



## The Book of Daniel – Thriving in Babylon

### Part 5 – The Son of Man and the Four Beasts

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#### Key Passage

Daniel 7:17-18 (NKJV)

<sup>17</sup> 'Those great beasts, which are four, are four kings which arise out of the earth. <sup>18</sup> But the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom, and possess the kingdom forever, even forever and ever.'

Chapter 7 of Daniel represents something of a transition within the book, moving away from narrative to an extensive record of prophecy. The four beasts in Daniel's vision represent literal world empires that existed in history, demonstrating the cyclical nature of the rise and fall of kingdoms while also pointing to a future time of great tribulation.

Yet amidst the chaos, the vision of the Son of Man stands at the center of the revelation, and it is considered by many to be not only one of the most important passages in the Old Testament, but the very centerpiece of Old Testament prophetic literature. Daniel awaited the coming of the Son of Man, but today we know this figure to be none other than Jesus.

This series has asked the question, "how can we thrive in a world that has turned itself against God?" Daniel's vision invites us to view our world from a very different perspective: God's. A being outside of time, God knows the past as well as the future, and in the Bible He shares with us glimpses of what is yet to come. God does this in order that we may have peace in the times ahead. Even as the world falls apart around



us, God is in control, and we have hope in the final coming of the Messiah to make things right.

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## **BELONG**

Start the group with an opportunity for community. We want this to be a place where the body of Christ can **belong** by sharing their lives with one another in genuine fellowship.

- How is everyone's week going? Any life updates?
  - What is something the group can be praying about?
  - What is something the group can praise this week?
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- Have you ever considered God's perspective of the world compared to our own?
  - How might having God's perspective of the world change how you approach the world?
  - What do you think is the purpose of prophecy in Scripture? What are we meant to learn from visions about the future?



## BELIEVE

Move into the relevant Bible passages and read along together. This is where the body of Christ can learn together to **believe** in Jesus more and love Him better.

### The Purpose of Revelation

#### Daniel 7:1 (ESV)

7 In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon, Daniel saw a dream and visions of his head as he lay in his bed. Then he wrote down the dream and told the sum of the matter.

The text says that Daniel received this vision during the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon. Belshazzar was first introduced in the story back in chapter 5, holding a great feast whereby Daniel interpreted the writing on the wall. Because the events of chapter 5 ended with Belshazzar's death, we know the vision of chapter 7 took place at some point before then. Belshazzar was co-regent of Babylon alongside Nabonidus in 553 BC, meaning if Daniel was brought to Babylon around the age of 15, he would be 67 now.

The text says that Daniel, upon receiving the vision, wrote the sum of the matter; other translations say that Daniel told the main facts. This seems to indicate that the vision was more comprehensive and detailed than what was recorded, but Daniel chose to omit certain information. This detail in the text alludes to the purpose of revelation within the Scriptures while also providing important guideposts when studying prophecy. Although there is more to the future than Scripture reveals, the Holy Spirit has chosen in His wisdom to only give us *so much* of the picture.

Jesus' Olivet Discourse from Matthew 24 comes to mind here. When revealing the signs and seasons of His second coming, Jesus makes clear that not even He knows when His return will be; only that the Father in Heaven knows and He has chosen to keep that information a secret. Later, when Jesus is about to ascend to Heaven, the disciples ask Him when the kingdom of Israel will be restored. In response, Jesus says it is not for them to know the times the Father has set.

Daniel chapter 7 provides a miraculous glimpse into the future that comes not from man, but from the very mind of God, and for this reason the information must be taken seriously. We are meant to know certain things about the future that the rest of the world is not privy to; however, the purpose of such things is not simply to boast of future knowledge. It is to prepare our hearts for coming trouble, knowing that Jesus has the



victory in the end. The purpose is not to have every single detail laid out and defined. We must be careful to take the text at its word, but not read too much into what it says.

## The Vision of the Four Beasts

### Daniel 7:2-8 (ESV)

<sup>2</sup>Daniel declared, "I saw in my vision by night, and behold, the four winds of heaven were stirring up the great sea. <sup>3</sup>And four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another. <sup>4</sup>The first was like a lion and had eagles' wings. Then as I looked its wings were plucked off, and it was lifted up from the ground and made to stand on two feet like a man, and the mind of a man was given to it. <sup>5</sup>And behold, another beast, a second one, like a bear. It was raised up on one side. It had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth; and it was told, 'Arise, devour much flesh.'

<sup>6</sup>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 dominion was given to it. <sup>7</sup>After this I saw in the night visions, and behold, a fourth beast, 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 the beasts that were before it, and it had ten horns. <sup>8</sup>I considered the horns, and behold, 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, and a mouth speaking great things.

