

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The Times of the Gentiles - Daniel 7

Wouldn't it be great if we could know what was going to happen in the future! I could know which numbers were going to come up on the lottery on Saturday. I could see what my wife was going to be like when she was 60 rather than 20. I could know whether it was going to rain before I put the washing out and had to bring it back in sopping wet! But what we actually mean is wouldn't it be good if we could change the future for our benefit. You see, if we had known those lottery numbers and used them, then what we would have seen in the future would have been quite different from what we saw initially.

This morning we start our look at the second half of the book of Daniel. It is very much with the view to understanding what will happen in the future, as revealed in the divinely inspired word of God, and to then see its relevance to us today. May that indeed change our behaviour now!

Before we start our look at chapter 7, it is worth just briefly considering three useful guidelines for understanding the prophetic Scriptures. You see, unlike Isaiah, Jeremiah or the rest of the prophets, it was not the word of the Lord that came to Daniel, but rather a vision of that which would come to pass. In this respect, Daniel's prophecy is very much like the book of the Revelation.

Firstly, all Scripture is profitable and has a real meaning. We are not to write it off as unintelligible or spiritualise it to get some lessons that are true for all time. No, through the prophetic word, God is deliberately revealing part of His future intentions. So these Scriptures are to be taken as having a definite meaning. However, that does not mean they do not need interpretation. As we shall see this morning, when Daniel speaks about a beast, he does not mean a literal animal.

Secondly, we need to know the whole of the Bible. If the Holy Spirit has chosen to use a symbol to represent something in one part of the Bible, it is usual that the same symbol has the same meaning in another part of the Bible. We should always look for interpretation of Scripture from within Scripture itself. Happily, in today's chapter, that interpretation is given, as with the parable of the sower (see Matthew 13) in the chapter itself.

Thirdly, where we do not have a definitive explanation of a prophecy, given by Scripture itself, then we need to be very cautious about saying that it can only mean what I say it means. History is littered with dates when Christians believed the world was going to end based upon some faulty interpretation of some text. Much dishonour is brought to His name by such dogmatism. By all means, and with the Spirit's help, we should try to gain as full an understanding as possible of these Scriptures, but let us always realise that we might not be quite right all the time. Prophecy is given in sufficient enough detail to let us know how we should behave now, but not in so much detail as to allow us to set our alarm clocks!

Chapter 7 of Daniel gives us an overview of the Gentile supremacy from the time of Daniel until the end of the age. That in itself is remarkable. When God chose Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and made the Israelites His chosen people, He gave them such promises that, had they been obedient to Him, they would have been the world's only superpower, their kingdom spanning the globe throughout all ages. Instead they exist today, precariously hanging on to a small strip of land next to the Mediterranean Sea, having been at various times dispersed throughout many nations. How very different their history would have been had they obeyed what God had commanded. When Israel was carried away into captivity, so ceasing to be a power in the world, then began the time that Scripture calls 'the times of the Gentiles'. So Daniel has a vision of four great beasts.

"The first was like a lion, and had eagle's wings. I watched till its wings were plucked off; and it was lifted up from the earth and made to stand on two feet like a man, and a man's heart was given to it. And suddenly another beast, a second, like a bear. It was raised up on one side, and had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth. And they said thus to it: 'Arise, devour much flesh!' After this I looked, and there was another, like a leopard, which had on its back four wings of a bird. The beast also 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, exceedingly strong. It had huge iron teeth; it was devouring, breaking in pieces, and trampling the residue with its feet. It was different from all the beasts that were before it, and it had ten horns. I was considering the horns, and there was another horn, a little one, coming up among them, before whom

three of the first horns were plucked out by the roots. And there, in this horn, were eyes like the eyes of a man, and a mouth speaking pompous words" (verses 4-8).

