

Daniel 7:1-28

Introduction

If you've been with us over the last few weeks, you will have noticed that the second half of this book of Daniel is written in a very different style to the first half. As we've moved from chapter 6 to chapter 7, we've gone from narrative to apocalyptic literature. From storytelling to front row seats at the cinema. It's all very visual. Apocalyptic literature uses strange and vivid imagery. If you're visiting with us this morning, you may have found it very strange indeed. It's full of symbolism. And it's written to appeal to our senses. If you prefer watching movies to reading novels, you'll feel right at home in the chapters to come.

The big message of the second half of the book is that God is in control and we can trust him. Of course, that's what the *first* half was about. It's the same message. But it's such an important message that God is telling us the same thing from a different perspective, so that we might really take it to heart. If you like, in these chapters, God is communicating truth in picture form. 'Apokalypsis' is a Greek word that literally means 'unveiling'. God is pulling back the curtain of history to show us where everything is heading. And he's using imagery and symbols to describe what is beyond the scope of our normal everyday language.

The chapter begins by taking us back to the days of Belshazzar, king of Babylon. Daniel tells us of a dream he had in the first year of Belshazzar's reign. And immediately we're plunged into the stuff of nightmares: four beasts and a little horn. That's our first heading.

Four beasts and a little horn

Look at verse 2. **Daniel said: 'In my vision at night I looked, and there before me were the four winds of heaven churning up the great sea. Four great beasts, each different from the others, came up out of the sea.'**

In ancient thought, the sea is a place of chaos and evil. It's a place from which evil emerges. And it's churned up by four winds. Four probably represents the four points of the compass. But notice that the winds that churn up the sea are described as the winds of heaven. It's a little clue, right at the beginning, that God is in control even though the scene that follows is chaotic and frightening.

In verse 17, we're told that the beasts that come up out of the sea represent kings who will arise out of the earth. So, the descriptions of these beasts are not intended to be taken literally. They're symbolic. You might be familiar with the eagle as a symbol for the U.S.A. And the bear as a symbol for Russia. The England football team wear three lions on their shirts. In the same way, these four beasts represent four kingdoms. If you remember Nebuchadnezzar's dream in chapter 2, of a statue made of gold, silver, bronze and iron, you'll remember that they too represented four kingdoms. It's reasonable to think these beasts represent the same four kingdoms: Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome. There are good reasons for thinking that's the case. But there *are* other ways of identifying these kingdoms. And in a more general sense, they represent *all* earthly kingdoms and *all* earthly

powers that oppose God. The number four may indicate the totality of the nations. So, actually, we don't need to spend too much time trying to pin down the precise identity of these four kingdoms. It's more important to spend our time trying to understand what God's teaching us about himself and history as he paints this picture for us.

Now, I said that apocalyptic literature is written to appeal to our senses. So, we need to allow ourselves to get into the scene. As we read the descriptions of the four beasts, we're meant to find them frightening and unnerving. We're meant to allow ourselves to feel the terror of a leopard with four heads and a bear with ribs sticking out of its mouth. But remember these beasts are symbolic. We're not to take this literally. You don't need to worry about bumping into these beasts when you're out at night walking the dog. We need to keep in mind that these beasts represent kings and kingdoms. Of course, that doesn't make them any less terrifying. These kingdoms are scary and dangerous. They are worldly powers who oppress and destroy.

But although they are terrifying, notice that these beasts are not wholly autonomous. They *can* do as they please. But they're not wholly independent. We see that in how they're described. We're told that the lion has its wings torn off and is lifted from the ground. It's given the mind of a man. The bear is told, 'Get up and eat your fill of flesh.' The leopard is given authority to rule. They might ravage and terrify the earth but ultimately God is still in control. That detail should comfort us. The Bible is unapologetic in telling us that God is in control, even of all that is evil and frightening. And that should comfort us, because we know that God is good.

Nonetheless, this feels like a nightmare. This isn't the kind of dream that any of us are likely to be hoping for when we go to bed tonight. But as we read on, we discover that this horrible vision of beasts that kill and destroy is just a backdrop to what comes next. As in a movie, the action abruptly switches to another scene. Suddenly everything stops and attentions switches to God's heavenly throne room, which is our next heading.

God's heavenly throne room

Look at verse 9. **'As I looked, thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as 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. Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court was seated, and the books were opened.'**

After the chaos of the four beasts, everything is now calm and orderly. This is the place of ultimate authority.

