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With the Clouds of Heaven

Daniel 7:1-28

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The seventh chapter of Daniel begins this way:

In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon, Daniel saw a dream and visions of his head as he lay in his bed. Then he wrote down the dream and told the sum of the matter.

It's finally Daniel's turn to dream. The storyteller rolls back the clock about a decade to the first year of Belshazzar, which would have been about 550 BC. The implied audience, remember, is the faithful Jews living in Judah in the early 160s BC, during the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes. The purpose of the book of Daniel was to encourage them and to exhort them to stand firm for the Lord, to stand firm for his law, even as this pagan king was making it illegal for them to live according to the law and to worship the Lord, even as many of their fellow Jews were caving in to the pressure and apostatizing. The book of Daniel points them back to their ancestors who lived during the Babylonian exile and had their own struggles to remain faithful to the Lord. The story is told through their eyes to encourage the current generation.

We also need to understand that the book of Daniel now shifts its genre from tales about Daniel and his friends in the Babylonian court to apocalyptic visions. There are four visions. This

first one in Chapter 7, a second in Chapter 8, a third in Chapter 9, and a fourth spanning Chapters 10-12. In Greek, an *apokalypsis* is a revelation, an unveiling, of something. It's related to prophecy, but it usually has to do with current events and is God's way of pulling the curtain back to show that current events aren't just random or haphazard, but that he's at work behind them. Biblical apocalyptic encourages the faithful to stand firm and to trust in the Lord knowing that even as evil seems like it's out of control, it's not. God is sovereign and he—and his faithful people—will win the day. It reminds us that God is king and that he will vindicate his people for their faith.

And, as we saw with Revelation, one of the defining characteristics of apocalyptic literature is that it communicates through symbols. And that can make it difficult for us. The symbolism would have been obvious to the original hearers, but because it's very context dependent—things like culture and history, worldview and mythology and things like that—it can be very hard for us to understand. One of the hard things for us, one of the things that gets lost in translation is the visceral reaction this symbolism would have created in the original audience. For us it's just something to decode: *this* means *that*. For them, the imagery would stir up emotions. This wasn't about events thousands of years ago. This was about what they were experiencing. It was about their world, their not-too-distant past, and their not-too-distant future. It was about the present affliction, the present persecution, the present pressures that confronted them. Think of the feelings you might have as you watch the evening news: fear, dread, sadness, elation. Those sorts of feelings were connected with this imagery. The timing of this vision, at the beginning of Belshazzar's co-regency, means that Daniel's vision would coincide with big news. For millennia the Assyrian empire had dominated the Near East. The Babylonian Empire of

Nebuchadnezzar and Nabonidus and Belshazzar was the last incarnation of Assyria. To the north was the Median Empire and to the east the Persian. Cyrus the Great, the Persian emperor was on the move, gobbling up parts of Media and Babylon. In 550 BC the Medes fell to the Persians. Now Babylon was in Cyrus' sights. Here were Daniel and his people, bystanders in the middle of turbulent times. We can imagine Daniel hearing the most recent news of the fall of the Medes, going to bed, tossing and turning, finally falling into restless sleep, and dreaming. Let's continue with verse 2:

Daniel declared, "I saw in my vision by night, and behold, the four winds of heaven were stirring up the great sea. And four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another. The first was like a lion and had eagles' wings. Then as I looked its wings were plucked off, and it was lifted up from the ground and made to stand on two feet like a man, and the mind of a man was given to it. And behold, another beast, a second one, like a bear. It was raised up on one side. It had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth; and it was told, 'Arise, devour much flesh.' After this I looked, and behold, another, like a leopard, with four wings of a bird on its back. And the beast had four heads, and dominion was given to it. After this I saw in the night visions, and behold, a fourth beast, terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong. It had great iron teeth; it devoured and broke in pieces and stamped what was left with its feet. It was different from all the beasts that were before it, and it had ten horns. I considered the horns, and behold, there came up among them another horn, a little one, before which three of the first horns were plucked up by the roots. And behold, in this horn were eyes like the eyes of a man, and a mouth speaking great things. (Daniel 7:2-8)

