

# The Everlasting Kingdom

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Preacher: Rev. Daniel Beilman

[ 0 : 0 0 ] during the Christmas season. And so just the Christmas portion is performed with the hallelujah tacked on to the end. But the hallelujah only ends part two, and there's actually a whole third part, 30 minutes of really beautiful music left to go, music about the implications of the resurrection and eternity.

And I was a part of a performance of the Messiah at a church in Florida. And after we performed, we did a lot of part three, and after we did Messiah, an older gentleman came up to me and said, now all that stuff after the hallelujah, did you write that?

And as graciously as I could, I replied to him, why, yes, I did. Yeah. So the end of Messiah paints for us a picture of eternity, all made possible because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And we find that also in the book of Daniel. In chapter 7, this book does the same thing. But we often stop at chapter 6, because there's a change in tone after chapter 6, and Daniel becomes more difficult to read, and we tend to ignore or overlook chapters 7 through 12.

And so the story of Daniel in the lion's den becomes, in our minds, ipso facto the last chapter of the book of Daniel. For the next few weeks, as we continue in Daniel, we are going to encounter beauty, epic drama, horrible enemies, and resplendent heroes.

[ 1 : 3 5 ] Daniel is a beautiful work of art. And if we are given some keys to unlock its meaning, we can draw unceasing encouragement from its message. Instead of the three typical points of a sermon, I'm actually just going to ask two questions.

The first is, what in the world does all this mean? And the second question I'm going to ask, or we're going to ask together, is, wow, wouldn't it be great to have a vision like this?

What does it mean? Wouldn't it be nice to have a vision like this? We're asking questions, and so doing, we're implying that we need God's help to answer them. So let's ask his help right now.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, ancient of days, you who sits on a throne of flames, you who judges the world and all of its inhabitants rightly, we need your wisdom to understand this, the vision you gave your servant, Daniel, that in understanding it, we might behold you rightly and worship you rightly and know your plan for us and for the world, which you created and you love and are determined to rescue and redeem.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. So, what does it all mean? I think I asked, what in the world does it all mean?

[ 3 : 0 5 ] That might sound a bit flippant, but people do ask, what does this all mean? With a good deal of resignation. Because it's very difficult to read. It's not the clearest part of scripture and most people move on to a part that is clearer.

This kind of literature is called apocalyptic literature. Parts of the book of Daniel and of Ezekiel and the book of Revelation are examples of apocalyptic literature.

Apocalyptic sounds a bit scary. We hear the word apocalypse and we think of vast, fiery destruction or world-ending cataclysm and it gets a little confusing because many then try to read specific current day events and people into these writings and it's understandable because it often feels like the end of the world as it does now.

I mean, you feel it, right? I mean, we have like these we've come to these two options. We didn't think either one would get this far and now they're both there at the same time.

The Cubs and the Indians and the World Series together. Surely the end of the world is at hand. Apocalyptic literature has a lot to say about the end times but the end times is not the primary goal of this kind of literature.

[ 4 : 3 4 ] The word apocalypse actually means revelation to reveal. Apocalyptic literature reveals not by predicting per se but by showing us what is going on behind the veil in events present, past and

future.

What we see behind the veil is beautiful and it's terrifying and it's confounding all at once. So how do we understand it?

Well, we understand it by knowing what it is that it is trying to accomplish and by focusing on what's clear and what we know.

So what is apocalyptic literature trying to accomplish? Well, biblical apocalyptic like Daniel 7 has three goals. The first, to reveal the ending of this present age which is an age characterized by conflict and how it is replaced by an age of peace.

Two, to reveal the kingdoms of this world and how they are replaced by the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ. And three, the revelation is unfolded and complex and mysterious imagery in order to comfort and exhort the faithful.

[ 5 : 58 ] You might want to write these down because this could apply to Revelation, Ezekiel, Daniel. And if you're going through the lectionary, that's the tool that Anglicans use to go through the Bible every two years.

Right now, we're in the book of Revelation. The three keys, age of conflict replaced by age of peace. Two, kingdoms of this world are replaced by the kingdoms of God and of his Christ. And three, the mysterious imagery is meant to comfort. And comfort is exactly what Daniel and his fellow Israelites needed. The vision occurred in the first year of Belshazzar's reign.

Belshazzar's father, Nabonidus, was extremely unpopular. He left the city and left his son, Belshazzar, in charge. In the same year, Babylon would be hearing rumblings from the north, from the east, about this new power that's stirring up.

It overthrew the Median Empire, and this new Persian Empire is big, and it's led by a charismatic leader by the name of Cyrus. Now, imagine yourself as an Israelite.

[ 7 : 11 ] Your homeland has already been wiped out by the Babylonians. You're in exile in this foreign land, and you've been instructed by God to work and to pray for the good of this city and to make it your home.

But now, this empire's leadership is extremely unstable, and it wouldn't be hard to imagine this new northern power sweeping down and destroying everything. So what becomes of you?

Are you in exile somewhere else? Do you become a slave to this new power? Do you even survive? Much less, can you return to your native land someday?

