

War of the Gods
Messages from the Book of Daniel
Message 8

God of History
Daniel 7:1-28

The Nightmare

Imagine you are Daniel. There you are, in the middle of a sound sleep when you see through the darkness a vast ocean. The wind is blowing fiercely, kicking up huge waves. It's a frightening scene, the turbulent sea in the middle of the night. Suddenly the sea kicks up a lion from its depths. You look around for some place to hide, but it's no good. This lion has the wings of an eagle. There is no hope of escape! But then its wings are plucked off, and the lion stands up like a man. In fact it becomes very man-like. While you are wondering about the lion, a bear lunges from the sea. The bear is ravenous. Part of its last meal is still dangling from its powerful jaws, and it is looking for its next prey. Your terror increases when you hear a voice commanding the bear, "Arise, devour much flesh!" But before the bear can tear you limb from limb, a leopard springs out of the sea. But what a leopard it is! This creature has four wings. And four heads. Now you are doomed for sure!

Then you see something too terrifying for words. Another beast lunges out of the sea at you. This one is unspeakably horrible – worse than any creature you have ever seen or imagined. You scream in fear at its huge iron teeth which it is using to devour everything in its path, and its invincible ten horns which kill everyone in its way. Whatever it does not cram into its mouth, it smashes and tramples. All plants and animals, buildings and people are destroyed by this beast. Nothing survives. Everything is a wasteland in the path of this awful creature.

Suddenly the scene changes. The beasts recede into the shadows and your gaze is drawn to a palace, brightly lit, and a throne room. Numerous thrones are put in place, but one surpasses the others in glory. It is made of fire, it has wheels, and a stream of fire flows from it. But the One on the throne! The Ancient One. You are overcome by the brilliance of His majesty. His clothing and His hair are so white they flash with light. He sits, and millions and billions gather around His throne. Then the court convenes to judge the beasts. One by one they are condemned and lose their rule. The last beast is singled out for a special verdict. He is cast into the fire – not because of His power and violence, but because of his blasphemous words.

But now something even more wonderful happens. Someone – He looks like a man – is coming up through the clouds to the throne. The crowd parts, and the officers lead Him to the throne, to the Ancient One. He kneels, and the Ancient One grants Him all authority and power everywhere in heaven and on earth. His Kingdom is not over part of the earth, but encompasses all ethnic groups, and nations, and every language. People everywhere serve Him. His Kingdom is universal and eternal. This is the last Kingdom. It shall never be taken away or replaced. This Kingdom will stand forever, and this King will rule for eternity.

Who can understand things like this? You decide to ask someone and are relieved when one of the figures in your dream explains it all to you. The beasts represent a succession of kings. Finally the Kingdom shall be given to the holy people. Then the Most High shall rule forever.

The vision fades. The ravenous beasts are all gone, along with your conversation partner and the splendor of the palace. All you see is the blackness of your bedroom. You are shaking, and soaked in sweat. You are exhausted – physically, emotionally, and psychologically – but you cannot go back to sleep. You go through the next day in a daze, and it takes you weeks to recover from the power of your vision.

The Beasts

How many of you have been to New York City? Isn't it a magnificent place? Everything about it is impressive – the towering buildings; the incredible variety of people, food, and merchandise; the commercial power of Wall Street; the energy of the “city that never sleeps”. Who here has been to London? It is also a wonderful city, isn't it? How about Paris? Isn't Paris the most beautiful city in the world? By any reasonable standard, these cities are amazing. But you know there is a dark side to them as well. Crime, poverty, violence, prostitution, and all other vices flourish there. The world's cities are the center of the pornography industry and the trade in human beings for sex. Respectable businessmen devise marketing schemes to lure people into buying things they do not need by preying on their lusts. How do you think God sees the great cities of this world? Do you think He is impressed by their power and beauty? Or do you think He is angry with their sinfulness?