In his vision, Daniel stands by the great sea. In the Old Testament the “great sea” always means the Mediterranean. It was the centre of the ancient world. Imagine Daniel standing in a place jutting out into the sea, a place the Rock of Andromeda at Joppa. The waters rage and the winds blow. It’s not an ordinary wind. The winds rage from north and south, east and west all at the same time and the sea churns violently around him. For all the ancient Near Eastern peoples, the sea represented chaos. Genesis opens with the sea—formless and void—representing the chaos of the uncreated world into which the Lord speaks, separating the waters, raising dry land, bringing the order needed for humans to live and to flourish. Now, in his dream, Daniel sees the sea raging. Chaos threatens the order of God’s good creation. As we look at our own current events, it’s not very hard to image what Daniel felt. Turn on the news or look on the Web and so often it seems like chaos and evil are tearing the world apart. In so many places humans languish when they should be flourishing, all because of war and corruption, because of poverty and greed and sickness. Sometimes it seems like chaos has won the day.

And who’s at the heart of the chaos? Daniel sees four ferocious beasts emerge from the sea. The beasts are symbolic and it’s hard to be certain exactly how all the symbolism here works. A lot of it seems to come from the Old Testament prophets, but it could also be coming from the mythology and the symbols of the various peoples and empires that are symbolized. Some of it is eerily similar to the symbolism of the Babylonian books Daniel would have studied in learning about divination and the symbolism of dreams. What we do know—because Daniel is told in verse 17—is that these beasts represent four empires. We know from what has preceded and what follows in Daniel that the sequence of empires begins with Assyria, of which

Babylon was the last incarnation. So a regal lion with the wings of an eagle emerges from the sea representing the greatness of Babylon. Its wings are plucked off and it is set on two feet, which reminds us of Nebuchadnezzar in Chapter 4, ranging in the wilderness like a wild animal, but eventually restored to humanity and kingship by the Lord.

From this point there’s disagreement on how to interpret the symbolism and that’s because of our distance from the original context. We just can’t be sure what the symbolism means and it then becomes very easy to look through history and cherry pick things that match the symbolism and squeeze it into our modern interpretations. I’ll just note that the rabbis and Christians for most of our history interpreted these four empires as Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. That was mostly because in the days of the rabbis and early Christians, Rome was the great global power and because Rome so often stood opposed to both the Jews and Christians. Rome fell, but Byzantium—the eastern Roman empire—remained until the 15th Century. And there were successors to Rome in the West. In 800 Charlemagne was crowned Emperor of the Romans and it wasn’t until 1806 that the Holy Roman Empire finally came to an end. But as the years went by, connecting Daniel’s fourth beast to Rome became more difficult, and since the early 19th Century folks have had to work especially hard to hold on to that interpretation, whether identifying the beast with the papacy or with the European Union—and those schemes have consistently ended up falling apart.

History gives us a better basis for interpreting Daniel’s beasts. We know now that at the time Daniel was written there was a common scheme across the Ancient Near East for describing the succession of empires. The four great empires were Assyria, the Medes, the Persians, and the Greek Macedonians. In fact, as the Romans

replaced the Greeks in the centuries that followed, they were *added* to the scheme as a *fifth* empire.

So following this common pattern, the bear represents the Medes. As in Nebuchadnezzar’s statue, it was clearly inferior to the Babylonians. The three ribs in its mouth may be a reference to Jeremiah 51:27-29, which describes the three nations that joined with the Medes in their attack on Babylon. And the four-winged, four-headed leopard then represents the Persians. The swiftness with which the Persians conquered the four corners of the earth contrasts with the ponderous bear imagery of the Medes. But Daniel’s vision really isn’t very interested in the second and third kingdoms. The focus of his dream is on the fourth. This is the kingdom that raged and threatened the people of God at the time the book was written.

And the fourth kingdom is different. As we’ll see in a bit, the first three beasts, despite appearances, were all under control. But this fourth beast, it does what it wants to do—or at least, that’s how it thinks of itself. The imagery of the great beast, exceedingly strong, and stamping into oblivion what was left after breaking things apart with its iron teeth or tusks, suggests an elephant—a good image of Alexander’s unstoppable army that conquered the territory of the other three empires. The ten horns are fitting symbols of the ten kingdoms that arose from Alexander’s empire after his death.¹ But out of those horns there came up one king in particular, who was a menace to the people of God. The little horn is, again, a fitting image of Antiochus Epiphanes. He tried to abolish the law and the worship of the God of Israel. He was the one who claimed divinity for himself. He was the cause of all their woes.

