

Introduction:

- A. Today we’re beginning a series on the Second Coming of Christ. Christians love the image the New Testament gives us of Jesus coming in the clouds, with a shout and the sound of the trumpet, to take us up to be with him forever. Our text today takes us behind the scenes. *Illus.:* A few years ago Susan and I went to the movie theater in Lincolnshire to see a live simulcast from the Metropolitan Opera in New York. It was a long evening. My favorite part was the intermission. Because during the intermission the cameras went backstage. It is just *huge* back there. There were the sets of all the scenes, each waiting its turn. An army of stagehands were moving the enormous sets in and out. That’s kind of like what God shows Daniel.
- B. To set the stage, Daniel was a prophet at the same time as Ezekiel, and both were in Babylon. Ezekiel’s years were spent among the Jewish exiles while Daniel’s were spent in the courts of pagan power, a kind of lonely holy influencer in two successive empires—the Babylonians and then the Persians. Nebuchadnezzar and Darius. In **Dan. 6**, the passage just before our text today, we’re told the story of Daniel in the lions’ den. When God preserved his life, King Darius was stunned and, of all things, he praised Daniel’s God. Listen to this from **Dan 6**:

*“For he is the living God
and he endures forever;
his kingdom will not be destroyed,
his dominion will never end.
He rescues and he saves;
he performs signs and wonders
in the heavens and on the earth.”*

*He has rescued Daniel
from the power of the lions.”*

- C. With that scene before us, Daniel takes us back before that incident to a vision of other dreadful beasts whom God’s people would face. It was terrifying. Daniel writes at the end of it, *“I, Daniel, was deeply troubled by my thoughts, and my face turned pale...”* This vision is not meant to be analyzed so much as *imagined and felt*.

Vv.1-3... This vision came at night (v.7), and I suspect we are supposed to see these scenes against a dark sky background—ominous and foreboding. Picture a vast sea at night. Then winds begin to blow from all four directions at once, churning up the sea, mountainous waves crashing into each other, creation in a rage. The image of a sea in Scripture is often used to describe the chaotic world in all its “godlessness and instability” [Ferguson]. Human history is like a vast, polluted sea storming every which way. **Is. 57:20-21** says, *“The wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud. ‘There is no peace,’ says my God, ‘for the wicked.’”*

Then, from that churning, watery chaos terrifying beasts begin to rise, as if birthed out of the storm, each in its turn, by that fomenting ocean. **Vv.4-8...** What does it mean?

I. POWERFUL, BEASTLY EMPIRES ARISE TO POSSESS GOD’S HOLY LAND AND OPPRESS GOD’S HOLY PEOPLE. (7:1-8)

- A. Here is the lions’ den Israel will face, beastly kings and kingdoms who will oppress them through a dark night of history. These beasts represent four empires. Students of prophecy don’t always agree, of course, as to who they represent, but there were four great empires that reigned over Israel until the time of Christ, and I think that is the point here. These beasts, at least in some sense, precede the first coming of Christ.

- B. After the vision ends, Daniel asks what these things mean. **Vv.17-18** explain, “*The four great beasts are four kings that will rise from the earth. But the holy people of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it forever—yes, for ever and ever.*”
- C. The first beast, the lion with the wings of the eagle, describes Babylon, the kingdom in which Daniel was living at the time of the vision. In Jer. 49:19-22 God described King Nebuchadnezzar both as a lion and an eagle, just as we read here.

The second beast, the bear with the three bloody ribs in its teeth is Persia, which conquered Babylon, and whom Daniel served later in his life. Some commentators note that the Persian Empire had three major conquests that may be symbolized by the three ribs in the bear’s bloody teeth.

The third beast, the leopard with wings, seems to speak of the Greek Empire under Alexander the Great. He conquered vast lands with amazing leopard-like speed, all by the time he was 33. When he died his kingdom was divided into four parts, like the four horns.

