

“DANIEL’S VISION OF FOUR BEASTS.”

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Scripture Texts: Daniel 7:1-8

Introduction.

It is obvious a huge change has taken place in our reading through Daniel. As Dorothy would say, “We are not in Kansas anymore.”

We have concluded the historical section of Daniel which fills the first six chapters. In those chapters we saw how God sovereignly and powerfully worked in a pagan country and through pagan kings to aid and benefit His captive people.

God made clear to His people He alone is the Most High God who “rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will and sets over it the lowliest of men” (Daniel 4:17).

As we turn the page to chapter 7 of Daniel we come to the pivotal chapter, the chapter that encompasses the whole of human history. We are stepping out of the history of the Jewish exile in Babylon to God’s greater purposes for all human history.

The Jewish people were expecting a restored kingdom of Israel, but God has a greater kingdom purpose. In God’s agenda kingdoms will rise and fall, one kingdom after another after another and they will all be overthrown and superseded by a greater and better Kingdom of God.

This book is a survival manual for the saints. It removes unrealistic expectations and gives realistic expectations. It takes away the element of surprise just as Jesus did for His disciples:

John 16:33 I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.

Daniel 7 is an overview of history, of what God is doing and going to do. It is a tool for reading the newspaper and listening to the news and putting our elections in a larger context.

The Meaning of Apocalypse.

As we come to chapter 7 we find ourselves back in apocalyptic writing like we encountered in Revelation. Many people stop reading Daniel at this point and throw their hands up and give up. But it is written by the Holy Spirit, and is the eternally true Word of God.

Romans 15:4 Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

All of Scripture is meant:

II Timothy 3:15-17 ... to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 16 All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for

training in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

All scripture is meant to give us wisdom and hope. And that includes the apocalyptic sections. They are not inspired to confuse or frustrate or give nightmares.

We must be careful not to think that because it's written the way it is that it's fanciful or fairytale like or unreal. The form and style don't mean it isn't true. Truth can be proclaimed in many various ways, histories, narratives, poetry, song, prophecy, letters, and apocalyptic literature. This is the Word of God, the message behind the symbols is true even if there aren't any real four-headed beasts.

We can't hope to understand apocalyptic writing unless we understand its purpose.

Apocalyptic writing is written in times of persecution or oppression when God's people are particularly discouraged or defeated, when they are despised and cast off by the world. It is meant to communicate a message of God's final victory over a rebellious human history.

However hostile or hopeless or hateful the future looks apocalyptic visions give us courage and hope to resist futile thinking and resist the enemy of our souls and of God's kingdom.

So we can endure whatever cost or suffering with obedience and confident hope in the future.

“Apocalyptic is designed to comfort the oppressed, to encourage the faithful in distressful times. It is written for those who feel powerless or helpless, under pressure, marginalized, left out; for those who become the objects of scorn and ridicule for their faith; for those who suffer and cry out "How long?" It is for anyone who feels burned out and tired, who wonders if life is passing him by. It is for all who grieve, who do not get out of life what they expect, who are frustrated and angry. In a word, apocalyptic is written for those who are in need of perspective” (George Schwab).

Apocalyptic writing proclaims a theology of hope to those in a hopeless world. The writer of apocalypse has seen heaven open, he has seen the Most High God high and lifted up and enthroned in the heavens, he has seen the amassed legions of angels, the heavenly army that no one can number, he has seen how history ends and who holds history. Having seen what he sees he fears no tyrant, he fears no army, he fears no suffering and no sacrifice.

Jungle Book.

After interpreting Nebuchadnezzar's vision in chapter 2 and Belshazzar's handwriting on the wall in chapter 5, now Daniel relates his own vision and then gives its interpretation.

We move backward from the time of the reign of the Medes and the Persians under Darius and Cyrus to the Babylonian rule under Belshazzar.

Daniel sees a whirlwind stirring up the ocean and out of the ocean come four strange beasts. In those days the sea was not a good thing; it was a source of fear, chaos, of that which could not be controlled. It was a symbol of rebellion against God. It was a place of monsters, like the Leviathan of Psalm 74. It's sort of the Zombie Apocalypse meets Jurassic Park.