Daniel is inviting us to visualise all of this. So, try to see it in your mind. But remember, God is spirit. He doesn't have a body. So, this can't be a literal description of him. Rather, it's just a picture that God has given us.

And it's full of symbolism.

He's called the Ancient of Days. He's ageless. Eternal.

His hair is white as snow and his clothing white like wool. He's holy and pure.

He's sitting on his throne. He's not caught up in frantic activity like the beasts. He's seated. His throne, with wheels, represents his universal rule.

A river of fire flows from the throne, signifying judgement.

Around the throne stands a huge multitude; ten thousand times ten thousand. It's a heavenly courtroom. Books are opened.

And then Daniel's attention is brought back to earth where the little horn he'd seen earlier is continuing to speak with boastful words. In its arrogance, it's setting itself in opposition to God. And Daniel keeps watching while the little horn keeps speaking, until the fourth beast with the little horn on its head is eventually slain, its body is destroyed, and it's thrown into the blazing fire.

The clear message is that these earthly kingdoms won't last for ever. God will ultimately triumph over the kingdoms and powers of the world which, in their arrogance, oppose him. But the point for Daniel and the rest of the exiles is that this victory is going to be a long time coming. If these beasts represent kingdoms that will come after Babylon has fallen, then God's victory won't happen immediately. It wouldn't come at the end of the Babylonian empire. History would continue. Other kingdoms would rise and fall. But these verses are written to give Daniel reassurance. He was to know that salvation will come. God will be victorious.

And that victory, when it comes, is associated with another figure in Daniel's dream.

Look at verse 13. **'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. 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.'**

That description is precisely the way Darius described the kingdom of God at the end of chapter 6, and Nebuchadnezzar before him in chapter 4. This is one like a son of man, who receives the authority, glory and power that belong to God himself. He is the stone that we met in chapter 2, who will crush all the kingdoms of the world and bring them to an end, but will itself endure for ever.

It's no coincidence that 'the son of man' is the title Jesus chose for himself. He did so deliberately so we might know that he *is* this figure in Daniel 7. And I take it that Daniel is seeing here the moment that Jesus ascended to heaven following his resurrection from the grave. In Acts 1, verse 9, we're told that he was taken up to heaven before the very eyes of his disciples, and that a cloud hid him from their sight. And what Daniel's describing here is what happened next. We mustn't forget that this is full of symbolism. It isn't a literal description of what it looked like. But it is a real event.

God is showing us a picture to convey what is beyond the scope of normal language. At the cross, Jesus won a great victory over all God's enemies. He defeated every spiritual and earthly power that opposes God. And this is the moment his victory is cemented, as he is crowned king and receives the kingdom of God.

You'll have seen something similar if you've ever watched the FA Cup final on TV. Two teams play each and when the final whistle is blown, one of them is the winner. Then what happens next? The winning team climbs up the steps in front of the packed stadium and gets presented with the trophy, normally by a member of the royal family. Their victory is confirmed and cemented. It's not precisely the same, of course. But it's another picture to help us understand what's happening. Having won victory at the cross, Jesus ascended in triumph to his Father in heaven. And before thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand, he was given not a trophy but authority, glory and sovereign power.

This is a coronation, when the risen, victorious Jesus was exalted to the right hand of the Father and his victory at the cross was cemented. It's what Paul describes in Philippians when he says that Jesus was exalted to the highest place and given the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow.

It's the pivotal moment in history. It's what Jesus himself was speaking of at the end of Matthew's Gospel, when he said, '**All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.**' And it's this scene that makes sense of his command to go into the world and make disciples of all nations.

People today take a dim view of our attempts to share the gospel and convert people. They ask why we can't leave other people alone. As long as they're happy and they're not hurting anyone, they say, why can't we just let them get on with their lives without trying to thrust our Christian beliefs on them? It might sound like a reasonable question. But if Jesus is this figure in Daniel 7, then, one day, all knees will bow before him. For some that will be accompanied with rejoicing. But for others who have rejected him, it will be accompanied with tears and regret. And we can hardly claim to love those people if we remain silent. It's because Jesus is this figure in Daniel 7 that we *must* tell them about him, so they too can worship him as king and enjoy his victory, not just now but for all eternity. If you wouldn't yet call yourself a Christian, that's why we're so determined to tell you about Jesus.

He is reigning in heaven. Those who belong to him *will* share his victory. That's the good news of the gospel. But the remainder of the chapter warns us that we have a hard road ahead, which is our final heading.