The fourth beast is such a mutant it doesn’t seem to resemble any known animal. It was “*terrifying and frightening and very powerful*” This kingdom likely corresponds to the Roman Empire, which oppressed Israel when Jesus lived. “*It was said of the Roman Empire, ‘They make a desert, and call it peace.’*” If it is the Roman Empire, it is not *only* the Roman Empire, because some of its characteristics, as recorded later in this chapter, have not yet come to pass. Furthermore, those details are akin to what we read in Revelation about the end times. Just as the book of Revelation speaks of Babylon existing in the end days, long after the Babylonian empire was crushed, so this beast with its arrogant horn-like kings will arise again.

But step away from maps and timelines and look at this beast if you dare. It doesn't even resemble known animals. It is a ruthless mutant. Huge iron teeth chewing up people, and those not eaten are crushed under its feet. Daniel recognized the ten horns as symbols of kings. How long would this beast live?! How could God's people could survive under such a crushing empire?

- D. If tonight God visited you with a vision of our times and coming days *the four winds of heaven would still be churning up the great sea.* ” Beastly empires would still loom up out of the darkness, threatening us and all God's people. The point here isn't really to figure out who these beasts represent, but to realize that this is what our world is like. The dark and angry sea still churns. Wicked rulers rise up from the waters. Beastly powers more fearsome than the Babylonians or Persians hold power in this world. Iron jaws still crush their victims.

Beep. Beep. Beep! *“We interrupt this broadcast.”* God abruptly changes channels and we see something that is happening simultaneously with the scene of the beasts—the fourth beast, in particular—but the world around us is oblivious to what God shows us. They have no idea this is happening.

In vv.9-10 there is not only a change of scene, but of mood. **Even the style of writing** changes from the piled clauses of prose to the ordered, rhymed ideas of poetry. Notice as I read the solemn order of things, the awe, the holiness. **It is still a frightening scene, but for an entirely opposite reason.** In the previous scenes we have the world frightening in its beastly, inhuman cruelty. Now we have a scene fraught with the danger of holiness. **Vv.9-10...**

II. UNSEEN BY THE CHURNING, BEASTLY EMPIRES, THE ANCIENT OF DAYS CALLS HIS COURT TO ORDER (7:9-12)

A. Even while in one dimension that terrible beast is raging ravenously, in another place far above the tumultuous sea, a celestial room is being prepared for a solemn hearing. “*As I looked, thrones were set in place.*” These are the thrones of judges, and the Chief Justice is the Ancient of Days. “*The Ancient of Days took his seat.*” Court was in session.

The sight was breathtaking. “*His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool.*” Our judges signal their dignity with black robes. The Ancient of Days wears white brighter than the sun.

“*His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze. A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him.*” What kind of Judge is this! Who can even approach him let alone withstand His justice? Surely this scene is even more terrifying than that of the beasts, for they only projected might and ruthlessness. This scene projects the dazzling and dangerous holiness of Almighty God. The Bible says, “*Our God is a consuming fire.*”

B. **V.11** continues, “*Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him.*” How many attended the beasts? Nothing like this! But here is God’s vast worshipful army of both angels and saints, I think, ready to either sing or do battle. We used to sing a little Sunday School chorus: “*Dare to be a Daniel. Dare to stand alone.*” But in this moment, Daniel realized, “*I am not alone.*” Daniel had not been alone in the den of lions and neither he nor his fellow Jews were alone in facing the beasts.

C. Then, according to v.11, once the Ancient of Days was seated: “*The court was seated, and the books were opened.*” Below, rising up from the dark sea, the beasts

roar and attack, crush their victims and crow of their greatness. But here, no word is spoken. None is needed. Because “*the books were opened.*” Within the pages of those books was all the incontrovertible and damning evidence of unbridled wickedness against the beastly powers of this world. The time had come to call the beasts to account.

- D. The execution of God’s sentence comes quickly in this vision. Suddenly the scene shifts again, back into the dark world where we left the *little horn*—this upstart tyrant—with the human eyes and the arrogant boasting. **Vv.11-12...** In one moment Daniel sees the books opened and in the next, the arrogant beast is put to death by God, its body destroyed and then thrown like so much refuse into the lake of fire. There was no battle. No defense. No posturing. Just God’s “terrible and swift sword.”

