

Daniel 7:9-10 - Visions of Heaven, Part I: The Ancient of Days

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- [0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.
- Yes, we did pick every song we could think of about that same theme this morning and sang them all. So that's always fun. Here's the roadmap for this morning.
- Long introduction, short sermon, great lunch. Okay? Y'all, anybody up for that?
- Yep, you in for that? You're voting for the short sermon part, aren't you? Those of you who sat through Sunday school with me already deserve the short sermon part. It's just for you. But there is a long introduction.
- So let me start with that long introduction before we read our passage for this morning. We're at the point in the book of Daniel where we begin to shift from stories about the life of Daniel and his friends living in Babylon and how they engage there, things that happen in their lives, to visions that Daniel has of the future, visions that happen during those years where there are fiery furnaces and lions' dens and so forth.
- [1 : 16] But visions of the future God gives to Daniel that are recorded in these last six chapters of the book. This is what now in the second half of the book is called apocalyptic literature.
- What that means is that this is the revelation of the Old Testament. Some of you I know have studied revelation recently. If you've ever studied revelation, you know what it's like, right?
- It's chock full of incredible imagery and brilliant metaphors, wild pictures of beasts and battles and heaven and hell, all of these sorts of things.
- And that dynamic doesn't mean that the things described aren't real. It just means we recognize that often they can't be fully described by even the one who's seeing the vision.
- The emotion that's meant to be communicated by them requires this intense imagery, these vivid pictures. In fact, it's clear here in Daniel's visions that the ones he has should startle us, should some of them frighten us, should others of them shock us.
- [2 : 27] That's what happens to Daniel himself when he sees these things in chapter 7. But I want us to ask the question, what is apocalyptic literature about?
- What are these visions of? What is it that we're seeing and reading? Perhaps when you think of apocalypse, you think of the end of the world, right? A tragic ending, a gloom and doom and terrible things happening in the end of the world.
- That's the way it's popularly talked about. That's not entirely unhelpful, actually. Daniel does have visions about other parts of history that lead up to the end times, but much of this is about the end.

That's why there's so much controversy around so much of it. What does it mean and how's it all going to be in the end times? And much of it is indeed dark and dangerous. But it's important to understand this about Revelation, the book of Revelation, as well as this apocalyptic literature here in the next few chapters of Daniel, it's not just given to be scary and dark.

As dark as they are, God gives the visions of the future and of heaven to his people, not merely to frighten them, but to encourage his struggling people.

[3 : 46] So that they are not surprised to find themselves suffering and sinking. So that they can be hopeful in a day yet to come when God will be finally victorious, when God's enemies will be judged, and when God's people will be saved.

That's part of this literature as well. And that's why I want us in the next few weeks to slow down and get a look at what I'll call visions of heaven. We're going to jump around a little in Daniel 7 through 12 each week, but we'll be looking at those visions that Daniel has.

You see, I would contend that we don't think about heaven enough. I don't. I don't think about heaven enough. I suspect many of you are like me in that thoughts of heaven get put into this category of I'll use them when I get there.

That will be nice to know when I get there, but I'm not there yet. Kind of the way I treat thoughts of retirement. Or some of you may treat thoughts of adulthood or growing up and being a big...

I mean, there's a lot to learn about that, but I'll handle it when I get there. That will be helpful to me when I arrive at that point. And you can see when you think about retirement or adulthood how unhelpful and dangerous that can be to put off thoughts of what that will be like until you're already in the midst of it.

[5 : 16] The same is true with heaven. We feel like we've got all we can handle today, right? I'm just trying to make it through day by day. I have no time to think of heaven.

It'll be there when I need it. After all, as many of us have heard, when we think about heaven, we know that we don't want to be so heavenly minded that we're no earthly good, right?

That's a common phrase. Johnny Cash even sang about that. I don't want to be like that. I mean, I want to be actually earthly good. I don't want to walk around with my head in the clouds, no help to anybody.

But the Bible actually paints quite a different picture about the practical value today of thoughts of heaven. We've seen already in the book of Daniel, and we're going to see more, how remembering eternal realities and God's eternal perspective enables us to engage as we are called to here in this world.