What hope do you have? And then God lifts the veil, reveals to Daniel what is really going on in the world. So let's look at this vision.

The first thing that Daniel sees is a sea. In the Bible, the sea is a symbol of chaos and opposition to God. Then out from this tempest of rebellion comes four creatures, beasts, what you heard about, and we can call them monsters.

[ 8 : 27 ] They're hideous, and each beast is followed by another, more hideous, more gruesome. The first three have features that resemble earthly animals. The fourth, I don't know what the fourth is.

It's hideous. With iron teeth that devour and chew and strong legs which crush anything it doesn't devour. And then it has ten horns.

And three of those horns are replaced by another horn, and that horn has eyes and teeth. Well, later in this chapter we learn that the beasts are kingdoms.

The vision declares that Daniel's world is being run by a succession of fearsome monsters that will go from bad to worse, each one more frightening than the one before it.

So who or what do these monsters represent? Well, if you look at the structure of Daniel, chapter seven seems to be a companion chapter to chapter two.

[ 9 : 31 ] Now in chapter two we saw a vision that Nebuchadnezzar had of a statue which represented the kingdoms of Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome.

And is that what these four beasts represent? Well, probably. Now can we identify those ten horns? Well, some people have tried to identify them as perhaps different caesars that were particularly bad, or maybe these are ten or so rulers throughout history that have been particularly bad and there have been efforts to identify them.

Well, Daniel himself asks for an interpretation of this vision. He's especially curious and frightened probably of this fourth beast and the angel obliges and actually interprets the dream for him but doesn't identify the kings or the kingdoms, which is important.

Remember, we stick with what we know. So because these identities remain unknown, the attempt to identify the various beasts or horns actually detracts.

it directs us away from the proper interpretation of the vision. Now here's why. Any interpretation that says that fourth beast lies in the past or lies in the future presumes that our current situation is less beastly.

[ 11 : 03 ] Remember, one purpose of this type of literature is to shed light on the current age of conflict and of the kingdoms of this world. Now it's in one sense true that we are in the same age as Daniel.

A big age. An age of conflict. And I'll explain how that's true in a minute. But the situation for God's people has always been beastly.

The dream tells us that it continues to be beastly today. In a brief survey of world Christianity would quickly reveal this to you. So take Asiya Bibi, a Christian mother of five, who has been on death row in Pakistan since 2010 on a charge of blasphemy.

Take Christians in Kenya being targeted by Al-Shabaab. 148 were killed last year in an attack on a university. Six were killed just earlier this month on a border raid.

Christians targeted by this extremist group. Or take Christians who have recently fled from Mosul to Turkey. Just two days ago, three days ago, on Thursday in the Wall Street Journal, there was an article about how Turkey is not going to let Christians return to Mosul their homes, their hometowns.

[ 12 : 26 ] The situation for God's people is beastly. Verse 25 says, The beast shall speak words against the Most High, 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.

So how long will that last? Does it go on forever? In ancient mythology, yes, the answer would be yes. It does go on forever. These two equal ultimate realities, chaos and order, just continue in conflict forever and ever.

But that's not what the Bible says. Daniel says that the struggle lasts for a time, times, and half a time. And there have been efforts to figure out what that means, how many days, months, weeks, years, does that mean?

Let's focus on what we know. We know that it's a finite time. It doesn't last forever. Here and elsewhere, the Bible repeatedly declares that God alone is ultimate, and that in the end, his order will prevail.

These four beasts, they look nightmarish, but the focus of the passage isn't on the beasts per se. It's on the ultimate fate that they look forward to, on the day of judgment.

[ 13 : 51 ] On that day, God wins the final victory. God will have us not look at the beasts, but to look at the throne. And there we see the Ancient of Days, wise, glorious, beautiful, powerful.

The English Puritans would have used words like awful and terrible. There he sits on his throne, righteous in judgment. And someone like a son of man is presented to the Ancient of Days.

What is Daniel seeing here? What is this one who looks like a son of man? Well, son of man simply means human, much like how the Pevensies are referred to in the Chronicles of Narnia as sons of Adam and daughters of Eve.

Just human. But this verse says like a son of man. So this figure represents, excuse me, resembles humanity.

But he also comes with the clouds of heaven. Now that's an expression that the Bible uses to refer to God. So Daniel would have seen someone that was like human and God at the same time.

[ 15 : 07 ] Now it just so happens that this expression, son of man, was one of Jesus' favorite titles to apply to himself. As a matter of fact, the night before he goes to the cross, he is before the chief priest and the elders and the scribes and he says to them, this is great.

It's just wonderful to see the Bible like tie all together. He says, I tell you, from now on, you will see the son of man seated at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven.

And then they go nuts. This is blasphemy, they say. Because they know exactly what he's trying to do. He's referring to Daniel 7. He's identifying himself with this figure who is human and God at the same time.

And in Daniel 7, which direction is this figure who is like the son of man going? Is he descending on clouds? No. He's going up.

