

The King is Coming

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- [0 : 0 0] So Daniel chapter 7, that's where we're going to begin. Well today as John said is Advent Sunday.! That's the countdown to Christmas, at least in the corporate mind of the world.
- ! And maybe you've been busy doing some of those things already, doing your Christmas cooking, your present buying, card writing, maybe even tree decorating. Anyone done that yet?
- One or two. You're very keen. There are all kinds of jobs that need doing, aren't there, if we're to enjoy the celebrations later in the month. But over Advent, the eyes of the church are not on celebrating the first coming of Jesus, but on his triumphant and final Advent at the close of the ages.
- That's going to be our focus today and over the next three weeks, hence the two readings we had earlier on. And we're going to begin in the book of Daniel, Daniel chapter 7. Now if you went through Sunday school, you will know some of the great Old Testament stories that are there in the book of Daniel.
- Daniel in the lion's den, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the fiery furnace. Yet the last six chapters of Daniel are very different, at least in their style.
- [1 : 0 8] Actually the lesson that they teach is almost exactly the same. God's absolute sovereignty over his world, even when his people are suffering and when evil pagan powers seem to have the upper hand.
- That's the message of the first half of the book and the second half of the book as well. But the style is very different. See, as in the book of Revelation, we are into the realm of apocalyptic writing.
- So we need to be very careful how we read and how we understand the dramatic images that Daniel gives to us. Now, as I said, we don't have much time this morning and we're going to skate over many of these images.
- But actually I think that's okay. Because the trouble comes if we spend our time diving headlong into some of the rabbit holes that we might find here.
- And we'll get lost in the detail rather than seeing the grand picture. See, there is a great maxim when it comes to understanding all of scripture, but especially apocalyptic passages like this.
- [2 : 1 0] And the maxim is this. The main things are the plain things and the plain things are the main things. The main things are the plain things and the plain things are the main things.
- That is, while there may be some great truth and great beauty in the detail, we do far better to concentrate on the things that the Holy Spirit inspired writers clearly make plain to us.
- The bold headlines. So keep that in mind as we go through this dream together. There are five sections. You would have noticed those. There's the vision of the four great beasts. There's the vision of God Almighty on his throne.
- We get the judgment of evil. The arrival of the Son of Man. And in that last little section, we begin to hear an angelic explanation that carries on to the end of the chapter.

Those last few verses bring us some real clarity, actually. The four beasts, we're told, are four kings that will arise on the earth. But notice the last verse. Did you notice that? The holy people of God will receive the kingdom and will possess it forever.

[3 : 15] Yes, forever and ever. That's the picture Revelation ends with. That's where the book of Daniel ends as well. But let's have a look at that vision of the four great beasts.

I don't know what you dream about at night or where your thoughts go when you close your eyes. But if you spent time worrying about the number of conflicts in the world, the rising and falling of nations, it might not be too surprising if you found yourself dreaming about those things as well.

The opening of this chapter gives us the historical context for Daniel's dream. The great king Nebuchadnezzar, one of the characters of the early part of Daniel, has died. Belshazzar has succeeded him as king.

See, like today, Daniel lived at a time when empires were rising and others were falling. And the great Babylonian empire that had conquered Judah and vast swathes of the world and taken the greatest and the brightest and best of the Judeans into captivity was beginning to wane.

The times, as Bob Dylan might have sung, were a-changing. Perhaps Daniel was reflecting on God's purposes in all this when God gave him this vision. And it is rather a disturbing vision, isn't it?

[4 : 29] It's the kind of thing that would wake you up with a cold sweat if you had this kind of vision tonight. Maybe Daniel was longing for peace in his time, as we might long for it in ours, but the vision showed something very different.

Four great beasts coming out of a raging sea. The sea, especially a turbulent one whipped up by storms, had been a common image for a world in chaos, both amongst God's people and a wider world as well.

Hearing that kind of image of a storm-tossed sea that brought to mind a world where evil reigned, where destructive forces ruled. But notice where the winds come from.

They are the four winds of heaven. The vision Daniel is about to see isn't one where God is absent. Not even in that first chunk. He's very much present.

We can never charge God with evil, but Daniel's vision is not a picture of a world over which God has no control or is powerless. God is behind the scenes, steering everything to his ends.

[5 : 34] The angel in verse 17 speaks of these beasts as four kings, four empires. Most commentators agree that these kings and empires are around or soon after the time of Daniel.

There's some disagreement over exactly which empires they are. I take it to be the Babylonian Empire, the Medo-Persian Empire, which came soon after the Greek Empire under Alexander the Great, and then the Roman Empire.

