

Living the Nightmare

Daniel 7

Daniel 7 records a terrifying vision that Daniel was given to show him the world he was living in and the hope of God's ultimate triumph. Christians need to be aware of what is going on around us and behind the scenes, and confident in what Jesus has done and will do.

The basic explanation for the whole chapter is given in verses 17 and 18: "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." But God gave Daniel and us this vision in apocalyptic language for a purpose, so we must engage with this.

This style of writing is apocalyptic, it's about unveiling what's really going on in the world. There are elements of this that are incomprehensible to us so symbolism and code language is used, which requires interpretation. Daniel 2 gives us help with this as the two dreams clearly parallel each other. We needn't press every symbol for an exact match because "images speak truly and accurately but not precisely" (Tremper Longman III, NIV Application Commentary). We're meant to feel that this vision is about the world as it currently is – in Daniel's day many centuries ago, and in ours today.

1. Earthly chaos.

The vision starts with the sea (often associated with chaos and danger in ancient Near Eastern cultures) violently churned up by the winds from every direction. A series of horrifying creatures emerge from it, which represent humans. These kings and their kingdoms are shown as beasts not only because of how powerful they are but also because they have become sub-human, they have degenerated to becoming like beasts in their greed and violence. They may be at the extreme end of human behaviour but we're all on this spectrum: going our own way and rejecting God's ways does this to us. It can be easy to identify this in others, but "line separating good and evil passes ... through all human hearts" (Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* 1918–1956)

The description of the fourth beast signals an intensification in what's happening. It is so terrible that it can't be compared to any earthly animal and its destructive powers seem to have no limit: "it shall devour the whole earth, and trample it down, and break it to pieces" (verse 23). The horrible little horn (another symbol for strength) that comes from it challenges God Himself (25) and makes life terrible for God's people (21, 25). Is this vision true for even the pleasant places in the world? Yes - apocalyptic goes beneath the surface to reveals what's really going on. Wherever we are, there are families and workplaces and neighbourhoods and nations and cultures are ravaged by sin. Some of it is obvious to us, some less so because we're so used to it or we've chosen to ignore it.

2. Heavenly peace

The other location contrasts with and answers what Daniel has seen. He must have felt powerless but now he's in the presence of God almighty. He saw terrible creatures but now He sees the Creator. What we're told about His hair, clothes, and throne symbolise that God is "a judge who has the wisdom to sort out right from wrong, the purity to persistently choose the right, and the power to enforce his judgements" (ESV Study Bible). Living as an exile, Daniel must have felt outnumbered on a daily basis but now He sees that God's kingdom is countlessly vast (10, see also 2 Kings 6:16). The beast is destroyed with an almost anticlimactic ease.

Daniel uses a phrase in describing God's triumph that became extremely significant: "one like a son of man" (13). The most obvious explanation of what that title means is a human but His mode of transport is divine: God alone "makes the clouds his chariot" (Psalm 104:3). To come to the Ancient of Days and be given "dominion and glory" and "an everlasting dominion" rather than punishment for one's sins is something that no mere human could expect. So who is He? Over 80 times in the gospels, Jesus calls Himself "the Son of Man". It wasn't a common title in the Old Testament or the world Jesus lived in, so He's using it to refer to Daniel 7. He does this most dramatically, when the High Priest is trying to find a legal reason to kill Him (Matthew 26:63-64).

For those with eyes of faith to see it, the crucifixion of Jesus is the moment that Daniel 7 is fulfilled. Jesus suffers all the greed and lust for power and injustice and violence of beastly kingdoms as two of them put Him to a terrible death. It looks like they have trampled Him down but they don't realise that by letting them do so, He has defeated them. The power of death, the great threat of every monstrous tyrant from the school bully to the latest dictator, is undone, because death cannot hold Him (Colossians 2:15, see also Hebrews 2:6-15). Having risen to victorious life, Jesus ascended to the Father, the Ancient of Days, and was given dominion over all things, as Daniel saw. He shares this victory with His people (Colossians 1:13).

If we have put our trust in Jesus, we are between the granting of this kingdom to Jesus and its final establishment. We are between judgement being made on the beast and being served by its final destruction. One day heaven will come down and get the hell out of earth but it takes faith and apocalyptic vision to see it at present.

We are more fully aware of what's happening here than Daniel was because we have God's victory accomplished by Jesus. So our reaction needn't be exactly the same as his but we shouldn't dismiss it.

Twice Daniel tells us how troubled he was by this vision (15, 28). Maybe he realised that the kingdom he has served for 50 years under Nebuchadnezzar was soon to collapse under its new ruler, Belshazzar. Perhaps he was sympathising with the suffering of God's people which is to come.

I'm not convinced that what I'm going to suggest now from my own experience is what Daniel felt, but I think there are some similarities. I don't see or sense frightening monsters around every corner, but I feel uneasy a lot of the time, I'm aware that there is nothing neutral in all of creation and so I sense this everywhere I go and whatever I'm doing. From shops to workplaces, on phones and in our homes, Christians should experience a dissonance, a discord, a tension. We

live in kingdoms that do not acknowledge our King. We must realise that this means we cannot trust our instincts or the ways of the world around us. We have to keep asking, “Is this what King Jesus thinks? Is this what He loves? Is this what He does and wants us to do?” It’s OK to be troubled by those kind of questions and the decisions they lead us to.

How do we relate to the world as it is, living in it but separated from it? The first six chapters of Daniel illustrate what faithful living in this world can look like. The extreme differences between the bestial kingdoms of the earth and the pure and perfect kingdom of our God are literally light and darkness but Daniel and his companions worked for and flourished in one of those dark kingdoms. They discerned how to live with a skilful balance: accepting some aspects of Babylonian life and rejecting others. Their careers last decades, and their lives are occasionally at risk!

Christians are not called to withdraw from the world but neither are they to be like it. Colossians 3 gives us a helpful way to understand this, with language that echoes Daniel 7. Paul explains how to think (Colossians 3:1-2, 5) and then how to act (Colossians 3:6-25). He spends most of his time focused on how we relate to people around us. The conflict between the kingdoms isn’t to make us angry and aggressive towards others, that would be to become like the beasts. Instead we “fight” by being like Jesus: pure, patient, humble, selfless, loving. He is our Lord (Colossians 3:23-24). When we do this, we become a vision like Daniel 7 for those around us, but one that may perhaps be understood more easily.

Following this message we showed a classic performance of Ancient of Days by Ron Kenoly, which you can watch here: https://youtu.be/V4dR_zuB3qk

Questions for small groups:

- Do you think that the trauma of the pandemic might cause us to look back on life before as better than it really was?
- What is your initial response to apocalyptic visions like Daniel 7?
- What do you think about a quote that Luke referenced from Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn which suggests that beasts lurk in each one of us? How does that impact our understanding of ourselves and people around us (particularly with whom we disagree strongly)? “The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either -- but right through every human heart -- and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained” (Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* 1918–1956)
- Luke talked about living with a sense of unease as he noticed the clashes between God’s kingdom and the kingdoms of this world – is this something you have experienced? Why do think Christians should think this way, and what are the risks of doing so?
- How can Colossians 3 and Ephesians 6 help us to understand what “conflict” looks like for Christians in this present age?