Westlake Church Lausanne

What the Future Holds
Daniel 7

Up until now in Daniel, others have been having the dreams and visions, and Daniel's been interpreting them. But from here to the end, it's Daniel who sees the visions. And they are graphic: they're of fantastical beasts, and angelic beings and heaven opened. And the danger is you read this kind of apocalyptic literature and think, 'this is weird, I'm not going to get anything out of this.' But think about it. Why do some people prefer to read a magazine sometimes, than a thousand page novel? Or why might someone prefer to sit down with a Tintin or Asterix comic book than an academic text-book? And have you ever jumped straight to the movie, rather than read the book it's based on first? You see, sometimes a picture is worth a thousand words, isn't it? And what follows in Daniel is full of pictures.

And in Daniel's visions it's as if we're taken to the cinema, and the lights go down and the thick curtain of time is drawn back, and the film that starts rolling is the big picture of the future.

But to make sense of it, you've got to remember the situation that Daniel and his first readers were in.

Look at v1, 'In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon, Daniel saw a dream.' So, we've gone back in time from where we were in chapter 6. In fact, we've gone back in time from what happened at Belshazzar's feast in chapter 5, 10 years back to be precise. And it's around 551BC and Babylon is still the world superpower. And Daniel's in Babylon because the Babylonian empire has conquered and destroyed his home city of Jerusalem and carried him and his fellow Jews off into exile.

So the people he's writing to are trying to live out their faith in a world that's changed beyond all recognition, in a world where they're now exiles. But of course, they're not the only ones who are trying to do that, are they? In our own day, we're seeing rapid social shifts in areas of morality, or sexuality, or faith, and the way those things are spoken about, that can leave those who hold a Christian world-view feeling like exiles in their own land. So how can faith remain steadfast in a changing world like theirs or ours?

You see, sometimes you can get bogged down in the 'now' circumstances of your life, can't you? And that might be the subtle opposition or hostility you feel to Christian faith at home or on campus or in the work-place; or it might simply be the mess of our lives – of family and relationship issues, or problems at work, or financial difficulties. So how can you live with hope and joy when that's the case? How can you keep running rather than sink in the mud? Well Daniel's answer is, see the big picture; look and see what God is doing in history.

Trouble Will Come

Verse 2, "I saw in my vision by night, and behold, the four winds of heaven were stirring up a great sea." Now, in ancient literature, the sea was the place of chaos, where evil reigned. And Daniel sees the winds of heaven stirring it up. So, as one commentator puts it, this is the world at its unstable worst.[1] This is world in all its turbulence.

And Daniel sees 'four great beasts' coming up out of the sea. And later he's told who they are, v17, 'These four great beasts are four kings.' Now, why represent kings and kingdoms with animals? Well, even today we do this, don't we. There's the British bulldog, the Russian bear, the American eagle, the South African Springbok. And for Australia? The kangaroo! So a picture really does paint a thousand words!

But these beasts Daniel sees have no cute factor. They're terrifying. And the reason they're terrifying is that sometimes world leaders, and the power they hold, can be terrifying. And they represent kings and empires behaving as amoral animals, because sometimes they do.

But did you notice the parallels between this dream and king Nebuchadnezzar's dream back in chapter 2? Nebuchadnezzar saw a giant statue, divided into four parts, representing four empires. And here are four beasts, representing the same four empires.

Look how Daniel describes the first one: v4, "The first was like a lion and had eagles wings." And if the first kingdom in Nebuchadnezzar's dream was his own, then this winged lion represents Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian empire. In fact, years before, as the prophet Jeremiah watched Nebuchadnezzar rising in power, he already described him as a lion and an eagle (Jer 4:7; 49:19-22; 50:17). But now, Daniel sees this lion's wings plucked off – just as in chapter 4 we saw Nebuchadnezzar stripped of his power and brought low. But just as back then we saw Nebuchadnezzar restored, as he realised God was God, and not him, so Daniel sees this lion becoming more humane, v4 'and made to stand on two feet like a man' and given the mind of a man.

But then comes the second beast, v5, 'Like a bear. It was raised up on one side.' And this is the Medo-Persian empire, with one side raised up to signify the dominance of Persia over the Medes in the empire.

But then comes the third: v6, "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 if the leopard is one of the fastest of animals, so Alexander the Great led the Greek empire to conquer the Medes and Persians in lightening speed. But he

[1] Ferguson 136

died, aged 32, leaving the Greek empire to be divided under 4 kings, which is why this beast has four heads.

But what about the fourth beast? If the first is like a lion, and the second like a bear, and the third like a leopard, the fourth is like nothing you've ever seen before. Daniel says in v7, it was "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 beasts that were before it." So this empire is like nothing that has come before. Its brutality is in a class of its own. And it crushes and devours and destroys. And in v23 Daniel is told the extent of its savagery, 'it shall devour the whole earth, and trample it down, and break it in pieces.'

