

“An Honest Look at the Future”

Daniel 7:1-28

April 3, 2016

INTRODUCTION:

As we move into Daniel 7, we are moving into more unfamiliar territory. Much of this is due to a change of literary genre from the historical narrative that marked the first 6 chapters, a genre we are very familiar and comfortable with, to one that is much less familiar. The literary genre that begins in Daniel 7 is called “apocalyptic,” a Greek word that means “revelation.” If you notice a similarity between Daniel 7-12 and the last book of the Bible, that is because both employ this type of literature.

Before we get into some of the details of this passage, it’s important to recognize just a few features of apocalyptic literature. The first feature is that of an impending sense of doom. The world is threatened by some frightening and seemingly unstoppable and evil force. In Daniel 7, it is the fourth beast that fills this role. The world is saved at the last minute by a miraculous and unexpected deliverer. A second feature of apocalyptic literature is the rich use of metaphor. Metaphors teach by means of analogy, teaching us about obscure and difficult things by referring to things we know. So in the opening section of Daniel 7, the kingdoms of this world are likened to creatures with which we are familiar. There is a lion with eagles’ wings, a bear and a leopard with wings.

The closest thing to apocalyptic literature in our day is the horror movie. I remember as a child going to afternoon matinees in the summertime to see movies like *The Blob*, *King Kong* and *Godzilla*. Like apocalyptic literature, these movies feature some monster that is on the verge of destroying people, if not all of civilization. People seem to have diminished power when threatened by this monster. The car seems never to start when people are fleeing the monster. There’s always a scene in which the monster is lurking around unsuspecting people, ready to pounce while they are in blissful ignorance of the threat of doom that is almost upon them. This contributes to one of the main features of both the horror film and apocalyptic literature. It is the feeling of terror, amplified by a sense of mystery about the monster. At first, no one quite knows what the blob is or its intentions. Finally, there is a rescue occurring at the end, just when things seem to be at their darkest.

Like the horror movie, apocalyptic literature is intended to evoke powerful feelings in the reader. But unlike horror films, the primary feeling intended is not one of terror but one of confident joy. The confidence comes after the terror by showing us the good end of the story. It is something like the fear of monsters under the bed experienced by many children. Much of this fear stems from the fact that we can’t see under the bed while lying on it. It is a fear of the

unknown. It is for that same reason that we can easily fear the future. We don't know what the future holds for us. So beginning in Daniel 7, we are given an honest look at the future, including the hard things about that future. It is as if the bed skirts are lifted and we see that there is indeed a monster under the bed. The confident joy comes in seeing that this monster is being fought successfully by a strong ally of ours.

Are there monsters under your bed that produce terror in your heart? Maybe your fears are related to the future of our country, or maybe they are related to the future of your children. I once knew a man whose life was dominated by absolute terror that he would die sick and alone. Daniel 7 and the following chapters don't seek to comfort us by a glib, "Oh, don't worry; it will be fine." Rather, they teach that things are indeed dark and evil. But God is still in control, and evil will not be allowed the last word. Things will be okay in the end, because of the role of our great ally. Let's look more carefully at these things now.

I. The Future Is Not Without Evil

Daniel had a vision from God that alarmed him. It occurred during the first year of the reign of Belshazzar of Babylon. Much of Daniel's life in Babylon happened while Nebuchadnezzar was king, and that king had great appreciation for Daniel and had promoted Daniel to a place of significant leadership in the kingdom. Not so much Belshazzar. Daniel and God's people were marginalized during the reign of Belshazzar, and the kingdom itself entered into a time of significant decline as evil increased in the land. In his vision, Daniel saw four beasts arising out of a chaotic sea. The sea in Daniel's time represented chaos and evil. When the vision is interpreted later in the chapter, we are told that these four beasts represent four kings with their kingdoms (v. 17).

The dominant feature of these four kingdoms is that of evil. The first three animals are carnivores—the lion, bear and leopard. The last beast is so dreadful that no animal can be found to which it can be likened. These kingdoms exist not by bringing good to people but by consuming people. And the people they consume more than any others are the people of God. The little horn of the kingdom represented by this fourth beast **“made war with the saints and prevailed over them”** (v. 21). Three of these four beasts are what we would call “mutants.” There is a lion with eagles' wings, a leopard with wings and the fourth beast that seems part living and part machine, a cyborg with iron teeth and bronze claws. The Israelites were particularly repulsed by such mixtures. They were concerned to maintain the division of species created by God, and this was due in part to the laws of the Old Testament which

forbade mixtures of various types. For example, they were not to plow with an ox and donkey together or to wear cloth of wool and linen mixed together.

One of the questions often raised in the study of this chapter is that of which kingdom each of these beasts represents. It seems clear that the first one, the lion with the eagles' wings, represents Babylon. This kingdom became more humane with the conversion of Nebuchadnezzar. After that, it becomes less certain, and commentaries have been more divided on which kingdoms the last three beasts refer to, especially the last one. I think the beasts are intended to refer more to the characteristics present in all kingdoms of this world. Not all the kingdoms are equally evil. The first changes from being a beast to that of a human. Beasts walk on all four legs, with their heads pointing downward. Humans walk with lifted up head, able to gaze Godward. But the dominant feature of these kingdoms is that of evil.