The book of Daniel gives us two different perspectives on the kingdoms of this world. In chapter two God sent a dream to Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. That dream was upsetting to the king because he forgot it, but the dream itself was harmless. It was a vision of a huge statue made of gold, silver, bronze, and iron. It was a glorious image! Imagine the sun sparkling on the various metals of that huge statue. God told Nebuchadnezzar that the statue represented a succession of kingdoms. His own, Babylon, was the head of gold. It was the most glorious kingdom. After him would come a kingdom a little less glorious, represented by silver. Then came a kingdom bronze, and finally one of iron. You cannot help but admire the beauty of this statue, and be impressed by it. I am sure that Nebuchadnezzar just stared in wonder. Of course the proof that he loved the vision is in chapter three, where he made such a statue for himself – with one important difference. It was solid gold! This vision came from God, and in it He represented the kingdoms by various precious metals. So even God seems to recognize the glory of these kingdoms.

Now we have another vision. God explained to Daniel that this one also shows a succession of kingdoms. But this time they are represented by terrible beasts. This was not the sort of vision where you admire the beauty of the scene. It was terrifying, and Daniel was shaken to the core by the vision. What did God mean by this vision, and what are the four kingdoms?

The first beast provides an important clue to the identity of these kingdoms. The lion is the most majestic of the beasts, and with his powerful wings he would sweep across the earth unhindered. This seems to fit the description of Babylon. Then his wings are plucked off and he is given a human heart. A new heart is the standard biblical image for conversion, and that is what we saw in Nebuchadnezzar. Toward the end of his life he no longer swept across the earth in conquest. He settled down and made Babylon the envy of the ancient world. Then God humbled him, gave him a new heart, and raised him up again. Nebuchadnezzar began as a beast, but ended a man.

If the first beast is the kingdom of Babylon, then the others must be Persia, Greece, and Rome – just as we saw in chapter two. But why did God repeat Himself here? Since we already know the kingdoms to come, why give this information again? This time God shows us another side to these kingdoms. They look magnificent to those who are privileged, but they are oppressive to those who fall under their heel. Everyone of them – Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome – was rapacious, violent, and destructive. It sounds thrilling to read the description of the hanging gardens of Babylon, but the peasants who slaved on them were not so thrilled. Persia managed a vast empire, but only by brutally crushing any rebellion in her realm. We call Alexander “the Great” – and he certainly was. But he killed thousands of soldiers – Greek and others – in his lust for power. Rome eventually brought peace to the Mediterranean basin, but the Roman empire was built on the labor of slaves and the *pax romana* was enforced with utter brutality. In the case of this final empire, even the privileged classes lived in perpetual fear. The movie *Gladiator* brilliantly pictured this. Imagine having a brother for emperor, who threatens to kill your son unless you do his bidding. Imagine serving your emperor loyally, and then finding your wife raped and your children slaughtered by a jealous

rival. Imagine what it was like to be a gladiator – earning another day of life by killing your friends. Think of the slaves who did not survive a decade in the galleys or the salt mines. Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome were horrible, horrifying beasts who destroyed anything in their path.

There are three main points to this vision. The first is that the glories of this world's kingdoms are ugly and terrifying. Have you ever seen *Jaws*, or some other horror movie? Ruth made the mistake of seeing *Jaws*, and she was afraid of going into the ocean afterward. That is too bad for Ruth's enjoyment of the ocean, but it proves the movie accomplished its goal. This vision was the ancient equivalent of an Imax showing of *Jaws*. Daniel was so scared, I am sure it took him weeks to recover. That was God's intent. God planned to scare Daniel practically to death because He wished to give Daniel an true picture of the kingdoms of this world. And the true picture of this world's kingdoms is terrifying.

People today tend to make two mistakes in looking at the world. Many people see the beauty of Paris, the wealth of New York, and the power of Washington – and they are astonished. They are amazed, and they plunge into society. They become congressmen (or lobbyists), or stock traders, or entrepreneurs – and soar to the top. They seek wealth and fame and everything money can buy in the modern world. In brief – they worship wealth and success. Money is their god. Other people recognize the devastation that modern society brings upon so many people. They see the homeless, the abandoned children, the women forced into the sex trade, the poor who can never escape their poverty – and they hate this world. Some withdraw entirely, like the Amish, and live in closed communities. Others fight against injustice by opposing globalization, big industry, Wal-Mart, and all other cultural evils. They worship an imaginary world that never existed. Their god is hate.