Paul agrees with that need to think more of heaven for today. Colossians chapter 3, if then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.

[6 : 31] Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on the earth. Think of heaven. Our minds are to be set on those eternal realities, right?

C.S. Lewis has famously said it this way in his classic *Mere Christianity*. He says, A continual looking forward to the eternal world is not, as some modern people think, a form of escapism or wishful thinking, but one of the things a Christian is meant to do.

It does not mean that we're to leave the present world as it is. If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next.

The apostles themselves who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English evangelicals who abolished the slave trade, all left their mark on earth precisely because their minds were occupied with heaven.

It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this one. Aim at heaven and you will get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you will get neither, Lewis says.

[7 : 47] I think this is exactly why in the midst of the difficult realities of life in which Daniel found himself, that God kept giving him these visions. All the way through the stories we've already studied, what was keeping Daniel going?

God was giving him visions of heaven. It's what he actually needed to live there in Babylon. I think a clear vision of heaven is helpful to us in at least two ways before we jump into the first one.

First, it's helpful to us because seeing the end of the story, understanding where the story's headed and what the end is, helps us live appropriately in our part in the story.

Theologian N.T. Wright uses the example of a Shakespearean play to talk about how this works. Shakespeare, if you're not an English major, often wrote his dramas in five acts, okay?

So imagine that you're a character in a Shakespearean drama, maybe Hamlet, and you've read the first three acts. You've lived in them there. You know what Hamlet is like there.

[8 : 53] And then if you get act five, you know the end of the story. You may lose your script for act four, but you're going to have a pretty good idea how Hamlet should act, what kinds of things he would say, what's appropriate for him in that context, because you understand the story, where it started and where it's headed.

If we imagine that the first three acts, so to speak, or what the Bible tells us in terms of the creation of the world, the fall of man, the history of Old Testament Israel, the coming of Jesus, there's the beginning of the story, and we know that.

If we can live today in light of where the story is headed, in light of the end, if we know the end, then we'll know how to live as we ought right now in act four, so to speak, where we are.

If we know where it's all going, if we know who finally wins, if we know what really matters eternally, we will live now as we should. Getting a vision of the future helps us live now in our part of God's story.

And then secondly, a clear vision of heaven also helps us because there's a present reality that it reminds us of. I'll illustrate that with this story.

[10 : 12] When George Shultz was Secretary of State in Ronald Reagan's administration, Shultz kept a globe in his office. And whenever ambassadors to other countries would come in and meet with him, he would send them out, and on their way out the door, he would say, tell me, where's your country?

Point to your country on that globe on your way out. And every one of them had done that very successfully. That was a good sign. You know, if you couldn't find where you were headed, you needed to stay back and get some more training.

And then one day, a guy named Mike Mansfield was in his office. This Mansfield was the ambassador to Japan. And they met, and Mansfield got up to leave, and just like everybody else, he was asked, point to your country.

And Mansfield spun the globe and put his finger on the United States of America and turned back to Shultz and said, this is my country. And Shultz told that story to every other ambassador that he would meet with.

And he would say to them, never forget, you're over there in that country, but your country is the United States. You are there to represent us.

[11 : 24] It is a present reality for us as God's people that we are citizens of where? Of heaven. That that's our home. That that is the country that we are truly first and foremost citizens of.

We're exiles on earth. Our true home is in heaven where we are already seated with Christ, Paul tells us. So a clear vision of heaven helps us remember not merely what will be true one day someday, but what is already true today, that we are ambassadors for heaven and the king of heaven here on earth.

All right, thus endeth the long introduction. All of it serving to say for the next couple of weeks that we, like Daniel, need a clear vision of heaven.

The first one we'll see today comes in chapter 7 at verse 9. Daniel 7 at verse 9. This is God's holy word. Daniel says, 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.

[12 : 46] A thousand thousands served him and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court sat in judgment and the books were opened. Thus far, God's holy word.

Let's pray. God, this is your word and we need your help that we might see you more clearly.

