

A Study in Daniel 7

The Four Beasts: God's View of the Kingdoms of Men

We are reading tonight in Daniel chapter 7, beginning at verse 1.

"In the first year of Belshazzar, king of Babylon, Daniel saw a dream and visions of his head upon his bed. And he wrote the dream and told the sum of the matters."

"Daniel spoke and said, I saw in my vision by night, and behold, the four winds of the heavens broke forth upon the great sea. And four great beasts came up from the sea, different from one another."

"The first was like a lion, and had eagle's wings. I beheld till its wings were plucked, and it was lifted up from the earth and made to stand upon two feet as a man, and a man's heart was given to it."

"And behold, another beast, a second, like unto a bear. And it raised itself up on one side, and it had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth. And they said thus unto it, Arise, devour much flesh."

"After this I saw, and behold, another, like a leopard, and it had four wings of a bird upon its back. The beast had four heads, and dominion was given to it."

"After this I saw in the night visions, and behold, a fourth beast, dreadful and terrible and exceeding strong. And it had great iron teeth. It devoured and broke in pieces, and stamped the rest with its feet. And it was different from all the beasts that were before it. It had ten horns."

"I considered the horns, and behold, there came up among them another, a little horn, 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."

"I beheld till thrones were set, and the Ancient of Days did sit. His raiment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool. His throne was flames of fire, and its wheels burning fire. A stream of fire issued and came forth from before him. Thousand thousands ministered unto him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The judgment was set, and the books were opened."

"I beheld till the beast was slain, and its body destroyed, and it was given up 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, there came with clouds of heaven one like a Son of Man. And he came up even to the Ancient of Days, and they brought him near before him. And it was given him 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 that which shall not be destroyed."

"As for me, Daniel, my spirit was grieved in the midst of my body, and the visions of my head troubled me. I came near unto one of them that stood by and asked him the certainty of all this, and he told me and made known the interpretation of the things. These great beasts, which are four, are four kings that shall arise out of the earth. But the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom, and they shall possess the kingdom for ever, even to the ages of ages."

"Then I desired to know the certainty concerning the fourth beast, which was different from them all, exceeding dreadful, whose teeth were of iron and its nails of brass, which devoured and broke in pieces and stamped the rest with its feet. And concerning the ten horns that were in its head, and the other that came up, and before which three fell — even that horn that had eyes and a mouth speaking great things, and whose look was more imposing than its fellows. I beheld, and that horn made war with the saints and prevailed over them, until the Ancient of Days came, and judgment was given to the saints of the Most High. And the appointed time arrived, and the saints possessed the kingdom."

"He said thus: The fourth beast shall be a fourth kingdom upon the earth, which shall be different from all the kingdoms, and shall devour the whole earth, and shall tread it down and break it in pieces. And as for the ten horns, out of this kingdom shall arise ten kings, and another shall arise after them. And he shall be different from the former, and he shall subdue three kings. And he shall speak words against the Most High, and shall wear out the saints of the Most High, and think to change seasons and the law. And they shall be given into his hand until a time, and times, and half a time. And the judgment shall sit, and they shall take away his dominion, to consume and to destroy it to the end. But the kingdom and the dominion, and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heavens, shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High. His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey him."

"So far is the end of the matter. As for me, Daniel, my thoughts much troubled me, and my countenance was changed in me. But I kept the matter in my heart."

The First Half and the Second Half of Daniel

Daniel chapter 7 marks the beginning of the second half of the book. The first six chapters are largely historical — they record events that happened to the children of Israel and to the kings under whose authority Daniel served. The final six chapters are prophetic — they reveal what the Lord showed Daniel about things that were still to come.

And yet, both halves cover essentially the same ground. The same four kingdoms that appear in Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the great image — Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome — appear again here in Daniel's vision of the four beasts. The subject matter is the same. But the perspective is entirely different.

Nebuchadnezzar dreamed of a great and impressive man — a towering image, glorious in appearance. That is man's view of man's kingdoms: impressive, magnificent, awe-inspiring. Daniel, a man of God, dreams of wild and terrifying beasts. That is God's view of the very same kingdoms. The whole era we call the Times of the Gentiles — from the moment Israel lost the glory, when God ceased ruling the earth through His people, to the day when Christ returns and rules in righteousness — is, from God's perspective, the era of the beasts.

We are in that era now, even though it began some 2,500 years ago. It will continue until at least seven years from now — we are not told exactly how much more — when Christ comes and sets up His kingdom. The first half of the book shows man's failure in carrying out the responsibility God gave him. The second half shows how that plays out in the period after Daniel's own lifetime.

Why Beasts? The Nature of Animals and the Nature of Sin

It is worth asking why the Lord uses beasts to represent these kingdoms. What characteristic of animals makes them especially suited to this kind of illustration?

Animals have no moral agency. They have no responsibility before God. They have no knowledge of good and evil. They simply act according to the nature God gave them — slaves to that nature, with no ability to do otherwise. They do what is intrinsic to them, without reference to the will of God. They have no concept of what is owing to God.

The New Testament gives us a short definition: sin is lawlessness. Lawlessness is not merely breaking known rules — at its foundation, it is acting without reference to the will of God at all. And that is precisely what we see in these kingdoms. They act as entities without any reference to the will of God, exactly as animals do. They behave consistently with their nature alone.

