

Daniel 7:1-8

Introduction

This morning, we come to the “hinge” upon which the entire book of Daniel turns. We see this not just from the way the book is put together and structured, but also from just reading the content of the chapter itself. And yet even as we come to this pivotal chapter, the type of writing (the genre of literature) changes from straightforward “comfortable” historical narrative to “uncomfortable” apocalyptic. When we hear the word “apocalyptic” we think of the apocalypse – the end of the world. That’s true as far as it goes, but when some people think of the end of the world all they think of is doom, and gloom, and even extinction. As Christians, our understanding of the end of the world is very, *very* different – or at least it should be. “Apocalyptic” is not intended to scare us and fill us with fear – though we’ll see that there are parts of apocalyptic that are certainly “scary” and “fearful.” The real point is exactly the opposite. The real point of apocalyptic is to encourage all of God’s faithful and suffering people, to strengthen them in steadfast perseverance, and to fill them with hope and joy.

One of the things we’re about to see is that apocalyptic is rich with symbolic and metaphorical language. At first we might not like this because we feel like we have to do all the hard work of translating this vague and obscure apocalyptic language into “straightforward” historical narrative – the way some of us might wish it had been written in the first place (“This is that and that’s this”). But the *main point* of apocalyptic is *not* to give us a “historical narrative” of the past, or the present, or the future. If it was, it wouldn’t be apocalyptic, it would be historical narrative! So one commentator cautions us against “domesticating” this profound literature” (Greidanus; quoting Block). Even when we’re “interpreting” we have to be careful to let “apocalyptic” remain “apocalyptic.” We have to come to appreciate *why* God purposefully chose to communicate these truths to us using the medium of apocalyptic language. So my prayer is that God would help us to feel the true “undomesticated” power of this apocalyptic literature and of the truths that it’s so perfectly suited to communicate to us.

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

The events of the last chapter (chapter six) took place after Belshazzar had already been killed and Darius had already received the kingdom (5:30-6:1). The vision of chapter seven, however, was given to Daniel in the first year of Belshazzar. Chronologically, this chapter is “out of order.” But as we’ve already seen, in terms of the structure (or the flow) and the theme of the book this chapter is exactly where Daniel wants it to be.

II. Daniel 7:2 — Daniel declared, “I saw in my vision by night, and behold, the four winds of heaven were stirring up the great sea.”

The first step, here, is to actually see what Daniel’s seeing. Remember, no one’s talking to Daniel; strictly speaking he’s not being told anything. He’s just seeing something. And now he’s

describing for us what he saw so that we can *see* it with him. “*Behold*, the four winds of heaven were stirring up the great sea.”

The “four winds of heaven” refers to the four compass points of the earth (much like the language of the “four corners of the earth”) and so right away we feel that there’s a universal, cosmic scale to this. This isn’t just the Mediterranean “great” Sea, this is a Cosmic “great” Sea – far bigger and far more terrible than any one of our four terrestrial oceans. Can you picture this great, “mythic” sea being stirred up by all four of the winds of heaven blowing at once? Can you picture a boiling cauldron of total chaos?

What’s the background for this powerful imagery? One of the most famous Babylonian creation stories is told in terms of a conflict between Marduk the creator god and Tiamat the god of the sea.

“Marduk destroys Tiamat, the Sea, and from her body creates the universe as we know it (including humankind). Nonetheless, somehow the sea continues to threaten to abolish the creation, so that Marduk must set up boundaries and guards to keep the world from reverting to its former formless state. In other words, the sea is a force ranged against God and creation in Mesopotamian theology” (Longman).

The Canaanites had a similar story, but their gods were Baal and Yam (*yam* also means “sea”). In the Canaanite myth, Baal had to conquer the sea in order to become the chief among the gods. So how did the Babylonians and the Canaanites both come by this same mythology of the “sea”? I believe it’s because of the common tradition of the true creation story which was twisted and perverted through unbelief and idolatry. What do we read about in the very first verses of Genesis?

