

Four monsters and a throne

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[0 : 00] So the first reading today is taken from the book of Daniel chapter 7 verses 1 to 14. Daniel chapter 7 1 to 14 and that's on page 900 of the Bibles that you'll find on your chairs.

Daniel chapter 7 1 to 14. 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. 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 eagle's 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.

[1 : 24] 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. 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.

[2 : 37] 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.

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. 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. So Daniel chapter 7 starting at verse 15.

[3 : 49] 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 the 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 the 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.

[5 : 24] 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.

Their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey them. Here is the end of the matter. As for me, Daniel, my thoughts greatly alarmed me, and my colour changed, but I kept the matter in my heart.

Ben, thanks very much. Thanks very much indeed for reading. As John said, Nigel is ill. At lunchtime, I think, yesterday, he thought he'd be well enough to be dosed up, but by the evening, it was abundantly clear he was not going to be well enough, even if he was dosed up.

[6 : 50] So you can completely ignore, you never hear this, do you? You can completely ignore the outline on the back of the service sheet today. But we are going to speak on Daniel 7.

Nigel is going to be picking up on the book of Daniel, where he left off last term. And speaking on Daniel 7, I have spoken on Daniel 7 before, so I thought rather than trying to preach Nigel's sermon, I'd preach my own sermon instead, which I don't think I can preach.

I'm not Nigel Stiles, am I? I don't feel at all offended, so you'll agree with that. I'm not Nigel Stiles, so I think I'm much happier preaching my own sermon.

Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you very much for this glorious vision at the very heart of the book of Daniel. And we pray this morning, we thank you for the privilege we have of looking at it together and studying it together.

And we pray, please, that you would help us to receive your word with honest and good hearts. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

[7 : 59] Well, if you visited Westminster Abbey, you may well have seen the memorial to Lewis Carroll, who is the author of Alice in Wonderland. He died in 1898, and his memorial stone asks the question, is all our life then but a dream?

Is all our life then but a dream? It's a very profound question, isn't it? What is reality? What is the key to understanding reality?

Is there more to life than we can simply see and touch and experience day to day? Well, wonderfully, there is a key because the message of the book of Daniel is that God is at the center of reality.

He is the key to understanding our world. He is the key to understanding our lives. And that is reinforced most wonderfully here in Daniel chapter 7. It's the middle chapter of the whole book. And here in the middle part of the middle chapter, we have this glorious vision of the living God sitting on the throne of heaven.

[9 : 09] Now, Daniel 7 to 12, the second half of the book, is written in a different style to the first half of the book. It's what is known as apocalyptic language. The word means revealing or unveiling.

You find it in other Bible books as well, so Ezekiel and Revelation. It's a way of describing the world using symbols and patterns and dreams and visions and things.

It is if you are, if you're an arty person, it is impressionistic. So imagine you go to the National Gallery, and if you go with your magnifying glass and you look at a painting by Monet, then all you'll see is kind of red and green splodges and dots and that kind of thing.

Completely meaningless. But actually, if you stand back from the picture, well, what you'll see is not those splodges, but the most wonderful picture of poppies or whatever it is.

And it's the same with apocalyptic literature. We're not meant, I don't think, to focus too much on the details, but rather to stand back and to enjoy and to appreciate the big picture.

[10:18] And like the rest of the book, if you were here, as we're looking at Daniel in the autumn, you'll remember that the whole book is here to enable those who belong to Jesus to stand firm as followers of Jesus and to do so publicly.

And that is what this chapter is here to help us to do. It's why, of course, if you're here investigating the Christian faith, it's actually a great book to engage with because it helps us to understand the nature of reality and the character of God, the very things that enable those who do belong to Jesus to stand firm publicly as his people.

So, three reasons to stand firm. First of all, stand firm by understanding the pattern of history. By understanding the pattern of history.

And that is verses 1 to 8. Have a look at verses 1 to 3. 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. Daniel declared, I saw in my vision by night and behold, the four winds of heaven were stirring up the great sea.

[11:35] And four great beasts came up out of the sea different from one another. Now here is Daniel. He's now in his mid-sixties. It's funny, isn't it? We tend to think of Daniel as being a younger man, but he's now, by this time in the book, he's in his mid-sixties.

And he's at the seaside, not Bournemouth, on a beautiful sunny afternoon. But something far, it's far more troubling, isn't it, as we see what is going on here.

There's a great storm on the horizon. The sea in biblical imagery, so often a picture of chaos, of threat to God's people. And then out of the sea come four great beasts.

