the mouth of the LORD has commanded.

As we watch with Daniel, then, and see the books being opened, we’re comforted to know that *all will* be put to rights – that *nothing* will be missed; *nothing* will be left undone.

And then, just when we might have most expected the scene to continue, just when the books have been opened, our attention is “distracted” momentarily. Remember that fourth beast with the little horn from verse eight—the one with eyes like the eyes of a man and a mouth speaking great things? Well, that little horn is still talking.

VI. Daniel 7:11–12 — 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. As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion [had been¹] taken away, [though] their lives were prolonged for a season and a time.

If ever there was an anticlimax, isn't this it? And yet as Sinclair Ferguson points out, that's exactly what it's intended to be. Did we expect a bigger struggle? A more nail-biting, edge of your seat contest? After all that we've just seen, how could there be such a thing? It's true that if the beast should finally be left to itself, it would mean the end of the world – it would mean the end of God's new creation – of that wonderful saving work that He has begun in us. There should be no doubt in our minds about the intentions of the beast, or of that satanic power that stands behind the beast in the raging of the sea. In ourselves, we tremble and faint away with fear. These are terrifyingly evil and wicked forces against which we have no power at all – against which we are totally and completely helpless. But then we keep watching with Daniel until our eyes are captivated by this picture of true sovereignty – of perfect stability and calm. In the midst of all the raging of the sea, here's a place where all is “solid,” a place that's established firm and immovable, a place that cannot be touched no matter how high the breakers of the sea should ever mount. And so it's as we contemplate this part of the vision, it's as we meditate on this scene, that we find an ever constant source of peace, and hope, and even great joy as we face the tumult and the upheaval that's all around us in this world.

In the end—no matter how terrifying the raging sea might be, or the beasts that arise from out of the sea—in the end, the Ancient of Days will take His seat. His clothing is white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; His throne is fiery flames; its wheels burning fire. A stream of fire issues and comes out from before him; a thousand thousands serve him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stand before him; and the court will sit in judgment, and the books will be opened. And then it will all be over. The beast will be killed, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire. And we will sing, and dance, and exult, and rejoice together. The Apostle John writes in Revelation chapter fourteen:

- Revelation 19:1–4 — After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, crying out, “Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just; for he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality, and has avenged on her the blood of his servants.” Once more they cried out, “Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up forever and ever.” And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who was seated on the throne, saying, “Amen. Hallelujah!”

¹ Steinmann justifies this translation based on the Hebrew grammar, but I would suggest that this need be nothing more than the proper “*interpretation*” of the Hebrew based on the *context*. Since nothing was said originally about the fate of the first three beasts, Daniel returns now to this subject and says that while they were not initially destroyed completely, they all did meet their ultimate demise at the same time as the fourth beast. The whole tenor of this passage forbids us to believe that while the fourth beast was judged, the first three beasts escaped this judgment. This interpretation also fits with chapter two. There, we see that the stone doesn't only crush the feet of iron mixed with clay, but the entire image (all four kingdoms together; Dan. 2:34-35, 45).