

## The Dream of the Four Beasts

Daniel 7:1-28

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If you have your Bibles I'd invite you to turn with me to Daniel, chapter 7, as we continue our study through this great book. We come tonight to the 7th chapter which introduces us into the second section of the book. You'll remember that we've already said that part of this book is written in Hebrew, and part of this book is written in Aramaic. The Aramaic section of the book runs from chapter 2 to chapter 7. And so this chapter is the last of the Aramaic section and as it is in the same language as chapters 2 through 6, it ties together the two parts of the book. And we're going to see in just a few moments that there is an interesting connection between the first chapter in Aramaic, chapter 2, and the last chapter in Aramaic, chapter 7, which gives us a clue to understanding the meaning of the visions before us in this passage tonight. Let's hear God's holy and inspired word, then, looking at Daniel, chapter 7, beginning in verse 1:

### Daniel 7

*Father, we humble ourselves before this word. This word rebukes our ignorance. We confess, Lord, we don't understand it all. Not with all of our study, not with the closest attention to the greatest commentators of the ages can we understand everything here and yet, O Lord, we know that Your word is written for our edification and for our encouragement and for our strengthening and for our grasping of the grace which is ours in Christ Jesus. And so we ask that You would teach us from this word. There are surely here people who need to hear the message of this word. We all need the message of this word. So teach it to us, open our eyes that we might behold wonderful things from Your word and apply it to each of our own circumstances by the power of the spirit. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.*

If I may say one word of general preface before we give a few words of introduction. I think it is important to appreciate Daniel 7. It is important that we recognize where Daniel himself is in his career, what responsibilities he has had and what his desires are. We are told that this particular vision occurs in the first year of Belshazzar. That already places Daniel in the twilight of his career. You remember that we saw in the study of Daniel, chapter 5 in the story of Belshazzar, that Daniel had been forgotten. Daniel, though he had been a great leader in Babylon, had been forgotten under the reign of Belshazzar and so we

have a very prominent man, a very important man who had been involved in the administration of the kingdom and suddenly he's got some time on his hands and he's contemplating the important things in life. He's no doubt looking back over his own life and wondering how the Lord has used him. What has been the significance of his service?

At the same time we know that he had been doing detailed study in the book of Jeremiah and he knew that coming soon would be an end to the captivity and surely his heart was full of that thought, thinking one day soon my people will be released. And I'm sure that he had a sense that everything that had been happening in his life and every element of his life that had been served on the public scene had been contributing to a great plan of God to redeem His people from captivity and re-establish them in the land of Israel. But also in his isolation he was under the rule of a man named Belshazzar, who we may suggest, that Daniel already recognized was going to be a disaster for Babylon. And it may well be that the Lord in His grace not only came to reveal truths for time and eternity to us, His people through Daniel, but He even came to comfort Daniel who wondered what in the world is going to happen here. What cataclysmic events are going to happen now that this small man, Belshazzar, is on the stage. Whatever you may say about Nebuchadnezzar, he had big thoughts and big dreams and he was an effective ruler. This Belshazzar was a different kind of man. And it is in that context that this vision comes to Daniel. Daniel, a man who had always been able to keep his eyes on the big picture but now God is going to ask Daniel to consider a bigger picture than he has ever contemplated before. I simply want to emphasize again, isn't it interesting how Daniel is called to meet test after test after test, and they don't get smaller, they get bigger. He is called upon to face and to interpret larger and larger realities.

We have already noted that the general theme of this book is God's control of all things, even against the opposition of the kingdoms of the world. Nebuchadnezzar's conquest of Israel, it has already been made crystal clear in the first six chapters of Daniel, is not an accident. God is in control. He knows exactly what he is doing. It's part of His plan and He will prevail even over the mightiest empire on earth. God is in control.

When we come to Daniel 7, we have come to the second half of the book, and this may be one of the most exhilarating and baffling chapters in the whole of this book. There are symbols here which stretch the most detailed study of scripture for finding out the meaning of those symbols. And at the same time as puzzling and as exhilarating as this chapter is, it may be the central chapter of the book. It may be foundational for our understanding of the whole of the book, because the latter half of Daniel inaugurated in this chapter focuses us on the ultimate significance of history. The latter half of Daniel, just like the latter half of the book of Revelation, and we've already noted if you just heard those words, if you listened to those words, you heard John in those words. Isn't it interesting? Daniel finds himself in the throne room. Sound familiar? Read Revelation 5

recently? Daniel gets into the throne room, sees things that he doesn't understand, turns to an elder, turns to someone standing by. What does John do? He turns to an elder and he says, "What does all this mean?" So you can see the influence of this book on John in his own vision at the Isle of Patmos. At any rate, this chapter points us to give us divine insight into the ultimate significance.