And we're told what they are in verse 17, where Daniel is given the interpretation. Verse 17, these four great beasts are four kings who shall arise out of the earth.

And it's most likely, I think, these four kings, these four kingdoms, they correspond to some of the kingdoms which we see earlier on in the book. So the first is a lion, verse four, with powerful eagle's wings.

[12:42] The wings are torn off. It then stands like a man and it's given a new mind. So now, rather than being more animal-like, it seems to be more human.

In fact, it looks very much like what happens to King Nebuchadnezzar in chapter four, for those who are familiar with the book, as he came to his spiritual senses and as he humbled himself before God.

It is a picture of the Babylonian empire. The next kingdom, verse five, is a sort of military, it's a military picture, isn't it?

This bear, most likely the Persian empire, which defeated the Babylonian empire. That's something we see in chapter six with the death of King Belshazzar and the rise of Darius the Mede.

The three ribs, perhaps the remains of the three empires it conquered. The next kingdom resembles a leopard with four wings, a turbocharged animal, reflecting the astonishing speed with which the Greek empire under Alexander the Great conquered the Middle East.

[13:53] And finally, verse seven, a terrifying, enormously powerful, the horns in the Bible being a picture of strength. Well, this beast has just one horn, not just one horn, but ten.

Here is the mighty Roman empire with its great military conquests. You can't visit Rome even today, can you? But be impressed by the great demonstration of might and power of that city. Several years ago, Rachel and I went to see Helen Mirram star as the queen in the play *The Audience*. I don't think it's on anymore, but it's a fantastic play. It's all about the weekly audience which the queen has had with her prime ministers at 12 then, from Winston Churchill all the way through to David Cameron.

And it illustrates brilliantly the short-lived nature of political power. So it started off bizarrely with John Major, who was pretty short-lived, and then Winston Churchill trying to cling on to power, Anthony Eden disgraced, Howard Wilson resigning because of ill health, and so on.

The short-lived nature of political power. Well, Daniel 7 is not so much the rise and fall of individual leaders, but the rise and fall of nations and empires.

[15:20] And while these beasts describe particular kingdoms, they equally describe every kingdom, every power that is ruled. That I think is the significance of the little horn in verse 8, which we're told more about in verses 21 and 22, where we see its wickedness is directed against God

and his people, verse 21.

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.

Right up until the final day of history, it will wage war against God and wage war against his people. In other words, as follows of Jesus, we should expect the world to be a hostile place.

That is to be expected. And I think it's fair to say the relative freedom which we have enjoyed in this country in recent history is not the norm.

Greater hostility is the norm, and of course that is what we see so often in other places across the world. Now notice really that what we see here in these first eight chapters completely goes against the assumptions of our culture.

[16:43] We're constantly being fed the lie, aren't we, of evolutionary progress, that civilizations become more and more enlightened at the triumph of human progress.

Well that is wishful thinking. I mean who would have thought just over a hundred years ago that Europe was about to be engulfed in two world wars. Whereas Christians rather than being sentimental wishful thinkers like that, actually we are realists.

And that of course is one of the reasons why followers of Jesus are enabled and are able to stand as his people and to stand firm as his people because we understand the world we live in.

We understand what the world is like, what kind of place it is. So we're not thrown by the pattern of history or by rulers who oppose God's people, whether it's Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East or whether it's the intolerance of the secular liberal establishment in this country towards those who don't agree with it.

But the other reason why those of us who have followed Jesus can stand firm is because did you notice in these verses that even in the midst of everything that's going on that it's clear that actually there is someone else who is in charge.

[18:08] Did you notice that in verse four? We're told its wings were torn off and it is lifted from the ground. Or verse five, it was raised up.

Verse six, it was given authority to rule. In other words, none of these great powers ultimately were in charge of their own destiny. neither in their coming to power nor in their losing their power.

And that brings us to our second point. Stand firm, there will be a final day. Stand firm, there will be a final day. Have a look at verses nine and ten.

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 and thousands, a thousand thousands served him and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him.

[19:19] The court sat in judgment and the books were opened. moment. Well, these verses, they're a picture, aren't they, of ordered calm after verses one to eight.

As we look into the throne room suddenly of heaven, no one's in a panic and no one is taken by surprise. This, if you like, is the view behind the scenes of history.

Just turn back, keep a finger in Daniel 7 and just turn back to Daniel chapter 1. Let's just remind ourselves of how the book begins and what really are the two key verses of the book just in terms of setting our scene, setting the scene, Daniel chapter 1, verses 1 and 2.