So, if the first empire was Babylon and the second Medo-Persia and the third Greece, is this one Rome? And the answer's yes. Because just as in Nebuchadnezzar's dream the 4th kingdom had legs of iron, so this beast has teeth of iron. And just as Rome crushed all before it, so this beast leaves nothing alive in its path. And yet, Daniel goes out of his way to say this one is different. And he leaves it unidentified, and so it's not stretching it too far to think that this beast represents more than just Rome; that in fact it represents whatever power is currently oppressing and persecuting God's people, wherever they are.

And Daniel sees, v7, that 'it had ten horns.' And he's told in v24, 'out of this kingdom ten kings shall arise'. Now that may be 10 specific rulers. But a horn represents an animal's power, so these ten horns may be like saying something is ten times more powerful, and the power this empire's rulers exert exceeds anything that has come before.

But then, v8, "There came up among them another horn, a little one… and behold, in this horn were eyes like the eyes of a man, and a mouth speaking great things." So whether or not the ten horns were specific leaders, it seems clear this one is. And in v24, Daniel's told, "he shall be different from the former ones." Verse 25, "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." So this ruler will be boastful and proud. He will blaspheme God and persecute his people. And yet, however great he might appear, however much damage he does, in the big picture, he's just a small horn.

So who is he? Is he Antiochus Epiphanes IV, the king who ruled over Palestine in the second century BC, who claimed to be God manifest, and brutally persecuted God's people? Is he the emperor Nero – who lit Rome by burning Christians on stakes? Is he Titus, who conquered Jerusalem, and destroyed the Temple, and slaughtered her inhabitants? Or is he the future, final antichrist, the man of lawlessness the New Testament talks of (2 Thess 2:3-8), who opposes God and declares himself to be God?

Well, in some ways, he's all of these. You see, when Paul describes the final man of lawlessness, the final little horn, he says in 2 Thess 2:7 that 'the mystery of lawlessness is already at work.' And John writes in 1 John 2:18, 'Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come.' So whenever we see this combination of power and persecution, of God being mocked and Jesus and his gospel being opposed, it's the mystery of lawlessness and the spirit of antichrist already at work; it's the little horn speaking.

But what sobers Daniel, and what should sober us, is that this little horn seeks to wear down God's people. In v21 he's told 'this horn made war on the saints'. In v25 he's told he "shall wear out the saints." Now think about that. You see up until now in Daniel, God has always delivered and rescued. And instead of being killed, those who've stayed faithful to him have ended up being promoted. But not now. Not in the days of the little horn. So Daniel's warning us, life will not always be easy.

So how can you stay faithful when that's the case? How can your faith remain steadfast when it seems like the forces opposed to God are winning, and God's people are suffering as a result? Well, even as the little horn is speaking its big words the scene changes.

Justice Will Be Done

Now, when you look out at the injustice of the world, or witness another atrocity, there's something deep down that longs for justice isn't there? Or, you see power being used against the powerless, and the proud prospering, and there's inside that longs for things to be different: for a better world, a better kingdom. And we want justice to be done, and wrongs to be righted; and we don't want the guilty to get away with it.

And yet, atheism and scientific materialism have no answer to the question of justice do they? Because ultimately they can give no reason *why* something is morally right or wrong in the first place. But they can also give no answer to the *desire* for justice. Because if there is no God, and no final judgment, the powerful and proud do get away with it.

But Daniel's vision does give you an answer. It answers the question of justice, as it tells you there is an ultimate source of what is right and wrong; and it answers the desire for justice, as judgement is held.

Look what Daniel sees: v9, "As I looked, thrones were placed." So the scene suddenly switches from the sea tossed in chaos, to the calm and order of a throne room, as thrones are placed. But only one is filled, v9, 'and the Ancient of Days

took his seat.' So this is the Supreme Court of the universe, and v10, 'the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened.'

Queen Elizabeth II has reigned for 65 years, and incredibly the first Prime Minister who served under her was Winston Churchill. But since then she's seen multiple Prime Ministers come and go. But she's still there. And yet, that's nothing compared God. That's why Daniel calls him, the Ancient of Days. He's been reigning long before any of these beasts came on the scene. And he's neither impressed nor shaken by little horns. And all the great moments of history, and all the seemingly insignificant details of our lives – he sees them all and has seen it all. Nothing catches him off-guard. And he is wise and powerful. He is good and great. And his righteousness is so radiant it burns. Verses 9-10, '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 issues and came out before him.' So this is not a judge who will leave injustice unpunished or turn a blind eye to the use of power for personal advantage. And he has thousands of thousands and ten thousands times ten thousands of servants standing before him, waiting for judgement to begin.

But just as it's about to start, once again the scene changes: v11: "I looked then because of the sound of the great words that the horn was speaking." So, in heaven, the Ancient of Days rules in righteousness. But on earth, the beast is boasting, even as it oppresses God's people. So who will win the day? Will evil triumph, or will righteousness?