We've already said there seems to be a relationship between Daniel, chapter 2, and the dream of Nebuchadnezzar, and Daniel chapter 7 and the vision of Daniel. In both passages there are four kingdoms. In both passages the contrast is between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world. The difference is that in Daniel, chapter 2, the theme is earthly kingdoms being overpowered by the kingdom of God, whereas in Daniel, chapter 7 the theme is more specific. The depravity, the greed, the brutality of earthly kingdoms in Daniel, chapter 7, is contrasted against the godliness, the righteousness and the everlastingness of God's kingdom. These brutal, earthly kingdoms are set in bold relief to God's righteous kingdom which will never end.

The vision of this chapter takes place, as we said, in the reign of Belshazzar long before the faithful feats that we have already studied. But perhaps Daniel already realized what kind of a man Belshazzar was and God sought to comfort Daniel in this vision. No matter what would happen to Belshazzar, God's purposes would continue, no matter what would happen to Babylon under Belshazzar's rule and you can imagine from Daniel's perspective. At least Babylon had given some modicum of stability to the lives of the exiles from Israel that had been taken into captivity. At least they could count on decent government, running water and some basic social services.

Now you have a king who is irresponsible and now you have enemies surrounding Babylon and you can imagine the anxiety of Daniel, a man whose whole life had been devoted to good and honest government. And now he watches a wicked government trash the nation that he has served and a nation which has at least given some protection to his people and he wonders what is going to happen to the Lord's people. How, after all, is the Lord going to take us back to the land of our fathers?

We're going to aim in this passage to look at the big picture and seek not to be lost in the details. There are, frankly, many details that I don't have a clue as to their meaning. The big picture, don't miss it. The big picture is clear. Daniel 7 teaches us that the events of history are not isolated from events beyond history. Daniel 7 teaches us that the course of humanity is determined in the throne room of God almighty and that is a message that we all need to hear tonight. Daniel had been a busy man and we know, we who live in a busy age, how easy it can be to lose sight of the first things because of the tyrant of many things. Daniel knew those pressures and he was a man who had uniquely been able to keep his eye on his God and on his God's kingdom. But even Daniel needed to be

reminded of the biggest picture of all and so do we tonight. And so we look to Daniel, chapter 7. We will look to see the big picture.

You see God was not interested in simply giving Daniel detailed facts about future history. God was primarily interested in revealing Himself to Daniel and to impress something of His awesome purposes and to teach him about the nature of the coming kingdom. And I want you to hold that last thought because I believe that Daniel 7 and the passages that follow are the key to Israel understanding Jesus when He comes, because Daniel is going to tell the people of Israel some things about the Messiah and His kingdom that, if they had listened, they would have been less likely to reject the Messiah when He came to bring the kingdom of heaven.

So, I want to remind you of one last thing. Visual images dominate this chapter. This chapter doesn't operate in linear narrative. It's a succession of pictures. It's almost like watching a movie and the interesting thing is Daniel shows you one picture and he interrupts it and another picture breaks in and he interrupts it and another picture breaks in. So that there's a moving succession of visual images and the very message intends to reveal to us the mystery of God's purposes and the awful conflict that underlies human history through a series of images or pictures. Let's look then at the various sections of this chapter.

## **I. The Apparent Power and Evident Depravity of World Empires.**

First of all, in verses 1 through 8. Here we see the vision of the four beasts and the significance of this picture in verses 1 through 8 is the apparent power and the evident depravity of the world empires. Notice in this picture what we have is a panoramic vision of world empires but it serves merely as the backdrop of the inauguration of the reign of the Son of Man in the kingdom of heaven. We're heading towards verses 9 through 14. That's the central section of the passage, of the book, of the chapter, and so this picture of the kingdoms of this world in all their power, in all their brutality simply serves as a backdrop to a greater reality, the establishment of God's kingdom.

Now again, let me emphasize. We know you'll see some of the evidence of this in this passage, but Daniel, we know, was contemplating the end of the exile. And it would be fair for us to suggest that in Daniel's mind, as he was thinking about God's kingdom and what God was doing in the world and what part he played in it, that Daniel thought of the big picture being what God was going to do to bring His people back to Israel. In this passage, however, God is about to show Daniel a bigger picture. Daniel, who thought in big categories and realized that his God was a big God, is about to be shown that his God is bigger than he ever imagined because even God's bringing of Israel back into its home country was but a tiny picture of the picture that God was about to show Daniel, in Daniel, chapter 7.