Holy Spirit, teach us, speak in ways that I can't to my heart, to all of our hearts, that we might be changed today by what we see of one day, someday.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Have you ever seen a decorated military officer from a distance? You know, across a room or in a small shot on television?

And you've seen him and you see his chest decorated with all sorts of medals and everything and just from a distance your initial impression is, wow, that's impressive. This guy is pretty special.

[13 : 53] This is no average guy. He's important. He's heroic. I can see the medals. I can tell there are stars on his shoulder. Due to your distance from him or perhaps your ignorance of military honors, you may not know any of the specifics.

The things there may not mean anything particular to you, but at first glance you're impressed anyway. And then you get up close and you shake his hand and you learn that the stars were earned by a particular rank and that that purple heart is what it's called was earned in a particular incident where he acted very heroically and now you're impressed again, right?

But in a different way by knowing the particulars of who the man is. I think we need to have both of those experiences this morning with the vision Daniel gets of the Ancient of Days on his throne.

Remember, these visions are meant to evoke emotional response, to paint a picture, give an overall impression of something. What is the image portrayed here when you just listen and imagine the picture that's painted?

Listen to it again. 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.

[15 : 23] A stream of fire issued and came out from before him. A thousand thousand served him and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court sat in judgment and the books were opened.

Whatever the particulars, even if you don't know what any of that means, you can already tell this is a vision of someone important. Right? The words that came to mind for me as I read it this week were majesty, authority, grandeur, images like that.

Picture the infinite sea of people bowing before him. That's what's being pictured here. Bowing before him and surrounding him to serve him. infinite stretching as far as the eye can see.

John's vision of God's throne room in Revelation 4 highlights some different details but also shows us the response. These other people surrounding the throne who are responding to what they see on the throne.

Let's read this description and get a picture of it from Revelation 4. At once I was in the spirit and behold a throne stood in heaven with one seated on the throne and he who sat there had the appearance of Jasper and Carnelian and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald.

[16 : 46] Around the throne were 24 thrones and seated on the thrones were 24 elders clothed in white garments with golden crowns on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning and rumblings and peals of thunder and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire which are the seven spirits of God and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass like crystal and around the throne on each side of the throne are four living creatures full of eyes in front and behind.

The first living creature like a lion the second living creature like an ox the third living creature with the face of a man and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight. And the four living creatures each of them with six wings are full of eyes all around and within and day and night they never cease to say holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty who was and is and is to come.

And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne who lives forever and ever the 24 elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever they cast their crowns before the throne saying worthy are you our Lord and God to receive glory and honor and power for you created all things and by your will they existed and were created.

You get a picture of their response when they see the throne of God? Holy, holy, holy they keep saying all the time. Worthy of honor and glory and power that's the picture that we get that's the response that ought to come.

There's no doubt when we read Daniel's vision we've got a majestic ruler sitting on the throne someone awesome and glorious. But then let's look up close and understand the particular metals so to speak.

[18 : 41] Now the specific parts of the vision are important too. What do they teach us about God? What do we see about him here? First notice his clothing. His clothing was white as snow.

God is entirely pure completely righteous. What this means is that God doesn't make mistakes. He hasn't messed up.

He didn't do wrong by you even though sometimes it may feel like it. What e'er my God ordains is right as the hymn writer says.

Entirely pure and completely righteous. But his clothes aren't all that's white so is his hair. White hair as white and pure as lamb's wool.

The passage tells us white hair is often used in these days and in ours to depict what? Wisdom. God is most wise.

[19 : 47] His hair is as white as lamb's wool a picture of something as pure and white as can be imagined. He is the most wise. Have you ever felt like you know better than God?

I mean who's going to admit that in church really? I mean you wouldn't have said it yes somebody is. You wouldn't have said it that way perhaps but if you're like me you've thought before I know what God should do now.

I see what he's up to and this is what he needs to do next. God this would be so good if you would just help this person.

If you would just make this work this way that would be the best thing. It would make so much sense. And in my life at least that seems to be a guarantee for I've missed something.

I've gotten caught up in my own plans and ideas and forgotten what was really best. Tim Keller says this God will either give us what we ask or give us what we would have asked if we knew everything God knows.