□ Genesis 1:1–2 — In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

In the beginning there was only water and darkness and all was formless and void. This was obviously no place for man to live – or for many of the creatures that God was about to create. And yet the deep was not in any way an “enemy” that God had to conquer in order to prove His supremacy as the Creator God. Notice that “the Spirit of God was hovering *over* the face of the waters.” There is only *one* God in Genesis one, and He is the God who speaks these words:

□ Genesis 1:9–10 — “Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.

It’s true that Genesis pictures God’s work of creation as bringing shape and order out of that which was originally formless and void, but there was no battle here – no mortal conflict between Yahweh and the cosmic forces of the sea. God simply spoke, and it was so, and He saw that it was good. In many pagan myths the sea is even personified by the great Sea Monster that

swims in it. It's this Sea Monster that must be defeated—or at least held in check—by the gods. But this isn't at all the picture that we see in Genesis chapter one:

- Genesis 1:20–21 — And God said, “Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens.” So God created the great sea creatures and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.

The psalmist writes:

- Psalm 104:24–26 — O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom have you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. Here is the sea, great and wide, which teems with creatures innumerable, living things both small and great. There go the ships, and Leviathan, which you formed to play in it.

When it comes to creation, there wasn't even the hint of any conflict or battle between God and the malevolent, chaotic forces of the sea. What we learn from the Biblical account of creation is that there is only one true God who is absolutely, wholly sovereign over all that He has made. In the biblical account of creation, the “great sea” is just a part of God's creation and so “very good.”

And yet when it comes to our salvation from sin and death (which is pictured in the Bible as a *new creation*), God *does* go forth to battle. In the story of our redemption, we see that there *is* a malevolent, evil power arrayed against God – and so also against us. And it's this power that God must finally destroy in order to accomplish His saving purposes for us and in order to finish His *new creation*. So it's in this context of redemption and the new creation that the Bible “borrows,” as it were, from the mythic imagery of the hostile, malevolent sea arrayed against God (and against His people). Moses had already described Israel's passing through the midst of the Red Sea with language that was meant to evoke images of a new creation (see messages on Exodus 14 & 15). But then many years after Moses, the biblical writers would look back on this redemptive event and describe it using the “mythological” language of God doing battle with the sea.

- Psalm 74:12–14 — Yet God my King is from of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth. You divided the sea by your might; you broke the heads of the sea monsters on the waters. You crushed the heads of Leviathan; you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.
- Habakkuk 3:13, 15 — You went out for the salvation of your people, for the salvation of your anointed. You crushed the head of the house of the wicked... You trampled the sea with your horses, the surging of mighty waters.

The biblical writers are borrowing the mythical *language* and *imagery* of their day without ever coming close to adopting the pagan *worldview* of their day. In the pagan myths there are multiple gods fighting among themselves for supremacy, but even when the Bible adopts the language and imagery of these pagan myths there's still only one true and living God who brooks no rival.

- Psalm 89:9–11 — You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them. You crushed Rahab like a carcass; you scattered your enemies with your mighty arm. The heavens are yours; the earth also is yours; the world and all that is in it, you have founded them.

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 to play in it. In other words, even though the Bible borrows the language of pagan myth, what we ultimately end up with is a polemic *against* the pagan worldview.

We know that God’s redemption of the carnal seed of Abraham from Egypt was just a shadow and a type of the far greater salvation of the spiritual seed of Abraham that God would accomplish sometime in the future. So the prophet Isaiah looked for a day when God would once more go forth to battle against the sea.

- Isaiah 51:9–10 — Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the LORD; awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago. Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon? Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep, who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to pass over?
- Isaiah 27:1 — In that day the LORD with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will slay the dragon that is in the sea.

So now, with all of this background in mind, what is the impression left on us when we *see* these things with Daniel as if in real life: “I saw in my vision by night, and behold, the four winds of heaven were stirring up the great sea.” *In ourselves*, we begin to tremble with fear – with a terrifying, ominous foreboding of what’s to come. Certainly, the great cosmic sea being whipped up into a boiling cauldron by the four winds of heaven (as scary as that is by itself) is only the sign and the precursor of something about to happen. And yet what strength or power do we have to resist all the malevolent forces of the cosmic 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 to play in it.