Not only does God judge these wicked empires but at the same time he *vindicates* his holy people. **Vv.21-22,** “*As I watched, this horn was waging war against the holy people and defeating them, until the Ancient of Days came and pronounced judgment in favor of the holy people of the Most High, and the time came when they possessed the kingdom.*” The wicked will not win! The LORD reigns. The Judge of all the earth will do right.

One more scene suddenly appears before Daniel: **vv.13-14...**

III. UNSEEN BY THE CHURNING, BEASTLY EMPIRES THE SON OF MAN IS GIVEN EVERLASTING DOMINION OVER ALL PEOPLE (7:13-14)

- A. The sight of “one like a son of man”—like a human being—is a stunning surprise. How can a man—a man like Daniel himself—be ushered into this high and holy place? How can a human come on the clouds of heaven, the royal

carpet of God himself? Daniel must have gaped at this sight. Who is this!? What human being can *approach the Ancient of Days* with such confidence?

- B. Did Daniel know that this was “*a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief,*” or that he was “*the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*”? Jesus often referred to himself as the Son of Man, a direct reference to this statement. Notice the text says he is “*like a son of man.*” He is a man, to be sure, but with the stunning difference that he is also God. He is like us, but infinitely greater, too. Jesus, the God-Man, the second Adam, risen from the dead, clothed in immortality. He enters the courtroom of heaven on a carpet of clouds.
- C. I think this part of Daniel’s vision is time-stamped. **Acts 1** tells us of the ascension of Christ: “*he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid them from their sight.*” And do you know what happened next? I think it is just what Daniel saw in **Dan. 7:13**, “*There before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence.*” With his last breath on the cross Jesus had cried, “*It is finished.*” And so, his redeeming mission completed, he came victoriously into the presence of his Father.
- D. “*He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.*” The Son of God had always possessed divine authority, but this coronation by the Ancient of Days is “his appointment as absolute Lord and Judge” because he “*achieved a sinless life, paid the price for man’s redemption, and was vindicated by his bodily resurrection as Judge of the entire human race*” [Archer, p.91].

- E. So we have seen the Son of Man arrive on the clouds of heaven and be ushered into the throne room of Almighty God where he is seated at God's right hand. But when Jesus was on trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin, this happened, *"Again the high priest asked him, 'Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?' 'I am,' said Jesus. 'And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.'"* [Mk. 14:61-62]
- When Jesus ascended, leaving the disciples staring into the sky, the attending angels said, *"Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."*
- F. Then, back in the last verse of Dan. 7 we're told, *"But the court will sit, and [the little horn's] power will be taken away and completely destroyed forever. Then the sovereignty, power and greatness of all the kingdoms under heaven will be handed over to the holy people of the Most High. His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship and obey him."* Did you catch that: *"handed over to **the holy people of the Most High.**"* We will reign over all things with the Lord Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

Illus.: I hope you've noticed that we have this print of Daniel in the lions' den hanging on one of our walls here at church. Some years ago, one of the men in our church was going through a terribly difficult time—the worst trial of his life, threatening his reputation and his future. He was devastated. He asked me if he could take that picture home so he could look at it often. And so he did, till the trial passed.

We live in a world of frightening beasts on large and small scales. Other beasts have risen from the churning sea of this world,

and more will yet come “*waging war against God’s holy ones.*” But remember what Daniel saw. Remember what is going on behind the scenes. Remember the Ancient of Days seated upon his throne as Judge, and the Son of Man whose “*dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, whose kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.*” He is coming soon!

So what are we to do while we wait? Do not be afraid of this beastly world. Do not fix your eyes on the news, or fix your hopes on human heroes. Be faithful to Christ. Endure. Live like lights in this dark, churning world. Share the gospel that gives the lost sight and hope. And do not judge by what we see. **All is not what it seems!**