[21 : 00] Interesting. Either what we ask or what we would have asked if we knew everything God knows. He knows what is best because he is most wise.

Next we see God is the powerful warrior. Look at the rest of verse 9. His throne was fiery flames. Its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and came out from before him.

This is no normal throne. It's not just some tiny chair is it? This is a chariot. A war chariot with fire coming out with wheels on it.

It pictures God as the mighty general ready to carry out justice and vengeance. patience. He's not some meek loving grandfather in the sky known only for his gentleness.

No this is a powerful warrior with fire coming forth from his throne to consume. But maybe it's just a powerful guy just sitting there waiting to be told what he's allowed to do, where he can go in force.

[22 : 08] Maybe this is just the muscle with no real authority. Could that be? No way. Perhaps the clearest detail communicated in this vision of God is that God is the final judge, the ultimate authority.

That's how it begins and ends with thrones placed in the ancient of days taking his seat on what we find out is the center throne from that picture in Revelation. The court sat in judgment and the books were opened.

Who else needed to sit down before the court could start? Nobody. The judge has taken his seat and he's ready to start. The image is one of God as judge.

He is the one who decides who is raised up and who is cast down. He is the one dispensing judgments on all of history. He is the one in whose righteous and wise hands is the authority for all decisions.

In fact, that's immediately what happens in the next two verses after this vision. Without awaiting a jury vote, without a lot of fanfare, great human kings and kingdoms are dethroned and destroyed in an instant.

[23 : 26] Justice is served. The ancient of days is seated on the throne and there is no room for anyone else. An awesome vision of our glorious and mighty God.

Last question this morning. When do we need this vision? Well, you said a vision of heaven would be practically helpful in the here and now.

Would be something that would help me today. I mean, of course, it's always helpful to see God more clearly, but when do we especially need this vision?

We could make up answers, but in what context does God give it to Daniel and the rest of his people? When does he think we need it? It's actually really interesting if you start at the beginning of Daniel 7, when the ancient of days shows up.

Because the vision up to that point is actually not about heaven. All the way up to verse 9 where we started, the first eight verses are about the next few hundred years of human history after Daniel.

[24 : 34] They're about kings and kingdoms and wars and terrible things that are going on. And with no transition whatsoever, it shifts to the throne room of heaven. Look, this is the end of those first eight verses.

I considered the horns on one of these beasts, one of these kings. 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 in a mouth, speaking great things.

As I looked, thrones were placed in the ancient of days, took his seat. He shows up right there in the midst of it with no transition. It's as though your television set is sounding beep, beep, beep.

We interrupt this current broadcast to give you breaking news of something else that's happening simultaneously somewhere else. Right in the midst of human history, of great conflict, of deep evil, another reality is true.

And the camera just pans over to the ancient of days, seated on his throne, right in the midst of it. Let me read you just a sample of the setting that the vision comes in to help us see when we especially need it.

[25 : 46] Chapter 7, as I said, actually begins with a vision of kingdoms. And the vision is very similar to the one we talked about in chapter 2 when Nebuchadnezzar had a dream of a statue that was crushed, if you remember that.

This vision and the one in chapter 8 that I'll reference here speak of the kingdoms of Babylon and Persia and Greece and Alexander the Great and Rome and so forth with some really amazingly accurate detail.

But here's the situation. Look at some of the things going on. Daniel begins his vision. He sees a vision in there. Four winds of heaven stirring up the great sea and four great beasts come out of the great sea different from one another.

The first a lion, with eagle's wings. The second a bear who's told, arise, devour much flesh. That's what that king does. And then there's another like a leopard who rises fast with four wings of a bird on its back and had four heads and dominion was given to this one, this powerful one.

And then there's the fourth one. Terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong. Great iron teeth that devoured and broke in pieces and stamped what was left with its feet.

[27 : 02] A powerful but painful infliction on God's people and many others. Go to the next screen. Verse 21. As I looked, this horn that was on the last beast made war with the saints and prevailed over them.