We see, in Daniel's vision four beasts coming up out of the waters. Isaiah 57:20 and Revelation 17:1 both use the picture of waters to represent the mass of mankind, uncivilised and without ordered government. Against these the four winds blew. Again, Jeremiah 51:1, speaks of the judgement of God as a wind. So it is against the mass of mankind under the judgement of God, that these four beasts are raised up to perform the will of God. Verse 17 tells us that these four beasts represent four kingdoms, and so to understand the vision we need to identify these four. Interestingly, Nebuchadnezzar earlier had had a dream involving a great statue, with a head of gold, chest and arms of silver, belly and thighs of bronze and legs of iron. Against this a rock, uncut by human hands had come and destroyed it. The two dreams are clearly similar. However, whereas Nebuchadnezzar in pride could view man's achievements as a great statue, God would view the moral qualities of the kingdoms as like unto a beast. Pride has always been a problem for mankind. In Daniel 2, Nebuchadnezzar, the head of the Babylonian Empire is clearly pointed out as the head of gold. So too, here then, the Babylonian empire is figured as the winged lion. However, the empire quickly decayed after Nebuchadnezzar, as indicated by the beast being raised up onto two legs. Perhaps, too, we can see in this the description of the moral improvement there was in the time of Nebuchadnezzar, as he came to acknowledge the authority of God. In the second kingdom, represented by the bear, we see a picture of the Medo-Persian Empire. The Persians were by far the stronger part. The three ribs may be a reference to the Medes, Persians and Babylonians which formed the major powerbase of the empire to which much land was given. After this the four winged leopard arose. This represents the Greek Empire, established by Alexander the Great. It is said that before he was thirty, he sat down and wept, because there were no more lands left to conquer – such was the speed and strength of his conquest. The beast had four heads, and so after the death of Alexander, the empire was divided between four of his generals. The Seleucidae ruled over Syria, the Ptolemies ruled over Egypt, whilst Greece and Thrace were soon consumed into the expanding Roman Empire. The former two would have some significance to Israel during the inter Testament period. Finally, a beast like no other arose to represent an empire like no other. This represents the rise of the Roman Empire. This is seen as going on to the end of time. The accuracy of the vision should come as no surprise to us. Indeed to be a prophet was a dangerous business in Israel. It was no good accurately prophesying 100 things exactly right. One false prophecy meant death by stoning, so seriously did the Israelites take speaking on behalf of God. And yet such was the accuracy of Daniel's description of world events covering a period of over 500 years that Porphyry, an anti Christian philosopher of the third century, claimed that Daniel could not have been written by Daniel because it so matched actual events. This astonishing lack of historical rigor should come as no surprise to the believer, who fully realises that God is in absolute control of world events. He allows one empire after another to come to prominence to accomplish His will. So, this chapter, as well as giving us another, tangible reason for trusting in the reliability of the written word of God, shows us that world events do not just happen by chance. All is foreknown by God, who allows all to happen for His good purpose. That God is still just as active in the world today is undeniable. He is still accomplishing all that He has purposed to do.

However, we need to return to this fourth beast. It is seen as going on to the end of time, having ten horns, and then another little horn. Does the prophecy fall down because the world clearly did not end with the fall of the Roman Empire itself? Clearly not! It could be argued that, although the Roman Empire in its original form ceased to exert its control during the fourth to sixth centuries, since then from out of the various regions of the empire, first one and then another empire has arisen. Some would try to explain the horns of the beast in this way. However, whilst there may be some truth in that, we must remember that Daniel, a patriotic Jew, was very much looking at things through Jewish spectacles. When I go to the Lake District, from a distance all the hills look to be very close together. You feel that having climbed the first peak, it would be an easy thing to walk from one peak to the next, until all were done. It is only as you get up close that the valleys in between become apparent, and the two peaks that seemed so close are in fact, many foot weary miles apart! From the distance in time of about 550 BC, Daniel would view the rise of the Roman Empire and the impact that that would have on Israel as a country. He would also see the fall of the Roman Empire at the end of time, and again, the effect that that will have on Israel. The valley that lies between is the Church age, the great mystery of God that has now been fully revealed to us, through Jesus Christ. If we compare our chapter today with Revelation 13, then we shall see that the final beast or empire receives a near fatal wound, which amazes the world, when it rises again.

The world may speak of the fall of the Roman Empire, but it will rise again. Indeed, many would see in the increasing European integration of current times, based upon the Treaty of Rome, a not unsurprising beginning of the fulfilment of this prophecy. For what are we to make of the 10 horns that this fourth beast has? In Scripture, the symbol of a horn is used in at least three ways. Deuteronomy 33:17 uses the symbol as a picture of strength. Asaph, in Psalm 75:4-5 uses the horn to represent pride, whilst Daniel in 8:20-21, uses a horn to represent a political and military power. Taking all three together, we can see that at the end of time there will be 10 nations united in pride against God. From among these, another ruler will arise, displacing three of the former, to assume total supremacy. He is to be identified with the beast of Revelation chapters 13-17. He will lead the revived Roman Empire, initially in alliance with Israel, but then desiring sole dominion for himself, he will turn against Israel and defile the rebuilt temple and persecute the people of God. He will be Satan's man on earth. And yet his days are numbered to a time, times and

half a time, or three and a half years (Revelation 11:2 and 12:14). You see, throughout the many centuries of human history, God has raised up various forms of government from various races of people, and yet all have been shown to be flawed. None have brought lasting peace and prosperity to all the inhabitants of the world. God has amply demonstrated that left to our own devices, mankind will fail. However, the four beasts are not the end of the vision for Daniel. So we go back to verse 9. "I watched till thrones were put in place, and the Ancient of Days was seated; His garment was white as snow, and the hair of His head was like pure wool. His throne was a fiery flame, its wheels a burning fire; a fiery stream issued and came forth from before Him. A thousand thousands ministered to Him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him. The court was seated, and the books were opened....I was watching in the night visions, and behold, One like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought Him near before Him. Then 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 the one which shall not be destroyed" (verses 9-14).