- 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!

Brothers and sisters, are we fortified? Are we ready to see what Daniel saw? Daniel declared, “I saw in my vision by night, and behold, the four winds of heaven were stirring up the great sea.”

III. Daniel 7:3 — And four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another.

If ever there was a passage in the Bible too terrifying to read to our children, this one would be it. Notice that just as there were “four winds” from the four corners of the earth so now there are “four great beasts.” As we’ve already seen in chapter two, the number “four” can function (along with seven and ten) as a symbolic number of fullness or completeness. In other words, taken all together these four great beasts symbolize for us the full incarnation of all the malevolent power and might 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. Whatever the “interpretation” of these things might be, we must always be careful to see that interpretation in the full light of this apocalyptic and cosmic imagery. In fact, there’s a sense in which the most basic and fundamental meaning of these verses is not to be found in the interpretation, but rather in the power of this imagery—untamed and undomesticated, taken just as it is.

This malevolent, cosmic sea has become *incarnate* (it’s been embodied) in what *form*?—Daniel says in the form of four beasts. The point here seems to be the “beastliness” of these creatures as opposed to their “humanity.” Remember what the angel decreed concerning Nebuchadnezzar:

□ Daniel 4:16 — Let his mind be changed from a man’s, and let a beast’s mind be given to him.

The Psalmist writes:

□ Psalm 73:22 — I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you.

These four great beasts obviously aren’t like the “dumb” beasts and creatures of instinct that God made and called good in the beginning (cf. Gen. 1:24-25). These are thinking, rational creatures that have purpose and intent much like human beings (because they’ve arisen from out of the sea), and yet their purpose and intent is of such an evil and perverse and twisted nature that they’re pictured not as human beings but as beasts – and as we’re about to see as even worse than beasts. As we continue watching with Daniel, what do we see?

IV. Daniel 7:4a — The first [beast] was like a lion and had eagles’ wings.

Notice first of all that this beast isn’t actually a lion, but only *like* a lion. And notice, too, that it’s a mutant creature – it’s a lion-like creature with eagles’ wings. That’s not natural. There’s no parallel for this anywhere in God’s good creation. We read in Leviticus, in Israel’s law:

□ Leviticus 19:19 — You shall keep my statutes. You shall not let your cattle breed with a different kind. You shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed, nor shall you wear a garment of cloth made of two kinds of material.

We read in Genesis that God created “every winged bird *according to its kind*” on the *fifth day* and God saw that it was good (Gen. 1:21); and then on the *sixth day* God created “all the beasts of the earth *according to their kinds*” and God saw that it was good (Gen. 1:25). But what do we have here? This is a mutant hybrid; something that’s not a part of God’s good created order but rather a perverse distortion of it and therefore a powerful threat and enemy to it. Can you see

how natural it is that we should see a monstrosity like this arising from *out of* the raging, malevolent *sea*? And brothers and sisters, are you seeing 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? Is this the end of the world? Are we all to be devoured by these four beasts that arise from out of the sea? Do we dare to keep watching with Daniel?

V. Daniel 7:4b — 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.

Before we ever try “interpreting” this (which we won’t do this morning), we need to ask ourselves what the imagery itself is telling us. In other words, even without any “historical interpretation,” the apocalyptic imagery is already communicating something very true and very powerful to us.

Taken all together the plucking off of the wings, the being made to stand on two feet like a man, and the mind of a man being given to the beast represent a sort of “humanizing” of the beast. The beast does not actually *become* human. The beast is still a beast and its source and origin is still the raging sea. That’s where it came from and nothing will ever change that fact. But what we’re finally seeing here is that this beast is not sovereign. It’s not free to run riot according to its own will. There is one greater than the beast who restrains the beast and even uses the beast for His own good and wise purposes. That’s an amazing thing, isn’t it – that this terrifying beast that came up out of the even more terrifying sea should be wholly under the sovereign control of God? Notice all of these wonderful, comforting passives: “were plucked off... was lifted up... was given to it.” The beast is not sovereign, God is. “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!”