The picture of verse 2 is a picture of universal chaos. Notice the words. The four winds of heaven were stirring up the great sea. We've said as we've studied the Psalms, the picture of the sea is the picture of uncontrollable political forces in the world. Daniel picks up on that imagery and we see a sea, rough with white caps, huge waves crashing. This is the universal chaos amongst the kingdoms of men. But notice that it is winds of heaven that are blowing that sea. All the while God is sovereign and it is the winds of heaven that control the rise and fall of nations in the world.

The identification of the four beasts has been debated from time in memoriam, and I'll not satisfy or solve that issue for you tonight, no doubt. There have been various interpretations. Let me give you the most straightforward one. It seems clear throughout this vision that God starts with what Daniel knows and moves to what he doesn't know. He starts with what Daniel is familiar with in order that Daniel will have confidence in the vision about things that he's not familiar with. And so the first kingdom that he speaks of is very clearly Babylon. You will remember that the first kingdom is described in terms of an animal that is both a lion and an eagle and it is interesting that Jeremiah and Ezekiel describe Nebuchadnezzar using the image of the lion and the eagle and we know that Daniel read those prophets closely. And so the lion and the eagle is Babylon. The bear seems to be Media-Persia, the empire which followed under the reign of Darius. The leopard seems to be Greece and we won't argue the details, and the fourth beast seems to be Rome.

Now remember there are debates about these particular kingdoms. The point is, however, that these kingdoms represent the attempts of world empires to set up a lasting and beneficent and almighty rule on earth amongst the sons of men and they stand thus in contrast to the kingdom of God. The first three beasts are described in detail. They come in successive visions to Daniel. And Daniel is shocked as he sees them again. Remember that this man is not naive. He's been involved in human government. He knows how corrupt people can be. But even this man who had been involved in government all his life is shocked at the wickedness and brutality of these earthly kingdoms. He's overwhelmed, his breath is taken away and he doesn't even give us a description of the fourth beast. The only thing he tells us about that fourth beast is the teeth. Daniel seems to lock onto those things and apparently the beasts are so terrifying he can't even describe them to you. But even as he's describing these beasts in succession, that part of the vision breaks and we move to the second scene, the second vision of the chapter.

## **II. The Actual Sovereignty and Righteousness of God Almighty.**

And that scene removes us from the earth and the kingdoms of this world and it takes us into the throne room of heaven. In verses 9 through 14 we have entered

into that vision of God and of His throne room, and over against the apparent power and the evident depravity of the kingdoms of this world, we see the actual power, the actual sovereignty of God and the righteousness of God almighty in verses 9 through 14. Isn't it an interesting contrast between the earthly confusion in verses 2 and following, but when we get to verses 9 and 10 notice that the sea is a sea of glass. The Ancient of Days sits upon His throne and the world is under His control. Heavenly calm is contrasted to earthly chaos. And again the message is God is in complete control. No matter what His people are undergoing here, God is in complete control. There are four or five elements of this vision that I'd like to draw your attention to very quickly.

First of all, notice what God is called: The Ancient of Days. Kingdoms come, kingdoms go. The Ancient of Days is still on the throne. What is the goal of every earthly kingdom? To last a long, long time. What is God called here? The Ancient of Days. These beasts, as terrifying and powerful as they are, are grasshoppers in the sight of the Ancient of Days.

Notice also the Ancient of Days is white as snow. Daniel has just described world government at its wickedest. In contrast to the wickedness of human government, he pictures the Ancient of Days *white as snow* indicating His righteousness, His purity. The designs of world government may be altruistic, but they end up brutalizing their subjects. However, the Ancient of Days is seated. He reigns. He is in unquestionable control. He is in the position of authority. What a comforting thing for Daniel in the midst of the reign of that puny man, Belshazzar, to see. His God on the throne.

One more encouragement to Daniel. Notice that myriads and myriads are before the throne. This may be the kindest portion of this vision that God has shared with Daniel. How often had Daniel had to stand alone for his God? And his heart is lifted up to a place where there are thousands and thousands and tens of thousands worshipping God almighty. There he will be home and there he will not be alone. Here we may be called to stand in the minority. Here we may be called to stand alone. There we will be with a multitude that no man could number. How tender is God's vision to Daniel.

One last thing. Notice the books are open. We're in the courtroom. This is the judgment day. God is not only in control, it is He who will judge the world. Now it's very interesting that in the midst of this huge scene there's a flashback in verses 11 and 12 and suddenly we're looking back at that fourth beast again. But you know what? In those verses it's almost anticlimactic. The beasts are slain and very little is said about it. It's almost like Godzilla versus Bambi. I mean who's a match for God Almighty? He comes in, He wipes out the fourth beast, that's it. Game over. No five chapter-long battle. It's just over. He wipes out all who are in opposition to His people.