God looks at this world and sees it for what it truly is. This world is both beautiful and ugly. Man has accomplished much that is genuinely good, and much that is indisputably evil. This world's kingdoms are simultaneously glorious and terrifying. This also should be our perspective. A romantic view of this world is foolish, and so is a cynical view. As Christians we should be able to appreciate God's beauty and goodness wherever it shines through – and we should abhor the sin and wickedness around us. We should enjoy the good things God gives us, and work to eradicate the evil of society. We should enjoy the wonder of the modern world without worshiping it, and oppose the evil without hating the whole world.

The Ancient of Days

It must have been an intense relief to Daniel when the beasts receded and the palace came into view. This part of the vision was as stunning as the first was terrifying. Just the picture of the vast throng, the throne, the Ancient of Days would have dazzled anyone. But there was a purpose to this assembly. All these people did not gather simply to dazzle Daniel. Daniel was seeing a court assembling. The beast-kingdoms have been ravaging the earth for centuries, but their time is up! Now they will be judged. All will be found failures and cast aside. Another kingdom will take their place.

The second main point to this vision is that God rules history. God is in control. Even the beginning of this vision shows that. Did you notice how the beasts arose? They emerged from the sea because of the winds from heaven. The wind which brought forth the terrible beasts was God's wind. God sent the wind because He wanted those beasts to do His will. Of course God has to be in control if He can predict the future! From our vantage point we can look back and see that history unfolded just as this vision predicted. God can predict the future because He controls the future.

This seems like a rather trivial point, but hard as it is to believe, some Christians do not accept that God rules history. They believe that Jesus will return someday. They believe that Jesus cares for His church. But they think that history unfolds outside of God's control. I find this incredible. For one thing, if God is the creator of the universe, it makes no sense that He does not rule the affairs of men. What is He to do?

Does He leave earth and let us sort things out on our own? Scripture tells us that God fills the heavens and the earth. But then we have this passage, and thousands like it in the Bible, which explicitly tell us that God rules history.

If God really does rule history, we can draw several implications. First, whatever good or evil happens, God planned it. At first this might seem distressing. You mean God planned World War II? Yes. The assassination of President Kennedy? Yes. The spread of AIDS? Yes. How about the terrorist attacks on 9/11? Yes again. But this also means that God planned the rise of modern medicine, the end of the Cold War, the expansion of the world economy, the rapid growth of the church, and your own salvation. Why does God do these things? That is a hard question. I do not claim to have easy answers – or perhaps any answers. But that must not cause us to deny the word of God. More important than knowing why God brings hardship is knowing that He is distressed when we are distressed, He suffers with us in our trials, and everything He does is because He loves us.

The second implication is that we must not take credit for success or despair in defeat. God is in control. Sometimes He brings success, and sometimes He brings failure. Sometimes you can see your role in success or failure, but not always. Many good men died in World War II. Many survived and invented computers, put men on the moon, revolutionized agriculture, etc. Others survived, but never recovered from the shock of war. Why did some die and others live to accomplish great things? I do not know. God is in control. But even if you lost a son in the war – that will be a terrible loss – you will never entirely get over it. But you can believe that God rules the heavens and the earth, and is working out His good purpose somehow.

God rules history. We know God is good, merciful, and compassionate. The death of His Son to save us is final proof of God's love. We know He is building His Kingdom. So we always have reason for hope. Even when all seems lost we hope, for our hope is not in what we see. Our hope is in the Lord of history.

The Son of Man

The judgment proceeds. Each kingdom in turn is found unworthy and is discarded. The last kingdom, which openly insulted God (for that is what “blasphemed” means) is burned alive. This time there was no Son of God to save when he was cast into the furnace, as there was for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. The beasts have been found unworthy, but they are allowed to rule for a short while longer. Why? Why is the sentence not executed immediately? Because the new king has not arrived yet. Then as Daniel continued to watch, he saw “One like the Son of Man”. This figure came up through the clouds to the throne. That by itself is enough to tell us who this person is. This is the one who travels in the cloud. When Israel left Egypt, God led them in His cloud. When He met them on Mt. Sinai, He appeared in the clouds. Psalm 18:6-12 says,

In my distress I called upon the LORD;
to my God I cried for help.
From his temple he heard my voice,
and my cry to him reached his ears.
Then the earth reeled and rocked;
the foundations also of the mountains trembled and quaked, because he was angry.
Smoke went up from his nostrils, and devouring fire from his mouth;
glowing coals flamed forth from him.
He bowed the heavens and came down;
thick darkness was under his feet.
He rode on a cherub and flew;

he came swiftly on the wings of the wind.
He made darkness his covering,
his canopy around him, thick clouds dark with water.
Out of the brightness before him
hailstones and coals of fire broke through his clouds.