If you know the book of Daniel, you'll maybe recognise these four kingdoms from the vision Nebuchadnezzar had back in Daniel chapter 2. And if that doesn't ring a bell, well, you've got your homework for this afternoon.

Go and read that chapter. Each of those empires, those kings, is different. The vision Daniel has highlights a characteristic of each. We don't have time to go into those now.

If Daniel was hoping for a comforting vision, this isn't it, though, is it? He says later on he was disturbed as he saw these things. And not surprising, the empires are swift and violent.

[6 : 36] They are cruel and powerful. Their own rule might wax and wane, but there is no comfort. They're all awful. They're all terrifying. And when the last empire rises, an empire that has iron teeth to crush and devour its victims, it seems to spread and last much longer than the others.

The ten rulers, the ten kings who come from it, as is made clear later in the chapter, including that little boasting horn, sometimes taken to be ten Roman empires, or ten Roman emperors, one after the other.

There may be some truth in that. But in biblical apocalyptic literature, sometimes the number ten stands not for a numeral in itself, but for a completeness, the total number.

So it could also point to the fact that empires like this, empires that rise up and persecute God's people, will continue and go on until the end of time.

Like many commentators, Daniel is perplexed by the vision. But as he thinks about it, the vision changes.

[7 : 50] His sight moves from the chaos and rebellion of earth, symbolised by these four great beasts, to the control room of heaven and to the throne of almighty God. That's the second of the visions.

The image Daniel uses here to describe the almighty God have quite a bit of familiarity about them, I think. The Lord is clothed in white, showing his holiness and purity. His hair is white, kind of pointing to age and wisdom.

The throne of flaming fire denotes God's judgment. And the wheels, well, we think back to Ezekiel's great vision. A throne with lots of wheels that turn in all kinds of directions.

Show that God is not confined to one place. He rules everywhere. This is the kingdom that stretches right across all of creation.

The apostle John has a similar vision in Revelation 4 and 5. And again, those serving him and those gathered around the throne are beyond counting. See, if chaos and evil seem to reign on earth, symbolised by those beasts, it's very different than the throne room.

[9 : 01] Everything is safe and sure here. God is on his throne. He is ruling over all things. His purposes are coming to pass, even through the deeds of the wicked.

This is a vision to comfort Daniel and to reassure us as well. So if the scenes on your TV screens frighten you or depress you, if you're fearful of the future that your children or grandchildren might face, then you need to focus on this second vision, to lift up your eyes to the God who rules over all.

What is a Hitler or a Stalin or a Putin or whoever besides this God? How can the vast armies of China or North Korea compare with the power and resources of God Almighty?

They can't. There is one Lord and God over all and the nations are nothing compared to him. The next scene shows that, doesn't it? Because books are opened and God's judgment is poured out.

It's a scene that reminds us of that passage in Revelation chapter 20. As books are opened. In these books are the thoughts and words and deeds of those evil kings and their regimes that they represent.

[10 : 13] And they're presented in a courtroom setting. As the holy and righteous God hears them and then passes his judgments. One by one, these kings are stripped of their power and thrown into the blazing fire.

Yes, some of them are allowed to live for a while, maybe going around still carrying out their evil schemes, but their lives, the length of their days, is determined not by their great military strategy or their political prowess, but by God's.

He sets the limits. Sometimes in the midst of times of turmoil we can forget that and think that evil will last forever. It won't. Evil does not endure.

Evil dictators die. Their empires come tumbling down. If you've lived any length of time in the 20th century, you'll know that. You would have seen that the fall of communism, the coming down of the Berlin Wall, the people like Saddam Hussein, raising up great statues to themselves, and they all come tumbling down, one after the other.

One by one they all fall away. Just become figures from history. Forgotten foes, defeated enemies. They, like so many before them, find that their power and victories cannot lead to the point where they defeat death or escape the judgment of God.

[11 : 36] I find that a great encouragement. I hope you do as well. Evil leaders may escape justice in this life, but not in eternity. So while there is comfort there, though, the knowledge that the day of judgment is coming should cause us to reflect on our own lives too, shouldn't it?

To think what is written in those books about our lives. Daniel sees the judgment of these evil empires here, but we must not think that we get a free pass. The Bible's clear on that.

We may not be kings or rulers, despots or dictators, yet all of us too will be called to account. Judged against God's perfect righteousness, we too will fail the test.

Unless we have had our sins pardoned, our guilt washed away, as we'll be reminded in bread and wine later.

That forgiveness is only available through faith in Jesus Christ, only made possible by his death on the cross. Other prophets focus more on that. But just because Daniel's focus is elsewhere, we should not miss the challenge that the reality of God's judgment brings to our own doorsteps.