But don't miss those two words in verse two, *of heaven*. The chaos of emerging kingdoms is under the sovereign hand of God who rules and overrules in all of history.

They come one after another, just as various world empires succeed one another in the course of world history. In the rise and fall of many nations there is much chaos and violence.

The Lion.

The first beast is like a lion with eagles' wings that then are plucked off, a terrifying mixture of animal and bird. As it stands up on two legs it becomes like a man with a man's mind.

Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel compare Nebuchadnezzar to both a lion and an eagle symbolizing fierce power and courage.

The eagle to human image is a challenge. Some see it as a picture of Nebuchadnezzar's humiliation and restoration when he went from being a beast to being a humble human in Dan. 4.

Others see it as a weakening of Babylon, once great and god-like, but losing its power, or having its power forcibly removed, like the wings being removed. But this image is also every nation that has risen and then had its wings clip and its power diminished.

The Bear.

The second beast is a bear with three ribs in its mouth. It has its last victim in its mouth and is commanded to arise and devour some more.

The suddenness of its appearance could reflect the suddenness with which Belshazzar fell to the Medes. This sounds like a regime of savage power driven by a thirst for violence and power.

Again this is every nation with imperialistic ambitions, thirsty for more power, more territory.

The Leopard.

The third beast is a leopard with four wings and four heads. The leopard with wings symbolize lethal swiftness and the four heads looking four directions symbolize vastness of rule, perhaps a universal rule. There is no hiding or escaping from this beast.

The Greek empire is often associated with great swiftness and power. The speed with which Alexander the Great accomplished his conquests is legendary, as is his lust for more territory.

Nations today can wage battle at great speeds and with incredible mobility. What once took months can now be covering in hours.

Notice the reference to who is in control and the sovereignty of God. It doesn't seize dominion, dominion is given to it.

The fourth beast.

If you thought the first three were bad, the worst is yet to come.

The fourth beast is not like any beast we know. There is no “like” in this verse. It’s called different every time it is referred to in this chapter. It has animal and machine and human characteristics.

It inspires sheer terror, it wrecks total havoc, breaking, smashing, devouring, destroying. Horns represent power and ten horns represent great power.

It’s difference is also seen in that it produces another horn, a little horn. This symbolizes a regime of a ruler of extraordinary power and authority who has intelligence and great arrogance (a mouth to speak many things). A deadly mix.

This little horn reflects humanity with its autonomous, independent spirit.

By this point in the vision I wonder if Daniel would welcome going back to the lions’ den. These are troubling, disturbing, soul unsettling images.

As we will see in the rest of this chapter, this beast is associated with the coming of Christ, so we have to look past the usual associations with Rome or some past nation.

The Meaning of Monsters.

Who are these beasts and what do they represent?

Daniel 7:17 These four great beasts are four kings who shall arise out of the earth.

The most common view among OT scholars is that they represent the successive kingdoms or empires of Babylon, Media and Persia, Greece and Rome.

The truth of the matter is if we try to lock into certain kingdoms in certain times we will fall into the same trap that modern preachers fall into, trying to pinpoint specifics and guess who is who. And when we do that we miss the meaning and message of apocalyptic writing.

These beasts fit kingdoms and empires in all times and places. Today we can talk about the Russian bear, the Chinese dragon and the American eagle. And a century from now those will apply to yet unknown powers.

The fourth beast helps us break out of this habit. Is it really just the next empire in line to come along? The description seems to suggest that it is not at all like any of the other kingdoms. It is completely different in every way, in a class by itself. Something never seen or imagined before.

This may be symbolic of the last human kingdom in which wickedness and rebellion reach a crescendo. It will be an empire without parallel in power and ruthlessness.

What does this mean for us? What is the writer communicating?

First, these images are meant to be frightening. If you don't tremble you don't get it. The author is painting a view of human history and human empires that is scary, dark, even beastly. Man's inhumanity to man is truly horrifying.