Because you see, the whole book of Daniel is about two kingdoms. Chapter 1 verse 1, in the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem and besieged it.

That's one kingdom. It is the world as we see it. The world as it kind of hits us in the media, the newspapers, the stuff that's in the headlines, the stuff that history is made of.

[20:38] But then there's another kingdom, verse 2, and the Lord gave Jehoiakim, king of Judah, into his hands. Because standing above every human kingdom is God's kingdom, the Lord who is the Lord of history.

And Daniel 7 is the moment at which the curtain, if you like, is pulled back on God's kingdom for everyone to see. see. I wonder if you ever had the experience of going to a fair ground and you see one of those hair-raising rides.

If you're anything like me, unlike my children of course, but if you're anything like me, you say to yourself, you'd never get me up in one of those things. As people are being hurled around all over the place, the whole thing looks completely out of control, people screaming their heads off, the whole thing completely terrifying, you can't seem to predict which way it's going to move, all that kind of stuff, what's going to happen next.

Until that is, behind the scenes, you see a man in a little cubicle just kind of sitting there, holding on to his mug of tea, and he is completely in control.

And he's the guy with the stop-go button. And he's just enjoying his cup of tea, everything's completely normal, he's not screaming, he's not panicking, it's just fine.

[22 : 05] Well, that is the picture here, isn't it, on a cosmic scale. In verse nine, thrones are placed, but only one is occupied, the one that matters.

Here is God taking his throne, taking a seat for the final judgment. White, of course, a picture of God's perfect purity, his justice, his consuming holiness. Fire represents the presence of God. God, in verse ten, he is served by thousands upon thousands, and the books are opened. It is a preview of the judgment day.

The point being that it's only a matter of time before every person, every individual, and every kingdom and nation and power that sets itself up against God, it's only a matter of time before they come crashing down.

Just what happened in Daniel chapter five to Belshazzar, for those who are familiar with the book, as he faced the judgment of God. But here in chapter seven, this is judgment not simply of one person, but it's universal, isn't it?

[23 : 15] Verse ten, ten thousands times ten thousands stood before him. It is an awesome picture of universal judgment.

judgment. Now I guess some of us may find this very hard to come to terms with, the idea that there might be a judgment day, but have you ever thought about and considered the alternative?

What if there were no thrones placed? What if there was no courtroom? What if no books were opened? What if no one was ever held to account? What if people can just do things in the world, which ultimately are of no consequence?

Why this world would be a hellish place, wouldn't it? A terrible place. No, the judgment of evil is good news. And so, verse 11, the horn is destroyed.

There's no great power struggle on the judgment day, there's no titanic battle. So I think this is the question which you and I are meant to ask. Look again at verse nine.

[24 : 24] If you could look up as Daniel looked up at that moment, and if you could see what Daniel saw at that moment, how would that transform either the week you have just lived or the week you might be about to live as you go into the week today?

as we said at the beginning, the book of Daniel is written to enable and encourage Christians to stand firm publicly as God's people.

Many of us will know, I guess, exactly the issues where we find that the hardest, perhaps the issues last week when we really struggled to do that, perhaps the issues coming up next week where actually we know, yep, on Monday that's going to be the challenge.

Or when I meet up with so-and-so on Wednesday, that's going to be the challenge. But if you could look up and see what Daniel saw, wouldn't that transform the situation?

And you say to yourself, yes, I will take a stand. I don't know where it's going to lead. I don't know how costly it's going to be. Think of Daniel in the lion's den. Think of him in the fire in previous chapters.

[25 : 46] things. But actually to have this great confidence that there is one on the throne in heaven and that there is a judgment to come.

I take it it's this reality that back in chapter 2 enables Daniel to say to King Nebuchadnezzar, no wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he's asked about. But there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries. I take it's this reality that in chapter 3 enabled Daniel to say to Nebuchadnezzar, if we are thrown into a blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it and he will rescue us from your hand, O king.

I take it's this reality that in chapter 5 enabled Daniel to say to King Belshazzar, but you, O Belshazzar, have not humbled yourself. It's a brave thing to say, isn't it, to a king.

Stand firm, there will be a final day. And of course, if you're here this morning and you're just looking on the Christian faith, why this helps us to answer Lewis Carroll's question.

[26 : 57] is all our life then but a dream? No, it's not a dream. The lives we live are reality. But there is a backdrop behind the lives that we live which is equally real, although we cannot see it.

Pull back the curtain of our lives, pull back the curtain on Sunday the 18th of February 2018, look behind the scenes and God is on his throne.