How should we apply this? Let me make two applications and state both of them negatively. First, don't be naïve about the reality and durability of evil in this world. This is especially easy for Christians in America, where we have been spared the worst of this evil. I think there is a growing hostility in our nation toward biblical Christianity, and we are experiencing more of this than was the case previously. It is likely to grow worse. But we know little of what many Christians elsewhere experience all the time. Just this past Sunday in Pakistan, a suicide bombing targeting Christians on Easter Sunday resulted in 72 deaths and 341 people injured. Among the dead were at least 24 children. Every five minutes on average, a Christian is martyred somewhere in the world for their faith. Christians currently face persecution in 105 of the world's 196 countries.

The second application is not to respond to the reality of evil in the kingdoms of this world by withdrawal. The answer to the presence of evil isn't to withdraw into small, remote Christian ghettos. Daniel didn't do that. He was a politician in Babylon. We don't respond to evil passively, but with an active faith that believes God can use us to tame the beast. That's exactly what happened with Daniel. The first beast of Babylon changed from mutant lion-eagle to a man, and it was largely due to the influence of the exiles from Israel. This is a time in our own nation for Christians not to retreat into passivity, but to move out in faith, seeking to bring good to our communities through word and deed ministry. The Bible's view of civil government can be summarized by two seemingly contradictory chapters. Revelation 13 is very similar to our current chapter in portraying government as an evil beast opposed to God and everything good. Romans 13, on the other hand, portrays civil government as an instrument in the hands of God for the development of humanity and for the restraint of evil.

II. The Future Is Not Without God

The future God reveals to Daniel is a terrifying one. It alarmed Daniel (v. 15), especially the vision of the fourth beast. How can we not be troubled when we realize that we are in Daniel's nightmare, targeted by this fourth beast? We see that there is a monster under the bed after all. But we don't wilt in fear because we see that someone is fighting him and will certainly prevail over him. This one is called "the Ancient of Days," which is a title for God himself. He is described in four ways in verses 9-10. We read first that **"his clothing was white as snow."** This is a reference to his righteousness. In contrast to the little horn who establishes his reign through boastful words and through violence (v. 19-20), the Ancient of Days reigns in righteousness.

The Ancient of Days has hair that is like pure wool, which pictures his wisdom. He is the Ancient of Days, and with his age comes great wisdom. Most of us can think how much wiser we are now than say twenty years ago. God has always been wise, but one of the ways this is portrayed in the Bible is to see God as an old man who has been around for a very long time. His wisdom in this text is seen in his sovereign control even over evil. You may have noticed the invisible hand of God present in much of the language of this chapter, even when evil is being described. For example, the lion **"was lifted up from the ground and made to stand"** (v. 4). We read that dominion was given to the leopard (v. 6). And it is said of the little horn, which portrays the antichrist and which we will look at more carefully next week, that even the saints **"shall be given into his hand"** (v. 25). God is the one doing this, working behind the scenes even through evil. Martin Luther reflected this when he said famously of the devil that he is "God's devil."

The next part of verses 9-10 all refer to God's judgment. **"His throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and came out from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened."** God will ultimately bring to the earth what everyone wants—peace. But not everyone likes the instrument God will use to bring about this peace, because it is the instrument of judgment. God's judgment is like a fire burning away all that is impure in his universe. How does he know what is impure. Books have been kept, books that record all impurities in order that those guilty of the impurities might be judged and removed from God's world. That would be terrifying news for all of us except for our Lord Jesus, who was judged in our place. Judgment is still God's appointed means of bringing peace. Everyone must be judged. The difference between the redeemed and all others is that we have already been judged in Jesus.

The fourth way God is described here is that of being surrounded by **"a thousand thousands"** who served him, **"and ten thousand times ten**

thousand stood before him.” Suffering has a tendency to isolate us from others, and Daniel is shown here that all who suffer from evil are in company with countless others who are standing in the glorious presence of God. Think of them as cheering us on to faithfulness in our fight against evil.

III. The Future Is Not Without a Final Victory

Daniel’s vision assures us of ultimate victory in our struggle against evil. There is a fifth kingdom described in Daniel’s vision, one given to **“one like a son of man”** (v. 13). This is a reference to Jesus. This title of “Son of Man” was the one he used most frequently of himself in the New Testament. Jesus is given **“dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him.”** It is the servants of Jesus who will be victorious in the end, not because of any strength they possess, but because Jesus is given the kingdom and he graciously calls them his own. Amazingly, at the end of the day it is not the powerful and mighty who shall reign, but the meek who have humbled themselves, repented of their sins and trusted in Jesus. Notice what Daniel says is the end of the matter. **“And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High; their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey them”** (v. 27). The meek truly do inherit the earth.

The application of this is to choose first the kingdom of God because it is the only kingdom with a future to it. We do live *in* two kingdoms, but we can live *for* one kingdom. But we must choose to live for the kingdom with a bright future, and we choose that kingdom by choosing Jesus. On August 23, 2000, you would have felt pretty good if you owned stock in a company by the name of Enron. That was the day it reached its all-time high. But your joy would have been short-lived, because not long after that it came to light that some funny accounting had taken place, resulting in the company’s bankruptcy and its stock becoming worthless. On that same date of August 23, 2000, the day Enron’s stock peaked, there was another company that had experienced some hard times but was hopeful of a comeback. The stock of that company, a tech company by the name of Apple, was selling for \$3.88 per share. It closed Friday at about \$110 per share. Daniel 7 is clear about which kingdom has a future to it, and it is the one ruled by Jesus.

CONCLUSION:

We know the future because God tells us about it. He doesn’t sugarcoat the future, but comforts us with the reminder that he is still in control.