Before beginning, it is important to note that prophecy is highly symbolic. The visions and dreams God provides are very figurative and surreal, designed to draw you into the drama of God's story whilst concealing the full truth of it. Although not every detail can be easily discerned (and some details indeed have no good explanation, nor are they meant to), there is a clear meaning overall. Prophecy is not meant to confuse or frustrate but provide insight. In fact, a lot of the time the Bible will actually interpret its own prophecies within the same passage, as we will see in a little bit.

The vision begins with four winds stirring up the great sea. In the Old Testament, the sea is often a symbolic image of the nations of the earth. Take for instance the comparison drawn by Isaiah:

### Isaiah 17:12 (NIV)

<sup>12</sup>Woe to the many nations that rage — they rage like the raging sea! Woe to the peoples who roar — they roar like the roaring of great waters!

Other interpreters have suggested the great sea is not a symbol, but an actual body of water, such as the Mediterranean Sea. Each of the succeeding empires mentioned actually share a geographical connection to the Mediterranean Sea. However, given the



prophetic tradition of the Old Testament, and the symbolic nature of the imagery, this doesn't seem likely.

Luckily for us, the meaning of the four beasts is told to us by Scripture! Here is what Daniel is told by an angel standing by:

Daniel 7:17 (ESV)

<sup>17</sup> These four great beasts are four kings who shall arise out of the earth.

That the great sea is being stirred up brings to mind the idea of chaos and tumult. In the same way that the ocean rages amidst a storm, the nations rage against one another. It is no surprise then that as the sea is stirred, out from the water emerges four beasts, who themselves represent earthly kingdoms, each overthrowing the other. That the beasts are numbered indicates chronological sequence; one empire rises, the next takes its place, and so on, within the historical timeline.

Despite the terrifying images of the four beasts, recall the opening verses of Genesis:

Genesis 1:2 (NIV)

<sup>2</sup> Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

The prophetic symbol of water and the sea representing chaos and disorder, particularly the restlessness of the nations, goes all the way back to the very creation of the world where the Spirit is seen hovering over the water before the world was properly ordered. Although the great sea rages, there should always be in the back of our minds the knowledge that God is sovereign over the world and in control. He tamed the waters of creation; He can tame the nations too.

The first beast is like a lion with eagle's wings, wings that are later plucked, and it is made to stand like a man and given the mind of a man. Most scholars believe the first beast is the Babylonian empire, the empire in power in Daniel's day. This seems plausible, given that:

- a) Each empire in the sequence is a historical empire.
- b) Nebuchadnezzar is represented by a lion (Jeremiah 4:7) and an eagle (Jeremiah 49:22) in Scripture
- c) The Babylonian empire used lions as their national symbol
- d) Winged lions were a common statue in the Babylonian empire



The remainder of the imagery of the first beast is harder to interpret. It has been suggested that perhaps the wings being plucked represent Nebuchadnezzar's fall from grace, and his being set on two feet like a man is his restoration, but it is uncertain. Given the first beast is likely Babylon, history then tells us the remaining sequence.

The second beast likely represents the Medo-Persian empire, the empire that overthrew Babylon in chapter 5 of Daniel. Some think the bear having three ribs in its mouth represents Persia's three great military conquests: Babylon, Egypt, and Lydia. However, it is uncertain. The third beast, the leopard, likely represents Greece, the empire that succeeded Medo-Persia. Interestingly, the third beast has four wings and four heads, and Alexander's empire was later split into four distinct domains after his death: Casander's, Lysimachus', Seleucus', and Ptolemy's. Once again, it is hard to say with certainty.

The fourth beast is unique amongst the group. Daniel takes time to specifically identify this beast as different from the preceding three. He also provides an intriguing detail: this beast has *iron* teeth. This may not seem significant but recall our discussion of Nebuchadnezzar's dream in Daniel 2. The fourth empire in the sequence of the statue is represented by *iron* legs, and the fifth empire in the sequence of the statue is represented by *iron* and clay feet. There appears then to be a connection between Daniel's vision and Nebuchadnezzar's.

This fourth beast has ten horns. In the Old Testament, horns are often symbolic of kings or kingdoms. Take for instance the Psalmist when he speaks of David:

Psalm 132:17 (NIV)

<sup>17</sup> "Here I will make a horn grow for David and set up a lamp for my anointed one.

Ergo, this kingdom's uniqueness in part stems from its being an alliance or confederation of ten kings or kingdoms. That a little horn then rises out of the ten indicates that a certain king will emerge from this beast empire. Once again, this little horn is special within the vision. Daniel says the horn has eyes like a man, and a mouth speaking great things. Other translations say the horn speaks pompous words. Essentially, the little horn is a king who will rule this empire and will be arrogant and blasphemous.

Once again, Scripture interprets itself for us! Consider what the angel tells Daniel about the fourth beast:

Daniel 7:23-25 (ESV)

<sup>23</sup> "Thus he said: 'As for the fourth beast, there shall be a fourth kingdom on earth, which shall be different from all the kingdoms, and it shall devour the whole earth, and trample it down, and break it to pieces. <sup>24</sup> As for the ten horns, out of



this kingdom ten kings shall arise, and another shall arise after them; he shall be different from the former ones, and shall put down three kings. <sup>25</sup> 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; and they shall be given into his hand for a time, times, and half a time.