When Solomon dedicated the temple, God's cloud filled the holiest place. This passage in Daniel shows us God arriving in the heavenly palace to receive the Kingdom forever and ever. This is the rock cut without hands that demolishes all other Kingdoms and fills the earth in chapter two.

So the third main point of this passage is that the Most High will establish His Kingdom. This Kingdom will replace all other Kingdoms. It will be universal and eternal. I am sure it was profoundly comforting to hear that there would come a day when God would rule. Especially after seeing those other horrible kingdoms. This was Daniel's comfort and hope. Not only does God rule the kingdoms of this world, someday His own Kingdom will expel those other kingdoms entirely.

But what is the meaning of the Son of Man? Where does this name come from, and why is it used here? We might have been badly misled. We might have thought that this eternal kingdom would be given to an ordinary man, were it not for verse 27, where the Most High is named. I doubt that Daniel knew quite what to make of this, but fortunately we do. For this is the title which Jesus gave to Himself.

If Jesus is the Son of Man, that also leads us to several conclusions. First, that means that His Kingdom is the eternal, universal Kingdom promised in this book. This all comes together at the end of Jesus' earthly ministry. Do you remember Jesus' last words on earth? "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth." (Matthew 28:18) Then the book of Acts records what happened next. "Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight." (Acts 1:9) Do you recognize that event? That is the earth-side view of what Daniel saw from heaven – Jesus rising through the clouds to assume the throne of His Kingdom. Jesus is now on His heavenly throne ruling His Kingdom on earth.

Second, if Jesus is the Son of Man and He is ruling His Kingdom, that means that His Kingdom is spreading over the earth. Of course this is observably true, but in some circles you hear nothing but how the church is in retreat and in decline. That is certainly true in some places, but a world-wide view shows the church galloping all over other religions. Here is just one small fact. The Korean church now sends almost as many missionaries around the world as the U.S. Millions of people around the world are coming to Jesus. Last Thursday Larry and Stephanie Kraft told us that there are now established churches in one country of North Africa that 10 years ago had only scattered Christians. Jesus is on the throne, and His Kingdom is on the move. Someday the Kingdom of Jesus will cover the whole world. It may take many more centuries, but it is certain.

Third, if Jesus is the Son of Man, then for the first time in history a man is ruling in heaven. Now go home and think about that. Rule is nothing new for the Son of God. Jesus ruled as God before He was born of Mary. But now He rules as both God and man. That means that He has restored rule to mankind, and all people who are part of His Kingdom participate in ruling with Him. That is why in Daniel's vision he saw the Kingdom being given to the holy ones. Paul tells us that everyone who believes in Jesus is a holy one. We all are saints, which means holy ones. You may never be president of the United States, or governor of Pennsylvania, or even mayor of Quakertown. You may never own a business or be superintendent of the school board. But you are a ruler. In some way, in some place, God intends for you to take charge and make decisions which reflect the values of Jesus' Kingdom. If nothing else, this should be true of your house, or your dorm room. But perhaps God will call you, like Daniel, to rule in high places. Let's pray for God to

raise up His holy ones to rule on this earth.

Fourth, if Jesus is the Son of Man, that means that believers are called and equipped to conquer with Him. This world now belongs to Jesus. Unbelievers are imposters and usurpers. Do not let them intimidate you. In chapter six we saw how Daniel refused to practice his faith in private. The public square belongs to Jesus, and you are His agent. Do not be belligerent or rude, but do not let usurpers intimidate you.

Fifth and last, if Jesus is the Son of Man and He rules heaven and earth, that means there is no escaping Him. If you refuse to follow Him, He will find you and bring you to judgment. There will come a day when the books are opened, and if your name is not written with those who believe in Him, you will go to that fire that burns forever. Do not be so foolish. Take the advice God gives to kings in psalm two:

Now therefore, O kings, be wise;
be warned, O rulers of the earth.
Serve the LORD with fear,
and rejoice with trembling.
Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled.
Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

Blessed are all those who trust in Jesus. If you have not believed in Jesus, do so tonight! If you *have* believed in Jesus, continue! Reign Lord Jesus!

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