When the Lord gave Nebuchadnezzar the heart of a beast for seven times, He was manifesting outwardly what was truly in Nebuchadnezzar's heart inwardly — the heart of one who did exactly what his nature dictated, with no thought of what was owing to God.

The Recurring Pattern of Failure

There is a pattern in Scripture of God committing responsibility to man, and man failing immediately. Adam, the vicegerent of God in the garden, fell at once. Noah, to whom government was committed after the flood, made wine and became drunk. Abraham's descendants, the people of Israel, eventually fell into such wickedness that God said, "Enough" — and committed government into the hands of the Gentile powers.

What is the very first thing Nebuchadnezzar does after being given the greatest empire the world has ever seen? He says, "Look at this tremendous kingdom I have built." He becomes puffed up with pride. Every time God commits responsibility to man, man fails — immediately and utterly. This is not a Jewish failure or a Gentile failure. It is the failure of the first man, Adam, playing itself out across the entire span of human history. By the time the cross comes, the whole thing has been thoroughly established: the heart of man is completely lost and irrecoverable on its own.

It is the second man — the Lord out of heaven — who alone can succeed where the first man has always failed.

The Four Beasts and the Kingdoms They Represent

The four great beasts came up from the sea — a picture of that which is constantly moving and in turmoil. These nations did not arise out of any orderliness. It is worth noting that there is one sea common to all four of these kingdoms: the Mediterranean. Every one of these four empires borders on it.

The first beast was like a lion with eagle's wings. A lion is fierce; wings speak of speed. This is Babylon — fierce and fast. But then its wings were plucked, it was made to stand on two feet as a man, and a man's heart was given to it. That is a loss of fierceness and fleetness. It answers to what happened with Nebuchadnezzar when the Lord gave him the heart of a beast — the irony being that at the moment when he was restored and given a man's heart again, the fierceness of his kingdom was already diminishing.

The second beast was like a bear, raised up on one side, with three ribs in its mouth. This is the Medo-Persian Empire. A bear raised on one side speaks to the fact that in that partnership, the Persians ultimately prevailed and became the dominant power. The three ribs speak of the three principal cities

of Babylon that the Medo-Persian Empire defeated in its conquest. They are then told to arise and devour much flesh — the expansion of that empire into further lands and cities, which is exactly what happened historically.

The third beast was like a leopard with four wings and four heads. This is the Grecian Empire under Alexander the Great — fierce like a leopard, and faster even than a lion with wings, having four wings of a bird on its back. Alexander's conquests moved at a pace virtually unmatched in history. He died at approximately thirty-two years of age having assembled an empire of extraordinary size. When he died, his four generals divided that territory — which answers precisely to the four heads of this beast. Daniel was describing this some 200 years before Alexander was born.

A note from the historian Josephus records that when Alexander was marching toward Jerusalem with the intent to destroy it, the religious leaders came out to meet him and placed a copy of the book of Daniel in his hands, showing him that he was the one described there. According to Josephus, Alexander turned and left the city alone — taxing it and making it a possession, but not destroying it. The account cannot be corroborated, but it is not without its moral plausibility.

The Continuity of the Earlier Empires

Verse 12 notes that when the dominion of the first three beasts was taken away, their lives were nonetheless prolonged for a season and a time. They continued to exist as political entities even after they were no longer God's designated center of government in the earth. The Babylonian Empire continued after it was superseded by Medo-Persia; Medo-Persia continued after it was superseded by Greece; Greece continued after it was superseded by Rome.

This was deliberate. The Roman Empire, notably, prided itself on not exterminating the peoples it conquered. It tried instead to learn from them and assimilate what was best. In this way, aspects of the three earlier empires found their way into Rome — morally, politically, culturally. And this was God's plan, not Rome's mercy.

The fourth beast — Rome — will have a different ending. It did not get exterminated or superseded by a fifth empire. It simply dissolved from within, and Europe broke into nation-states. That means there is something unresolved about Rome morally. A revived form of what that empire represented is yet coming, and when God judges it at the end, it will be cut off both politically and as God's center of government. There will be no prolonging of its life. Because what terminates it is not another beast — it is the coming of Christ and the establishment of His kingdom.

The Ancient of Days and the Son of Man

In verses 9 and 10, thrones are set and the Ancient of Days takes His seat. The judgment is set and the books are opened. This scene will have a parallel elsewhere in Scripture — there is a throne, and there are books opened. Consider how that connects with what we read in Revelation.

And then, in verses 13 and 14, one like a Son of Man comes with the clouds of heaven to the Ancient of Days, and is given dominion, glory, and a kingdom — an everlasting kingdom, over all peoples, nations, and languages. What a title: Son of Man. It is the title of the Lord in rejection. It is what Ezekiel was called, and it is what the Lord repeatedly called Himself during His earthly ministry. When the Pharisees challenged Him, it was as the Son of Man that He answered. When He asked Peter who men said He was, He asked it as the Son of Man — the rejected one, the one the world had not received for who He truly was.

That one in rejection is the very one to whom God will give the everlasting kingdom. His dominion shall not pass away. His kingdom shall not be destroyed. And this is what we as believers are looking for — not the revival of any of the beasts, but the coming of the Son of Man in the clouds of heaven.

Lord willing, we will take up the fourth beast and its horn, and the books of judgment, next time.