What is the fourth beast? And who is the little horn? So far, each empire we have considered has existed at one point in history. However, the fourth empire has not yet arisen. In other words, this prophecy is yet to be fulfilled. The little horn is a king who has not yet taken power and is the dreaded figure of the Antichrist. When the dream describes the Antichrist's reign as "a time, times, and half time," this means three and a half years, a reference to the timing of the Great Tribulation, the final time of trouble that will befall the world in the last days.

Regardless of the interpretation of these symbols, the key point is this: the world is chaotic and dangerous, and nation will rise against nation in cyclical violence and war. The beasts look terrifying, and indeed they hold great power, but they are better likened to ravenous dogs, each trying desperately to overcome the world in a vie for power and influence. However, things are not as they seem. Despite the chaos, God is the true king of the world and rules over it absolutely. The powers of this world in this age will try to scare you into submission, but you must not allow yourself to be troubled; more importantly, you must never bow to the satanic forces of this world.

Eventually, one nation will arise that will be unlike any other, and it will assume control of the whole world. The temptation of this kingdom will be hardest to resist, and as Christians we must be prepared for the arrival of an evil that will make everything that has happened in history thus far look like a stage rehearsal for the real thing. If we place our trust in the kingdoms of this world, we will fall with them one day. If we place our trust in God and His Son Jesus, we will be triumphant over them.

### **The Vision of the Ancient of Days and the Son of Man**

#### Daniel 7:9-14 (ESV)

<sup>9</sup> "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.<sup>10</sup> A stream of fire issued and came out from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened. <sup>11</sup> "I looked then because of the sound of the great words that the horn was speaking. And as I looked, the beast was killed, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire.



<sup>12</sup> As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time. <sup>13</sup> “I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. <sup>14</sup> 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.

The Ancient of Days is God the Father, one of His many titles He goes by throughout the Old Testament. His throne is magnificent, befitting of the One who rules Heaven and earth. The imagery of fire is commonly used in reference to God’s judgment in the Old Testament. In fact, Daniel’s vision is in many ways a rephrasing of Isaiah’s prior revelation:

Isaiah 66:15-16 (NIV)

<sup>15</sup> See, the LORD is coming with fire, and his chariots are like a whirlwind; he will bring down his anger with fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. <sup>16</sup> For with fire and with his sword the LORD will execute judgment on all people, and many will be those slain by the LORD.

Our God is loving, but He is also the great judge. Evil in this world will not go unpunished, and the transgression of the final beast will be dealt with harshly. You do not want to be on this beast’s side when the Ancient of Days opens His books to judge.

Finally, the central image of the entire vision is described. This is the main event, the thing the entire dream has been building up to. As the chaos of the beasts and their kingdoms tear apart the earth, one like a Son of Man appears on the clouds. This is none other than Jesus Christ, the savior of the world! In the Gospels, Jesus identifies Himself as the Son of Man; in fact, it is evidently His preferred title, as He refers to Himself as the Son of Man more than any other name. The Son of Man is given dominion over the entire world, and His kingdom is everlasting.

This is further confirmation of the fourth beast being the Antichrist and his empire. The vision credits Jesus with overthrowing Him and establishing an everlasting kingdom in his place. This is incredible news! In the church’s time of greatest trial, Jesus Himself will come to our aid!

This passage provides a clear picture of who Jesus is. He is the one who rules and reigns forever. He brings peace to chaos and conquers every foe. He has the kind of power that the kingdoms of this world wish to wield, but never can. The power of the kingdom Jesus will one day establish is already at work within the world. Jesus declared when He came the first time that the kingdom of God has come to the world, and so if you have placed your faith in Christ, you are already a citizen of His kingdom yet come.



Jesus doesn't just want to reign physically in our world; He wants to reign spiritually in each of our hearts. Daniel saw ahead to a time when everything would be made right, when the beast of sin and death will be conquered forever. But better yet than Daniel, we as Christians today have come face to face with the Son of Man Himself! We don't have to wonder who this person will be or what He will be like. Jesus has already come to the world and revealed Himself to us, and now His Spirit resides directly within us.

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## BECOME

Wrap up the discussion by asking some closing questions. We can **become** more like the people God is calling us to be by reflecting on what we've learned and applying it.

- What do the four beasts in Daniel's vision represent?
  - What historical world empires do the beasts likely represent?
  - Why are these beasts important? What do these beasts say about the nature of the world?
- What is special about the fourth and final beast?
  - Is this empire yet to come, or one that has come and gone?
  - Why does God give us so much information about this beast? How is knowing about it helpful?
- Who is the Son of Man in Daniel's vision?
  - What does the Son of Man come to do in this world?
  - What do we know about this figure now that Daniel didn't know in his time?