[12 : 50] What would be God's verdict on us if our life was to end today? Where do we stand before him right now? Daniel's vision gives us a reason to turn and to trust God, because at the right time, and that's at God's time, not ours, those evil empires of today will follow those of past ages.

That should encourage us, as I've said. There is only one kingdom that will last forever. Only one king will rule for eternity, and we get to meet him in those next few verses, verses 13 and 14, as we see the arrival of the Son of Man.

As I started preparation for this talk, it seemed initially as if the arrival of the Son of Man in those verses there was the final return of Jesus at the end of time.

But I don't think that's right. It's easy why we might imagine that. Jesus himself called himself the Son of Man. He spoke of his return in great glory, surrounded by the clouds of heaven, and all those images are here.

But I think Daniel actually has something else in it. I think he's seeing Jesus return from earth back to heaven after his ascension. Because that's when Jesus receives the true glory as a conquering king, isn't it?

[14 : 13] That's when he returns home after his conquest. On the cross, Jesus conquered sin. As he rose from the grave, he conquered death. By his death and resurrection, all the powers of the evil one were shattered by his great victory.

And Daniel here gets a glimpse of Jesus returning home in conquest, returning back to the courts of heaven that he left behind on that first Christmas.

And this is his welcome home parade. The flags are out to crown him king. Verse 14, he is given authority, glory, sovereign power. It's as if the father is giving Jesus the medals he deserves for the victory he's won.

All nations, peoples of every language worship him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away. His kingdom one that will not be destroyed. Here is Jesus coming back to the courts of heaven as victor.

And this is why we can trust him. This is why we can trust him that he will forgive our sins, that we can know him, that he is with us always, that we can be confident in our eternal destiny, that we can trust God's promises for the future, his goodness and strength in the present, his perfect judgment, that the day of evil's end will come and the Lord will return in glory to judge the living and the dead.

[15 : 40] It's Jesus' return to heaven, his ascension, his glorification there that gives us confidence that Jesus will build his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

Because right now, Jesus is sat on the throne. All authority and power belong to him now. His reign has begun in heaven.

Right now, Jesus is already reigning over all things. And one day, that reign will be extended to every corner of the globe in absolute perfection.

We do not see the full extent of Christ's rule now, but one day we will. One day that rule will be complete. When on that day, the clouds that took him back up to heaven, that hid him from the sight of the disciples, will one day part as he comes with the clouds of heaven to reign.

And if we are his and he is ours, then we shall reign with him. Wow, what a powerful dream Daniel had. It filled his mind.

[16 : 46] It disturbed him. And rather like Mary, as she has her great encounter with the angel that tells her that she will bear God's son and her own saviour, what does Daniel do? Well, he goes and he thinks on these things.

He ponders them. And you and I would do well to do the same over these coming days. To ponder the temporary nature of all evil rulers and regimes.

To ponder the sovereignty of God right now over the nations. To ponder the judgment of God that will come. The absolute perfect rule of our righteous king and saviour that is now in heaven and one day will come to earth.

It's good for us to ponder those things because as we do, we will find great comfort and hope in them. But those thoughts should not make us complacent.

Jesus reminds us in our gospel reading, doesn't he, that that great and final day when he will return will come without warning. And there will be no press release from heaven a few weeks before.

[17 : 51] The Times won't have it in their events column. It won't be posted on Facebook. That great and terrible day will come as a surprise.

On that day, people will be carrying on their lives as normal as they did in the days of Noah. The empires of the day will be jostling for power. The celebrities of the day will be shouting for note to be noticed.

The shops will be open. The schools will be teaching lessons. There will be births and weddings and funerals all world over. And then suddenly, as in the days of Noah, the time will come and Christ will return.

the word Matthew uses for flood in Matthew 14 means cataclysm. Not a gentle bit of rain, but something that changes everything.

An event which ends time. An event actually which brings to the end the day of salvation. On that day, the glory, authority, and power that Jesus now has in heaven will be seen on earth.

[18 : 58] And he will be seen by all as king. And if we are not ready for that day, well, when he comes it will be too late. Yet today we have time to respond to Christ's warning.

My time, however, is up. So let me sum things up before I pray for us again. The world seems out of control, doesn't it?

But God is in charge. Evil regimes seem to be untouchable, but they will all pass. The wicked may seem to escape justice, but God's righteous judgment will fall on all.

And we can be confident of all this because the babe in the manger that we welcome at Christmas is right now sat at the right hand of God the Father, crowned with all honour and glory and awaiting the day for his eternal kingdom to come when he will be revealed as king of all and all those who are his will reign with him forever.

So don't give in to fear. Be hopeful for God is sovereign and make sure you're ready. Amen. Amen.