¹ Ptolemaic Egypt, Seleucia, Macedon, Pergamum, Pontus, Bithynia, Cappadocia, Armenia, Parthia, and Bactria.

But then, in the midst of the chaos, as the sea churns and these ferocious beasts rage across the earth, a new image appears—a bit like Dad coming home to find his unruly children tearing apart the house. Look at verses 9 and 10:

**“As I looked,
thrones were placed,
and the Ancient of Days took his seat;
his clothing was white as snow,
and the hair of his head like pure wool;
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.**

The beasts are brought to heel as the God of Israel takes his seat as judge. The one who tamed chaos in the first place established earthly kings to preserve his order and to promote human flourishing. These kings have done the opposite and now what at first seemed like wild and ferocious beasts stand pitifully before the judgement seat of the Most High God, his fiery throne, and before the heavenly hosts. Then verses 11 and 12:

“I looked then because of the sound of the great words that the horn was speaking. And as I looked, the beast was killed, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire. As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time.

Even as he stands before the Most High, that blasphemous little horn continues to speak. The other beasts, for all their raging, served the Living God—as we’ve seen in the first six chapters. They all, in some way and in the end, acknowledged him. The

Lord of history raised them up to serve his purposes. But this horn on the fourth beast rages against the sovereign God and is judged: killed, destroyed, and burned to oblivion. The vision gave hope to the faithful living under his reign of terror.

But that’s not all there is to it. Daniel has a second vision and this one’s not just about the bringing down of wicked rulers; this one is about the raising up of a righteous one. As St. Paul writes in Romans, creation waits with eager longing for the sons of God to be revealed. It’s not enough to judge the wicked. Creation longs for its rightful stewards. Look at verses 13 and 14:

**“I saw in the night visions,
and behold, with the clouds of heaven
there came one like a son of man,
and he came to the Ancient of Days
and was presented before him.
And to him was given dominion
and glory and a kingdom,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him;
his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
which shall not pass away,
and his kingdom one
that shall not be destroyed.**

History will not continue as a reign of terror and blasphemy, nor will it merely end in judgement. In place of the raging kings represented by ferocious beasts, Daniel now sees one “like a son of man”. In the beginning the Lord created human beings to rule his creation with goodness and wisdom as his stewards and that’s what this new figure like a son of man represents. After the Lord has judged the wicked empires of the world, this son of man arrives riding on the clouds—that’s a dramatic image of the Lord’s war chariot. He is presented before the Ancient of Day, before the Most High God, and to him is given glory and an everlasting dominion—

ultimately a kingdom that will not be destroyed.

But what does this all mean? The dream continues as one of the heavenly host explains the symbolism to Daniel in verses 15-27:

“As for me, Daniel, my spirit within me was anxious, and the visions of my head alarmed me. I approached one of those who stood there and asked him the truth concerning all this. So he told me and made known to me the interpretation of the things. ‘These four great beasts are four kings who shall arise out of the earth. But the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever, forever and ever.’

“Then I desired to know the truth about the fourth beast, which was different from all the rest, exceedingly terrifying, with its teeth of iron and claws of bronze, and which devoured and broke in pieces and stamped what was left with its feet, and about the ten horns that were on its head, and the other horn that came up and before which three of them fell, the horn that had eyes and a mouth that spoke great things, and that seemed greater than its companions. As I looked, this horn made war with the saints and prevailed over them, until the Ancient of Days came, and judgment was given for the saints of the Most High, and the time came when the saints possessed the kingdom.

