

Sermon Given by

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“Apocalypse now!”

I wonder if you've heard about the Frog who went to visit a fortune-teller? The fortune-teller gazed into her crystal ball & said to the frog: "You are going to meet a beautiful young woman. From the moment she sets eyes on you she will have an insatiable desire to know all about you. She will be compelled to get close to you. You will fascinate her." "This sounds great", said the Frog. "Where am I? At a night club?" Fortune-teller replied: "No, a Biology class!" There are many people today, who would like reassurance about the future! The present seems so uncertain or disappointing or perplexing. In our broken, fallen world Christians are not exempt from such pressures. For a whole variety of reasons the experience of God's people often involves periods of perplexity and major questioning. This is certainly the case in the book of Daniel. It's set during the period known as the "Exile" some 600 years before Jesus. The exile had been an event that seemed like a disaster for the people of God. Jerusalem had been sacked, the temple destroyed, the holy things carried off – all at the hands of pagans. The question for them and the question for us from time to time will be – who's really in charge – who's the true King?

In the first 6 chapters though we have seen that despite what may seem to be the case, God is in control. God has rescued his people from despots and scheming satraps; fiery furnaces and hungry lions. History is, to use the old, but helpful cliché, "his story". In the words of 4:26 "Heaven rules." Daniel 7 is not an easy chapter; in fact all of the second half of Daniel, chapters 7-12 is quite hard work and we are far more familiar with chapters 1-6. It's striking though that there are 3 times as many allusions and verbal parallels in the NT to the 2nd half of the book as there are to the 1st. Indeed there are more allusions and parallels in the NT to chapter 7 alone than there are to all of the first 6 chapters put together. So chapter 7 is a key chapter and our first heading is:

1) The power and reality of the Beastly Kingdoms

Daniel has a dream and essentially what Daniel sees are v3 ***"Four great beasts each different from the others, came up out of the sea."*** The 1st beast was like a lion v4, the 2nd like a bear v5, the 3rd like a leopard v6 & the 4th, well it's nameless. Then there's v8 a ***"little horn" with "eyes like the eyes of a man & a mouth that spoke boastfully."*** Each beast seems to get more gruesome. So the 4th v7 was ***"terrifying and frightening & very powerful. It had large iron teeth; it crushed & devoured its victims & trampled underfoot whatever was left."*** What on earth do these beasts refer to? Well thankfully we have God's interpretation from v15. V 15 ***"I, Daniel, was troubled in spirit, and the visions that passed through my mind disturbed me. I approached one of those standing there and asked him the true meaning of all this. "So he told me and gave me the interpretation of these things: 'The four great beasts are four kingdoms that will rise from the earth."***

They all came up v3 "out of the sea" the place associated in the OT with chaos & evil. So they are the powers of evil, the perverse spiritual forces that lie behind the godless kingdoms of the world. Kingdoms that reject the rule of God may seem very impressive to the human eye but this chapter exposes them as it shows us the destructive satanic beasts that lie behind them. When you think about it, likening a kingdom opposed to God to a Beast is an appropriate image because they perpetrate inhuman actions. Be it the killing of 6 million Jews in the Third Reich or the 7 million unborn children legally killed in this country since the passing of the Abortion Act in 1967 – 98% of which were carried out for "social" reasons – ie where there was no risk to the mother's health due to the pregnancy. Kingdoms that fail to acknowledge God as ultimate King, will not rule under him & like him & will therefore rule like beasts. Commentators have their different views as to which Empires are represented by the 4 beasts but the historical details are not crucial because however these beasts are specifically interpreted in history there is a sense in which they represent all kingdoms that oppose the true King, God himself. Daniel 7 and many other passages of Scripture warn us to expect persecution from Beast-like societies and governments. God's people can expect to be on the particular receiving end.

V21 "As I watched, this horn was waging war against the saints and defeating them".

So the wise believer, as he or she reads of persecution against Christians in Morocco, Egypt, Pakistan – wherever it is, shouldn't be surprised. Yes, we should be grieved, and pray for them and support them practically as best we can but we shouldn't be surprised by the state of our world. God's word teaches us to expect it. In the Western world we are relatively free from persecution. And so for us it's harder to see the true nature of what Paul, in one of his letters, calls 'the present evil age'. In Ephesians 6:12 he writes: **'For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms'** Every day there is battle raging around us, and whether we like it or not, whether we opt in or not, and whether we acknowledge it or not, we are caught up in that spiritual battle. There is a battle for the souls of men and women, and it's going on right now. And that battle and the unseen forces are as real as anything you or I can see with our eyes or touch with our hands. Just because the heavenly realm is unseen it's no less real.