This fourth powerful beast that was terrifying and dreadful is prevailing over God's people. He shall speak words against God himself, the Most High, and shall wear out the saints of the Most High.

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. And Daniel sees all of this and what's happening to God's people and he says, as for me, Daniel, my thoughts greatly alarmed me and my color changed.

He sees what's going to happen to God's people and it stresses him out. He's deeply anxious. We read in chapter 8 of one of these rulers, He shall make deceit prosper under his hand and in his own mind he shall become great.

Without warning he shall destroy many and he shall even rise up against the prince of princes and he shall be broken but by no human hand. And Daniel's response at the end of that vision, I was overcome and lay sick for some days.

[28 : 20] What's the general impression given by these parts of the vision? What are our emotions when we especially need this vision of God?

Daniel feels it well, doesn't he? When we feel like him, greatly alarmed, overcome to the point of being sick for days as he sees the things that will happen to God's people or for us things that are happening to God's people?

When we are overwhelmed, when the world around us seems to be spinning out of control and we become scared and when we feel helpless and when we grow increasingly anxious, that's the general feel of what's going on when you read about wild beasts and their terrifying power.

It's how we ought to feel, isn't it? And that's when God gives the vision of himself. That's when we need this clear vision of God and of our eternal home.

Have you felt like that lately? Overwhelmed or out of control, scared, helpless, anxious? And this vision is especially for you.

[29 : 39] But now close up, specifically what situations does God give this vision for? Here's a few particulars from these verses here in Daniel.

First, when injustice rages, when human rulers war and fight, when human power is used to harm, not help, when God's enemies have exhausted God's people, when God's people have wandered after idols.

Those are the things going on on the news when the camera pans over to the breaking news that the ancient of days is on his throne.

And God says that's not all that's true. That may be what's in the news, but there's something else. A righteous, wise, powerful, just judge on the throne over it all.

And he gives you that picture in order to bring true comfort to you. When injustice rages, things that drive us crazy and we can't seem to fix them for ourselves or for others that are being taken advantage of, we need to see the eternally just judge and know that he will do right in his time in a way we can trust even to death.

[31 : 03] When human rulers war and fight and seek power and everything seems to hang in the balance of how this plays out, we need to see the ancient of days who is on his throne long before the beast took theirs and remains on his throne well after the last one is declawed.

And we need to know that our ultimate home is there with our father. There where we will find true safety and true rest.

When human power is used to harm not help, we need to see the one who is gracious with his power and righteously protects the oppressed.

When God's enemies have exhausted God's people so that we feel that the wicked prosper and the righteous perish and we can't stand before it any longer, we need to see the eternal victor who destroys those great beasts with a flick of his wrist.

Who breaks their power, Daniel 8.25 with no human hand. Second time we've seen that one in Daniel, isn't it? That rock from chapter 2 that was hewn with no human hand.

[32 : 20] The divine Savior who crushes the kingdoms and becomes a rock that fills the whole earth. We need to see that Savior so that his people finally see justice.

And when God's people have wandered after idols and allowed other things that won't last or fulfill us to distract us from what's truly valuable, we need to see the all-glorious, ultimately worthy God who fights for us and knows what's best for us and is worthy of all of our praise and all of our attention and time and zeal.

Do you see him there this morning? Do you know that reality is true alongside and above the reality that you are facing? Do you know that the ancient of days has never left the throne Daniel saw him on?

Do you know that he's there right now just the way he was described in Daniel 7? One more look because he is there now and this is true for you today.

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.

[33 : 44] Its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and came out from before him. A thousand thousand served him and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him.

The court sat in judgment and the books were opened. Pray with me. Our great God, King of all kings, supreme judge over all judges, we this morning join the multitude surrounding that throne and bowing before you because we are not worthy.

And in proclaiming that you are worthy and the honor and the glory and the power is yours, Father, would you comfort us with the reminder of your presence on the throne that the just judge is on the throne and he is also our good Father.

Father, we need that reminder today when we would be so prone to put ourselves on the throne or to feel the throne is unoccupied. It's not. Give us that clear vision that we may know where we're headed and know where we already are in heaven with you.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.