Most of the world understands this far better than we do. We have lived a rather sheltered existence for the past couple of hundred years. And when we have been involved in some of the nastiness of world powers in conflict we have engaged it from a distance. We have sent our soldiers to fight over there, across the Pacific or Atlantic. We have only had to see it on the news, not on our doorstep.

Apocalyptic writing is hopeful and optimistic, but not without honestly telling the truth about the evil in the heart of man and in the hearts of rebellious regimes of men.

I hesitate to give examples but we have our own Nebuchadnezzar's and Belshazzar's and Cyrus' and Alexander the Great's and Nero's (see <http://www.historyplace.com/worldhistory/genocide/index.html>).

The first mass genocide of the 20th century was the Muslim Ottoman Turks in Turkey who tried to completely eliminate the Armenians. Over two million were killed.

Joseph Stalin was one of the most ruthless men ever to hold power in modern times. His forced famine led to the death of over 5 million Ukrainians. Over 25% of the population of the Ukraine died by 1933. Over the course of his brutal reign he is estimated to be responsible for the deaths of 20 million of his countrymen.

Hitler presided over the deaths of over 6 million Jews and 5 million others, killed in the most gruesome and inhumane ways.

The Japanese systematically killed over 10 million civilians and POWs in East Asia and the Pacific. The reports are brutal, horrific, stomach turning. Torture, forced labor, starvation, going through Red Cross hospitals killing the doctors, nurses, and patients.

In some of our conversations with some of our Chinese students we picked up some pretty strong racism against Japanese. They said it was because of what the Japanese did to their people in WWII. So I went and read what happened. It brought tears to my eyes. The inhuman horror, the rape and murder of tens and hundreds of thousands of civilians for no reason.

Racism is a sin, but what our Chinese students should do with their feelings is only possible through the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the power of His blood and His forgiveness. Without that there is no other path to forgiveness and healing of past wounds.

The Khmer Rouge under the ruthless reign of Pol Pot in Cambodia from 1963 to 1975 led to the deaths of over 2 million people through slave labor and torture in his killing fields.

In Rwanda, over a period of one hundred days in 1994, up to 800,000 Tutsis were killed by Hutu militia using clubs and machetes, as many as 10,000 killed each day. Over a tenth of the population gone in just four months.

Our own country is not innocent, just think of the Native Americans and slaves. It's estimated millions of Native Americans died from violence against them. We lived in Oklahoma and learned that history. How Oklahoma was made Indian Territory and whole tribes forced marched on the trail of tears from the east coast and south into Oklahoma and then how many years later we came and took that land as well.

These examples are not even one one-hundredth of one percent of the atrocities inflicted by governments and rulers and militaries throughout history.

Today millions are persecuted, tortured, enslaved, sex trafficked, forced out of their homes and countries, whole populations decimated. Every day.

Daniel's vision is meant to tell us that history is beastly. Our world is in the death grip of sin and Satan. The hearts of humanity are desperately wicked. Daniel's vision is a wakeup call that we cannot be naïve or gullible about history and about the rule of man and about what nations and empires do. And future new governments and parties and leaders won't be any panacea or cure all. There is no coming utopian vision.

This beastly history lesson teaches us that this world is under the control of kings and rulers and authorities that are scary and each one is scarier than the one before. Daniel's vision is God's perspective about this world, even if it isn't our present local experience.

The book of Daniel teaches us that the rise and fall and history of empires is known in advance and their course is laid out by God. Increasingly there will be a great struggle between the kingdom of man and the kingdom of God. Governments and nations will increasingly become anti-Christian. Historical Babylon is long gone, but the spirit of Babylon lives on as we saw in Revelation.

The kingdom of man will fade in glory and the kingdom of God will increase. This is the theme of both the historical and the prophetic sections of Daniel.

Let us be overwhelmed by what we have seen here, overwhelmed in both directions. Overwhelmed by the awful depravity of the human heart and the fallenness of the human condition and the great historical conflicts that creates, with all its godless brutality.

And overwhelmed by the mysteries of God's purposes in all of this and in the revelation of His power and glory as He sovereignly guides all things to a perfect, heavenly crescendo. This will become clear as the vision continues next week.

Our God reigns, Christ is risen and He is coming again.