In his superb book the Screwtape Letters, C. S. Lewis explains that one of Satan's greatest tactics is to persuade us not to take him seriously. The Screwtape letters are letters from a Senior devil (Screwtape) to a junior devil (Wormwood). Screwtape is telling Wormwood how to ensure people don't follow Jesus, and to make sure they do follow the ways of the evil one. This is what Screwtape writes to the young devil Wormwood: "If any faint suspicion of your existence begins to arise in his mind, suggest to him a picture of something in red tights, and persuade him that since he cannot believe in that...he therefore cannot believe in you." Satan loves it when we fall for the caricature of a devil with horns, a pointed tail and a pitchfork in his hand, for then we don't take him seriously, and we doubt he exists at all; and so we don't pray against him, or pray for protection. To fail to take the unseen spiritual world seriously is a dangerous game. Daniel 7 shows us just how powerful the forces of evil really are. The description of the beasts in v4-7 is terrifying. There is an unseen battle raging all around us. Behind all human evil there is something more powerful and more sinister than any evil human being. Behind evil people and evil regimes is an unseen world of spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. And they are extremely powerful, far more powerful than you or me; more powerful than merely human organisations; than governments. It's no wonder that Daniel was terrified by what he saw – the beasts are terrifying and powerful but crucially they are not more powerful than God.

That brings us to our second and final heading: **The far greater power of God – the divine Warrior, who will defeat all his enemies** Please look down at v9—even while the little horn is boasting and exalting itself above the others, notice what is going on behind it. There's a wonderful sort of pantomime feel about this. You've got to imagine the little horn in the foreground, boasting and shouting and yelling, and there is something huge happening behind. V9: ***“As I looked, thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was a 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. “Then I continued to watch because of the boastful words the horn was speaking. I kept looking until the beast was slain and its body destroyed and thrown into the blazing fire. (The other beasts had been stripped of their authority, but were allowed to live for a period of time). “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 peoples, nations and men 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”***

So Daniel 7 shows us the powerful and destructive beasts – those spiritual forces behind the Kingdoms of this world that reject God and His ways but it also shows us God himself, who is far more powerful than his enemies. Ultimately the beasts and any power or person who opposes the rule of God will be dealt with decisively. Instead the Ancient of Days will give authority to another Ruler. This character who is going to rule, is completely different from the beasts. The beasts failed to acknowledge God as ultimate King & so instead of ruling under God & like God they instead rule like a lion, a bear, a leopard, beastly and particularly beastly towards God's people. The one to whom the Ancient of Days gives power is "like a son of man", he's very different - his rule will be as it should be; his rule will be truly as humanity should be. He is God's perfect King. This perfection is seen in his ruling over all things & all people v14 ***“He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him.”*** And his perfect rule as King is eternal, (end of v14) "His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed."

With our NT antennae tuned we cannot fail to recognize the resonances of this passage with Jesus. "Son of man" was Jesus' favourite title for himself - used 14x in Mark's gospel alone. Jesus clearly sees himself fulfilling this dramatic vision of Daniel 7— He is the one given rule as God's perfect King. For Daniel, this was anticipating a future event, but for us it is a past event. Jesus, after his death & resurrection ascended to heaven & was crowned God's perfect King. At the end of the Bible, in the Book of Revelation the Apostle John sees a vision of the glorified Christ ruling from heaven. Rev 1: 12ff ***“I turned round to see...someone “like a son of man” dressed in a robe...His head & hair were white like wool, as white as snow, his eyes were like blazing fire...”*** The allusions to Dan 7 are obvious except that now what was said of God the Ancient of Days is ascribed to Jesus!

So Jesus rules now, he is already with God the Father ruling from heaven. But, as we all know from hard experience, he is still waiting to be recognized by all people. The bringing in

of the full extent of the rule of God on earth, is still in the future. The description Jesus gives of this event in Mark's gospel is very interesting. Mk 13:26 **"At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds"** (like Dan 7:13) & **"with great power & glory"** (like Dan 7:14) Jesus will return one day & when this happens all opposition to God will be removed and there'll be a new heaven & new earth. That is the time when all beast-like rule will be destroyed & all will submit to the perfect rule of Jesus. We must have this perspective in mind in our everyday lives if we're going to keep going as Christians. Jesus is King but the fullness of his kingdom is yet to come. We live in the "now" of the rule of Christ yet we also live in the "not yet". That's why we often find it hard being a Christian. Our own weaknesses remain – it's easy to get depressed by our lack of growth in the fight against sin - our society seems to get more & more secular, and even church authorities seem to rebel against God. But it's worth pressing on because of what awaits us when his rule is fully known on earth. No longer will beast-like rulers dominate & abuse God's people. God's people will, v27, rule with Jesus, fulfilling our true humanity as those who should rule under God & like God.

I want to end with the story of the man who was giving an after dinner speech and he fascinated his friends by telling them of his experiences in a little town near where he used to live. The town was to be flooded, as part of a large lake for which a dam was being built. In the months before it was to be deluged, all improvements and repairs in the whole town were stopped: What was the use of painting a house if it was to be covered with water in six months? Why repair anything when the whole village was to be wiped out? So, week by week, the whole town became more and more bedraggled, more gone to seed. Then the man added by way of explanation: "Where there is no hope in the future, there is no power in the present." Life may be challenging as believers but we have real hope for the future, unlike that poor frog at the start! Hope that, though God will be opposed by beast-like rulers and kingdoms, they will be judged in the end. God will establish Jesus, the Son of Man, his perfect King over all, forever & what's more we have hope that we, his people, shall reign with him. That's a great hope for the future & it gives us power in the present.

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)