And then in verses 13 and 14 we see a picture of awesome power and comfort,

the coming of one who is called the Son of Man. We are told that one who is like a Son of a Man comes and He approaches the Ancient of Days and He is enthroned. And I want to remind you of two quick things from the end of Matthew. Turn with me very quickly to Matthew, chapter 26. Two images from the gospel of Matthew. First in Matthew 26, verses 63 and 64. When Jesus is asked by the high priest, "Are You the Messiah, the Son of God?" In Matthew 26:64 Jesus says, "You have said it yourself nevertheless I tell you. Hereafter you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven." Jesus goes right back to Daniel, chapter 7, verses 13 and 14 and He says, "I am the Son of Man."

Now let me tell you something even more encouraging. You turn over two chapters to Matthew, chapter 28. Immediately before Jesus ascended to heaven, He gave His disciples a great commission. The best part of that great commission - this is a wonderful thing to meditate on as we enter into the Missions Conference month - the best thing about that great commission is what He said before He gave it. In Matthew, chapter 28, verse 18, Jesus came up and spoke to them and He said, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and in earth." One of the last things that Jesus is telling us there, because the very next thing that is going to happen is He's going to ascend to the throne of heaven, but the last thing that He is telling us here is that the picture of Daniel, chapter 7, verses 13 and 14 is not a picture of His second coming; it is a picture of His ascension to the right hand of power.

What does that mean for you and me? The Lord Jesus Christ reigns now. He is on the throne. Daniel in exile, never knowing whether he'll see his land again, knows that his God is mediator, is on the throne for Him. Now that's so important because Daniel is going to see some things in this vision which absolutely rob him of strength.

### **III. The everlasting Kingdom.**

If you'll look at the verses 15 through 28. Daniel concludes this vision troubled in his heart. We are a bit baffled by that because we are exhilarated by the encouragements that Daniel is given in this particular vision. The King is on the throne. The Lord will bring judgment against the world. But all Daniel can see is that it is very clear from this vision that the Lord's people in His kingdom are going to be persecuted by a beast that will pursue them even unto the end of their lives and that before the kingdom is set up in rule, there will be much suffering endured by the people of God.

You see, God is showing Daniel the nature of the kingdom that He is going to establish. Far beyond simply returning the people of Israel into their own homeland, God has plans for a kingdom that will extend around this world and will bring in men and women and boys and girls from every tribe and tongue and

nation to worship the living God. But it is going to involve incredible suffering. And it's a measure of Daniel's heart that his heart is broken over people that he would never know. He knows the kind of suffering they are going to experience, and he's moved by it and his heart is troubled and so he needs every bit of the encouragement that God gives him. And we need it, too.

One of the practical implications of this vision, is that first of all, the people of God must never be naive about the strength and the reality and the durability of evil. It is with us in this fallen world. It is a force of wickedness and harm and we must never underestimate what it can do.

Secondly, we must remember that the kingdom of God is a kingdom of suffering in the here and now. We must not only be prepared for it ourselves, but we must be in solidarity with all our brethren who suffer in persecution and in oppression. We must care for them and pray for them and be one with them in the midst of their own travails, and with one another in the midst of our own struggles.

These visions, my friend, are key to Israel understanding that when the Messiah came He would not immediately set up a kingdom of political power but He would set up a kingdom which would entail the greatest being the least and the godliest being killed. That is the kind of kingdom that we experience in the here and now. It will come in its power and triumph in the then and there.

This vision also reminds us that our gaze must penetrate beyond history into the throne room of God. All of us bring circumstances in our lives to this room tonight that could overwhelm us. If we sat down and we dwelt upon them it could overwhelm us. We all need to be reminded of what is beyond and under and behind. In the throne room, all is calm. The Lord Jesus sits at the right hand and sometimes that's all you have. But that's all you need. Our hope in this life does not center on the focal points of world power. It centers upon the one who is on the throne, reigning for us in all His descending power and who will one day take us to reign with Him.

Have you noticed how many times the phrase is repeated? The saints, the people of the saints of the Most High in this passage. You see, you're united with the One who's on the throne. You've received Him by grace. If you have trusted in Him, if you've placed Your faith in Him, you're united with Him. And if He reigns so shall you also. Let us pray.

*Our Lord and our God, in the quietness of this hour, we ask You to take our breath away with a vision of the King of Kings and give us the strength to go on in a fallen world for we ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.*



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