Verse 11, "As I looked, the beast was killed, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire." In other words, it doesn't matter how things seem now. Even when it seems like evil is triumphing and injustice is winning the day, it's the Ancient of Days who's in control, and the final outcome is certain. That even these beasts – human power in all its animal ferocity, are ultimately under his power.

So Daniel's dream tells us that the God you long for: a God who is good, and just. A God who will finally deal with injustice, and right what is wrong, is God. And he will bring suffering, and those who cause it, to an end. And wrongs will be righted. Because however chaotic and changeable the world or your life may seem, God never changes.

And yet, such a God can still seem impersonal and far removed from the struggles of our lives, and the cost of faithfulness, can't he? It's fine for him sitting in his throne room in peace, but what about those crushed by the beast? What if it's you who has to face the cost of staying faithful under pressure, and temptation, when you feel like quitting? What help is a God so far removed from the reality of life?

A King Like Us Will Come
Cast your mind back to Nebuchadnezzar's dream in chapter 2. What brought that statue of four empires crashing down? A stone cut out by no human hand. But what's the decisive event here, in Daniel's dream?

Verse 13-14, "I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man… 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, while the beasts arise from the chaos of the sea, while the empires of men behave like animals, the kingdom of God is given to one like a son of man coming on the clouds of heaven – one like us, from another world. So one day, Daniel says, power will pass to one worthy of it: to a son of man, a son of Adam, to a true man, man as he was always supposed to be, exercising dominion over the world as God's man. A man who will represent us all. A man who shares the humanity of those he rules. And what all these empires wanted to get by force, God will give to him freely. The one man worthy.

But is such a man possible? You see, which ruler anywhere, which person anywhere, could stand in God's burning presence? Could you be that person? The moment you think you can, you're disqualified, aren't you. You see, whilst we all long for justice to be done, whilst we look forward to the day when all the little horns, and the beasts they ride, meet their end, the truth is that none of us could stand before the burning holiness of God. All of us have used power, or lack of it, for our own selfish gain. We have all thought or spoken boastful words. We have all sought to reign in our own lives in the place of God. So who amongst anyone, anywhere, could be worthy to approach the Ancient of Days and receive the kingdom?

Well, Jesus came and began his ministry, saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand" (Mark 1:15). And his favourite title for himself? The Son of Man. "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests" he says, "But the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20). In other words, I know what it is to be you, to be real. And unlike all these other kings, he didn't come to accrue power to himself. Instead he says in Mark 10:45, "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve."

And he doesn't gain the allegiance of others through fear, or exercise power by crushing people. He did it by being crushed, by himself becoming a victim of power hungry leaders. And at his trial before the Sanhedrin, as they stand around him, waiting to pounce on him, waiting for the kill, the High Priest asks him whether he's the Messiah. And Jesus replied, "I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven"

(Mark 14:62). And it's as they condemn him, and as Pilate, the representative of the Roman Empire, the fourth beast, hands him over, to be crucified and condemned, that all these powers stand condemned.

But it's there, at the cross, as he is crushed for our iniquities, as he is separated from the presence of God, that he makes it possible for us to be forgiven and to enter the presence of God, and stand before the Ancient of Days. And Paul tells us in Philippians 2, that it's because Jesus humbled himself and became like one of us, and humbled himself to the point of death at the cross, that God has highly exalted him, and that before him every knee should bow.

And God raised him from the dead. And immediately prior to his ascension into heaven he said to his disciples, "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me" (Matt 28:19), and then Luke tells us that as he ascended into heaven he did so in a cloud. As the Son of Man, the King like us, enters God's presence and receives the kingdom, and his reign begins.

And now, Daniel's tells us, because of him, everyone of us can enter his kingdom. As Daniel is told, v18, "The saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever, forever and ever." And verse 27, "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." It's why Jesus said, in Matthew 19:28-30, "Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my names sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first."

You see, if Jesus is the ultimate king, the one true power, we all face a choice, or choices, don't we? Firstly, as Daniel says in v14, "All peoples, nations, and languages, should serve him." And if he is the ultimate – he should be our ultimate. Our ultimate over our comfort, over our safety, over our reputations, over every other earthly power or allegiance. Because, secondly, if we do decide to serve him, Daniel makes it clear there will be a cost. In the words of v21, "This horn made war with the saints." And v25, "They shall be given into his hand."

There's never any promise that the Christian life is going to be a picnic, is there? As we wait for Jesus' return, the rulers of this world, whether political or cultural, will do all they can to wear out the saints. And the little horn will boast. And there may be times when you feel like giving up.

But don't. See the big picture. And God has made you a part of it. Remember what comes after v25 – it's v26, "But the court shall sit in judgment." And remember what Jesus has done for you. As Stephen, the first Christian martyr was being

stoned to death, Luke tells us that he gazed into heaven, he saw the big picture, and Stephen said, "I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:56). And when you see that, when you know who the king really is, it will give you the courage to keep going. As Jesus says in Luke 12:32, "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."