And yet for all this, the beast is still the beast and *we* are still helpless and powerless to stand before it. 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. Let there be no doubt about the intentions of the beast, or of that satanic power that stands behind the beast in the terrifying raging of the sea. But now we continue to *watch* and to *see* with Daniel:

VI. Daniel 7:5 — 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.”

What we have to remember is that Daniel sees this second beast also emerging from out of the sea. And what he sees this time—what *we* see—is not actually a bear, but something like a bear. What we see is a monstrosity of a creature that’s raised up higher on one side than on the other. What we see is a bloodthirsty creature that tears and devours – a beast with three ribs in its mouth between its teeth. There’s no humanizing of this second beast. It’s never made to stand on two feet like a man or given the mind of a man. But does this mean that God isn’t exercising any restraining power over this beast? For that matter, we never saw the first beast like a lion with any ribs between its teeth, but does that mean that the first beast never devoured anything? There’s a sense in which what’s said of one beast could to some extent also be said of all the

others, and yet there's also this unsettling reality that each successive beast is being described with increasingly terrifying language and depicted as less and less "restrained" by God. So it's this second beast that was actually "told": "Arise, devour much flesh." On the one hand, it's a gruesome and a horrifying picture. On the other hand, we see again that the beast is *not* sovereign – God is. As one that arose out of the sea, we know that what the beast seeks to devour and destroy is *God's* new creation, and yet it's only to the extent that *God* commands and allows it that this beast can devour anything at all. On the one hand, here is a great mystery; and yet it's in this mystery that we find infinite comfort.

VII. Daniel 7:6 — 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.

Is there anything more monstrous and unnatural than a beast with multiple heads? And is there anything more terrifying than to know that this four-winged, four-headed monster has "dominion" upon the earth? And yet there is still this – dominion "was *given* to it." If this is the third beast, what will the fourth and final beast be? "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!" Are we fortified? Are we ready to see with Daniel the fourth beast that arises from out of the sea?

VIII. Daniel 7:7–8 — 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. 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.

This fourth and final beast can't be compared with a lion, or a bear, or a leopard, or with any kind of beast that we've ever seen. Out of all four of the beasts, this is the only beast that appears to have no restraints upon it at all. There's no "it was given" or "it was allowed" or even "it was told." 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. When the first beast was made to stand on two feet *like* a man and was given the mind of a man we were meant to see in this "humanizing" of the beast the restraining power of God. But when this fourth beast grows a horn in which we see *eyes* like the eyes of a *man*, and a *mouth* speaking boastful and arrogant words against God we see not the restraining influence of God but the apparently unrestrained hubris of man satanically inspired.

Conclusion

On the one hand, these beasts are all apocalyptic cosmic beasts that arise out of the cosmic sea. And yet taken together, all four of these 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 cosmic and spiritual powers – cosmic and spiritual realities that would be invisible to us unless God revealed them to us (Eph. 6:12; 2 Thess. 2:7; Rev. 17:5, 7). From our human vantage point and depending on when and where we're living in history, this is obviously not 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 we won't be surprised when temptations or sufferings come. 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, when we come to truly see reality as God has revealed it, we'll be prepared and fortified *and encouraged* to trust our sovereign God and to persevere to the end in faith. The point of apocalyptic is not ultimately to scare us but to comfort and strengthen us. The point of apocalyptic is not ultimately to confuse us, but to teach us wisdom. And as we've seen, this wisdom isn't found first of all in the historical interpretation. In fact, it's impossible for us to really grasp the historical interpretation unless we first grasp the more fundamental meaning of the apocalyptic imagery in and of itself.

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. 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 to play in it.

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We remember the passage in Matthew where we read of our Lord:

- Matthew 14:25 — In the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea.

And then we rejoice in the hope and promise of Revelation chapter twenty-one:

- Revelation 21:1 — Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.