The hard road ahead

Daniel was troubled by what he'd seen, and in his dream, he approaches someone standing nearby to ask what it all meant. He's told that the four beasts are four kings that will rise from the earth, but then he's told, in verse 18: "**But the holy people of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it for ever – yes, for ever and ever.**"

In verse 14, it's the one like a son of man who receives the kingdom. In verse 18, and again in verse 27, it's the holy people of God who receive the kingdom. In other words, Jesus receives the kingdom and he shares it with his people.

But Daniel's mind then gets drawn back to the fourth beast, with ten horns, which will be different to the others and the most terrifying of all. Clearly, he can't get this fourth beast out of his head, and we can understand why. He especially wants to know about the little horn. In verse 21, we *now* learn that **this horn was waging war against the holy people and defeating them, until the Ancient of Days came and pronounced judgment in favour of the holy people of the Most High, and the time came when they possessed the kingdom.**

Daniel is told that this fourth beast is a fourth kingdom that will devour the whole earth, trampling it down and crushing it. The ten horns are ten kings. The number ten probably represents completeness. But this little horn seems to be a particular type of king, who blasphemes against God and wages war against his people. It's a particularly arrogant and evil ruler. Various attempts have been made to identify him with a specific person in history; perhaps the Greek ruler, Antiochus Epiphanes, or a Roman general called Titus. They certainly match, at least in part, what's written here. But rather than seeing him as just *one* person, it seems likely that this is a *type* of figure who will appear over and over again throughout history. It may even be that the appearance of this type of figure might climax at the end of history with the appearance of the man of lawlessness, whom Paul describes in 2 Thessalonians, chapter 2.

What all this is telling us is that hard days lies ahead as we await the final establishment of God's kingdom. That was true in Daniel's day, as they awaited the first appearing of Christ. And it's just as true for us as we await his second appearing. We live in the days between Christ's ascension and his return; between his coronation and his final glorious victory. And the Bible warns us that we should expect these days to be hard.

In our country, over the last few hundred years, we've experienced an anomaly in history, when the Christian faith has been valued and held in high regard. But all the signs are that we are returning to more normal Christian experience, which is to be treated with suspicion and hostility. We shouldn't be surprised if it gets harder to be a Christian in this country than it is now. In the years ahead, our society may become more intolerant of Christian belief. Obedience to Christ may become more unacceptable and more costly. The opposition we face may become more intense. We are living in the days when the kingdoms of the world will oppress and wage war against God's people and seek to wear us down. We may not experience that oppression with the same ferocity as Christians in other parts of the world. But we are part of the battle. And what this dream is teaching us is that we should expect the road ahead to be a hard one.

Daniel had been troubled. Having heard the interpretation, we're told in verse 28 that now he's *deeply* troubled and he says that his face turned pale. He knew this wasn't all going to happen in *his* lifetime, but he was concerned for the generations of God's people who would come after him. And so should we be.

But that's why we need to know that Jesus has won. He has been crowned King of kings and Lord of lords. His kingdom will prevail. And one day all his people will enjoy his victory with him.

Conclusion

This dream *is* terrifying. The details *should* unsettle us. But we mustn't miss the fact that it's recorded here for our comfort. It's intended to reassure us. The world can be a scary place to live if you're a believer. But we need not fear. Global powers will rise and fall, but they won't have the final word. They are merely the backdrop against which the kingdom of Christ will finally be established in all its glory.

At the end of Matthew's Gospel, the final words Jesus spoke before he ascended to heaven were a promise; that he will be with us always, to the very end of the age. And at the end of history, God will see to it that those who belong to Jesus, will share his kingdom with him. That's the assurance that God wants us to have. This dream is recorded here so that we might be ready for the hard road ahead. Don't be surprised or discouraged when opposition comes. Don't be alarmed if you must suffer for your faith. Rather, take heart because, in the end, *God* wins. The victory has already been secured at the cross. His kingdom *is* coming. And he is in control. So, keep trusting him.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, when it's hard to be a Christian, and as the opposition we face grows, help us to remember that Christ has won the victory at the cross. Help us to remember that you have crowned him as King and that he will one day return in glory to destroy his enemies and establish his kingdom for ever. And please help us to prepare the next generation of believers to keep trusting in you no matter what opposition they might face. When following Jesus is hard, give us confidence that you are in control, and help us to keep trusting you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.