He's ascending. We see in Daniel 7 the ascension of Christ. That event that happened 40 days after the resurrection. In Acts chapter 1 we read, as Jesus' disciples were looking on, he was lifted

up.

[16:24] And a cloud took him out of their sight. One of my favorite illustrations from the Bible is by the German Albrecht Durer. It's the ascension of Christ.

It's actually on the cover of your bulletin. It's very clever. You can just see Jesus' feet. And you see the cloud, right?

And as an aside, what I particularly like about this illustration is it doesn't present Jesus as having gone miles and miles into the sky.

Jesus ascends to heaven but he remains near. You see that? He will remain close to his people.

Christ's ascension is the culmination of his redemptive work here on earth.

That redemptive work included his suffering, his crucifixion, his burial, and his resurrection from the dead. And it's redemptive and we need it to be redemptive because of what we read in Daniel chapter 7 verse 10.

[17:34] There is a court that sits in judgment and books are opened. So when the books of our lives are opened, the books of our lives, what shall be found?

Well, we know what's going to be found because we confess every Sunday that we have sinned against God and thought, word, and deed by what we have done and by what we have left undone. But in love, the ancient of days sent his own son to endure the punishment that we deserve and to conquer death for us, something we couldn't do for ourselves. We become one with God's son. And that is how we too will be given the kingdom to possess forever. Forever and ever. There's something interesting about the timing.

We said that the biblical apocalyptic shows us how the current age of conflict is replaced by the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ, by an age of peace.

[18:34] Now in Jesus' time, the Jews believed that this moment in kingdoms here or replaced by the kingdoms here and this age replaced by this age is one decisive event. The king would come, judge his enemies and bring the age of peace.

But in Jesus, this is what happened. The ages overlapped. And this is how we can be in the same age as Daniel.

And yet the kingdom of God has still come. There was a decisive event but it hasn't been consummated yet. And so we live in the current age and in the age to come.

It's the already but not yet. And so the saints must still wait. Even while the kingdom of God renews the world and while we enjoy our participation in that renewal by feeding the poor, preaching good news, welcoming the stranger, even in the midst of this renewal, the beasts still trample and devour and destroy.

So, while the beasts are doing that and while we wait, wouldn't it be great to have a vision? Why does Daniel get this vision? Why can't I in the middle of the night have this amazing vision of the ancient of the days with hair that's bright white like wool and rivers of fire flowing from his throne?

[20:01] Wouldn't that encourage you? I would love, I think, to have a vision like that. Think how encouraged you would be.

But here's the thing. God has given us something better than this vision. He's given us Jesus.

Hebrews 1.1 says that long ago at many times and in many ways God spoke to our fathers by the prophets. He spoke through a vision to one of his prophets, Daniel.

But, in these last days he has spoken to us by his son whom he appointed the heir of all things. The son beats any vision you could ever have. He's the ultimate revelation. We see the son and we see who God is and we see what God's plan is for us and for a creation that he loves and is intending to fully redeem and rescue.

Dreams and prophecies are helpful but they're incomplete. It's the person of Jesus who most clearly shows us who God is and what his plan is. The person of Jesus who walked on this earth, he ate and he drank, he stubbed his toe and laughed with his friends and wept when they died.

[21:24] Look on him. Magnify him. When you're anxious or fearful or sad or depressed or lonely or despondent or afraid.

How do we do that? We look to the Gospels. The first four books of the New Testament, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John give us four portraits of this figure who was like the Son of Man.

So if you lack hope or if you have a deep unfulfilled longing, spend time in Matthew.

Immerse yourself in Matthew. Matthew gives us a picture of Jesus who came to fulfill the hope of a nation, Israel, and fulfilled all the prophecies made about the Messiah.

If you feel like you lack power and authority, that is, if you feel sin or sickness or addiction or depression or workaholicism has you beat, then immerse yourself in the book of Mark who paints a picture of Jesus who was like an action hero going from victory to victory, conquering the devil and his works, conquering sin and sickness and then he confers that authority on those who follow him. [ 22 : 56 ] If you feel like you are on the margins or if your heart breaks for those who live on the margins, if you feel like you lack belonging, then live in the book of Luke which paints a picture of Jesus constantly going to those who are on the fringes, loving them and identifying with him.

And if you feel like the world is full of darkness and despair, then live in the book of John which paints a picture of Jesus as being light, light that has come into the darkness, Jesus who brings light and life.

if November 8th scares you to death, then return to Daniel chapter 7. Look behind the veil.

See God, the judge, on his throne and you will see something Daniel didn't know to look for. You will see Jesus, the one, like a son of man, being 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. Take heart, you saints.

[ 24 : 29 ] For though it seems like the powers of this world may prevail, the Ancient of Days comes and you will possess the kingdom, an everlasting kingdom.

let's pray. God of our ancestors, God of our people, before whose face the human generations pass away, we thank you that in you we are kept safe forever, that the broken fragments of our history are gathered up in the redeeming act of your dear son.

Help us to walk daily in the communion of saints, declaring our faith in the forgiveness of sins and the resurrection of the body. For your glory, not for ours, for yours and yours alone.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.