**“Thus he said: ‘As for the fourth beast,
there shall be a fourth kingdom on earth,
which shall be different from all the kingdoms,
and it shall devour the whole earth,
and trample it down, and break it to pieces.
As for the ten horns,
out of this kingdom ten kings shall arise,**

**and another shall arise after them;
 he shall be different from the
 former ones,
 and shall put down three kings.
 He shall speak words against the
 Most High,
 and shall wear out the saints of the
 Most High,
 and shall think to change the times
 and the law;
 and they shall be given into his hand
 for a time, times, and half a time.
 But the court shall sit in judgment,
 and his dominion shall be taken
 away,
 to be consumed and destroyed to
 the end.
 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;
 his kingdom shall be an everlasting
 kingdom,
 and all dominions shall serve and
 obey him.'**

This is the hope of the saints. The blasphemous little monster will put himself in the place of God. He will torment the faithful. He will have power and authority and, to all appearances, it will seem like his reign will last forever—or longer than those other kingdoms, at any rate. A time, times—and that would go in sequence: four times and eight times and sixteen times and so on. But no. It's a time and times and suddenly a half. That might be a reference to the roughly three-and-a-half years Antiochus Epiphanes terrorized Judah, but it's more likely the idea that his power is cut short at its height. The Lord will give him enough rope to hang himself. And his kingdom will be given to the saints, to the holy ones of the Most High—and *his* dominion, his kingdom *will* go on forever and ever.

It's an image of the world set to rights. Chaos is finally, once and for all given order in by the Lord, and human beings are restored to their rightful place, to serve before the Lord as his stewards—as priests and kings. This

is why the Jews saw the son of man here as a symbolic representative of Israel. They were the people elect and set apart by the Lord, a people made holy to be a light to the nations—a people who, in living with the Lord in their midst—gave the world a glimpse of what creation was supposed to be like and who pointed forward to the day when it really would be set to rights and men and women would finally serve the Lord as the stewards and rulers of his creation.

The chapter ends in verse 28:

“Here is the end of the matter. As for me, Daniel, my thoughts greatly alarmed me, and my color changed, but I kept the matter in my heart.”

This is the end of the first vision, but there's more to come. This vision sets the scene and gives us the setting and timeframe for the visions that will follow. But then—and I guess I'm jumping ahead to the end of Daniel—we realise as Christians that even as Daniel's visions end, it's not *really* the end of the matter. The Lord did indeed bring down the evil Antiochus IV. The Lord did indeed vindicate his people. A new king would take the throne in Judah. But as is so often the case with Old Testament prophecy, even though we see it obviously fulfilled in the events of those days, it's fulfilled in a way that leaves things open to a final and greater fulfilment. Judah was only free for a century and then Pompey came, conquered Jerusalem for Rome, and deposed the Hasmonean dynasty. And the people would wait again for the Lord to deliver them.

It was in those dark days that Jesus was born and began his ministry and it shouldn't surprise us in the least that he took for himself this title from Daniel, son of man. He was the embodiment of the humanity we forsook in the garden and the embodiment of the Israel that Israel could never manage to be. In him, God became the first man to be what

we were created to be. And as our representative, he broke the bonds of sin by letting evil do its worst. The chaos and the vicious beasts of fallen, sinful, rebellious humanity rose up around him and did their worst, they killed him, and they buried him in the earth, and for three days evil thought it had triumphed. But on the third day, God vindicated his son, raising him from death. And as Jesus rose from his grave, so Jesus also rose to take his throne. *The* son of man has been given dominion and glory and his kingdom and as the good news of his death and resurrection goes out, the peoples, nations, and languages are being brought to him in faith, to serve him and to give him glory. And in that, we see the people of God, the new Israel, the church empowered by word and Spirit, coming on the clouds—riding the Lord's war chariot, equipped with the gospel—the good news of Jesus, crucified, risen, and enthroned in glory. And there, Brothers and Sisters, we ought to find hope and inspiration to stand firm in faith even as the seas rage today, as new beasts emerge from the dark waters, even as they speak vain and blasphemous things. Jesus has won the decisive battle. He now sends out: Onward! Christian soldiers. And on we go, taking up our crosses into the world, knowing that the one who humbled himself on the cross and who conquered by his blood not only stands with us, but has filled us with his own Spirit and now goes on before us.

Let's pray again our Collect: Almighty God, consider the heartfelt desires of your servants, we pray, and stretch out the right hand of your majesty to defend us against all our enemies, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*