So, firstly, stand firm, understand the pattern of history. Secondly, stand firm, there will be a final day. Thirdly, stand firm because Jesus Christ is Lord and he will be forever.

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 and 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.

[28 : 15] His dominion is an everlasting dominion which shall not pass away and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. Here is one, he's described one like a son of man, fully human, yet much more than that.

He's given notice all authority over all people for all time. He exercises the rule and authority of God. It's no wonder, is it, that this seems to be Jesus' favourite title that he takes for himself when describing himself so often he describes himself as the son of man.

At his trial he declared from now on the son of man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God. In other words, Daniel chapter 7 is in a sense a coronation ceremony.

Someone who will not simply rule one nation for 60 years or so, but all people for all eternity. And you say, well when did this take place?

Well surely at the moment of Jesus' triumph. After his death and resurrection he ascended to heaven, God seated him on his right hand in power.

[29 : 33] It's just what the early church proclaimed. God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ. Christ. But what's the big surprise?

Well I wonder if verse 18 surprised you as it was read. It seems to me the big surprise is that Jesus shares his victory with those who belong to him. Verse 18, but the saints of the most high shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever and ever.

It's repeated isn't it? Verse 22, the time came when they possessed the kingdom. And verse 27, then the sovereignty, power and greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be handed over to the saints.

I suppose a parallel would be the sense in which we can say, can't we, today, that we share in the victories of our Olympic athletes. So obviously yesterday, a great day for our Olympians, two golds and one bronze yesterday.

I gather it's the most number of medals in one single day that we've ever won in the Winter Olympics. Victory is obviously won by individuals, Lizzie Arnold, Laura Dees and Izzy Atkin.

[30 : 51] And yes, the whole nation rejoices. We can say, can't we, we won the medals. Even though perhaps for some of us the idea of sitting on a tea tray and bombing down the side of a mountain is the last thing you'd ever get us doing.

But nonetheless, we can say, we won. Well, in a far greater way, it couldn't be clearer, could it? At the end of time, those who belong to Jesus, we share in his victory.

We are on the winning side of history. In other words, the key to understanding our world is a person, Jesus.

If we look for meaning simply within either ourselves or within our world, then it won't make sense. The testimony, I guess, of everyone in this room who does know Jesus is that he is the key to life and that once we know him, everything else falls into place.

[31 : 59] And I take it as this conviction that Jesus is Lord and that he will be Lord forever is a thing which enables those of us who follow Jesus, who belong to him, to stand firm in a world, even a world which is hostile to him.

Stephen was the first Christian martyr, and at the point of his martyrdom in the book of Acts, in Acts chapter 7, this is what we are told just before he died.

But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Look, he said, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.

So let me ask, where are you fearful of taking a public stand as a follower of Jesus? Perhaps it's with a particular colleague or a particular friend, and you are fearful of what they might think of you. Fearful for your reputation, perhaps. Or perhaps it's when that particular topic of conversation comes up, you get fearful, and you find it hard to take a stand, whether it's a same-sex marriage, or the fact that Jesus is the only way to God, or other topics which are controversial in our culture.

[33 : 27] Or perhaps there's a particular situation where you know that actually as a Christian you should do something, or you shouldn't do something, but actually you find it very hard to act.

And of course it's hard to make a stand, isn't it, so often, because our hearts are so often divided. Yes, we love God, but we love other things. We love our reputation, we love our comfort, we love our career, and we want to fit in, and so on.

Well, the way it will stand firm, surely, is by being confident of what Daniel saw. Confident that Jesus Christ is Lord, that he is Lord and King forever.

And that the one we worship is the one who has indeed been given all authority over all people for all time. Let's spend a few moments in reflection, and then I shall lead us in prayer.

I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man. Heavenly Father, we praise you very much indeed for this wonderful chapter which so helps us to understand the world in which we live, that there is the rise and fall of kingdoms and nations, and yet behind everything we see in the news each day, and that's going on in our world that we can see.

[34 : 55] Behind that, we praise you heavenly Father that you are the one seated on the throne, that there will be a judgment day, a day of accountability, and we praise you that the Lord Jesus is the one who has been given authority over all people for all time.

We praise you for his death, for his resurrection, for his return at the end of history. glory, and we pray heavenly Father believing and knowing these things to be true, please would you help us and enable us to stand firm publicly as your people.

We pray that each one of us might have the opportunity to do that in a very specific way this week, conscious that Jesus is Lord and that you are the judge of all.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.