Daniel is now given a vision of the heavenly realm. How majestic is the view of God! His purity is illustrated in His clothes and hair, His righteous judgement in the flames that consume all that is false, His greatness reflected in the countless hosts that surround Him. Imagine if you or I were to be surrounded by such a crowd. How intimidating we would find it and how difficult to see each one in the vast crowd. Yet for the One who fills and surrounds the entire universe, no crowd is big enough to fully show forth His greatness. The inevitable question that arises out of this vision is, 'For what purpose is this throne set up and this court now in session?'

What we have here is really God's final answer to the cross. There, mankind in arrogance said of the Son of Man, "We will not have this man to reign over us." As far as the world in general today is concerned, the cross is still where Jesus ought to be. The attitude of this world has not changed. But as in all things God will always have the final word. And He has decreed that this world will have the Son of Man as its ruler, for only in this way can all His plans for the world come to fruition. He has determined that 'at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father' (Philippians 2:10-11). So in this vision, we are taken in to the very presence of God Himself. The Son of Man is brought in to His presence and is given an earthly kingdom, one that shall not be destroyed. It is important to note that it is as Son of Man that Jesus will receive the kingdom. His presence in the heavenly realm must act as a tremendous encouragement to us. I can remember, as a young child, many a time at the beach, when we would gingerly dip our toes into the water, and then run back – the water was so cold. But when dad was in already, saying "Come on in, the water's lovely", then we would just rush straight in. His presence made all the difference! Can ordinary human beings such as you and I ever be at home in the presence of a thrice holy God? Oh wonderfully yes! And it is because there is already a Man there – the One who loved me and gave Himself for me (Galatians 2:20). But God's purposes in Christ are not entirely heavenly. So Jesus is given a kingdom – one that will cover the whole earth, if not beyond! This kingdom will last for a thousand years (Revelation 20:4-6), and be the fulfilment of all the Old Testament prophets looked forward to, in terms of a time of tremendous blessing for the nation of Israel, and the world in general (see, for example, Isaiah 9:6-7; 11:1-9; Jeremiah 23:5-6; Micah 4:1-4). Because of its length this period of His reign is usually referred to as the millennium. Peace, righteousness, prosperity, equality and longevity will all characterise the time when Jesus reigns over the whole earth. At the end of this time, incredibly, some people will still not accept the authority of the Lord Jesus, and will rebel against Him. It is then that God will set up His throne to enact a final judgement of all those who have rejected His salvation. The old order of things will be destroyed to finally rid the universe of sin, before a new heavens and a new earth are created. His reign will then continue into eternity.

To my mind, there are at least three practical consequences to us today, which arise from His glorious reigning in the millennial kingdom. Firstly, we ought not to look for His earthly reign before God is ready to give Jesus the authority to act. This world had always been in a state of rebellion to God, and will always be so, until He reigns. Sadly, history is littered with examples of times when men, often with the very best of intentions, have attempted to make the whole of society Christian. The crusades, the last English civil war and republic years, the Continental 30 years wars of religion all bear damning testimony to the fact that we just cannot impose the rules and morals that Scripture lays down on society as a whole. The only way to change society is by changing the individual – and that can and must only be by a personal relationship with Jesus by faith. More blood has probably been shed, ostensibly in the name of God, than for any other cause and that is utterly wrong. When we understand that He will reign, but only when He is ready to do so, then we can learn to wait patiently for all that is wrong with this world to be made right.

Secondly, this planet is not bound for utter destruction, as some in the climate change lobby would have us believe. God has decreed that it is on this earth, in the scene of His rejection, that Jesus will reign for 1,000 years. Knowing this ought to make the believer a voice of reason and calm in a debate that sometimes lacks both.

Thirdly, as a beautiful complement to the second point, we ought to be good stewards, not only of the individual resources that God has given us, but also of the world's resources. Yes, the world is not going to suddenly become uninhabitable, but that does not mean that we act irresponsibly, with no regard to the environment that we live in.

Jesus is going to return to this earth, and we, with Him, shall reign over the earth. If we recognise this, then we ought to treat the planet and its resources with respect, wisely living as good stewards until He comes.

We have seen this morning that God is firmly in control of all things. He raises up and overthrows empires and governments as He chooses. He does this to accomplish His purposes. That purpose culminates in the time when, in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, He Himself will reign over all the earth, and receive the universal acclaim of all beings in the universe.

"This is the end of the account. As for me, Daniel, my thoughts greatly troubled me, and my countenance changed; but I kept the matter in my heart" (verse 28).

Recognising all the sufferings his people were to go through, before their eventual blessing with Christ, and maybe recognising the reason for those sufferings, Daniel was troubled by his vision. It is always a good thing when we really let the word of God impact upon us deeply. Too often we read it and it barely registers in our minds.

We began this morning by thinking how good it would be if we could know the future, but what we really wanted was to influence our future for the good, by knowing what lay ahead. This morning we have that opportunity. By trusting Jesus as Saviour, if we have not already done so, we can prepare ourselves to be associated with Him, when He reigns, for He shall reign. By living for Him now, and accepting the necessary sacrifices that that entails, we can in our small way ready ourselves for reigning with Him, when He accepts the kingdom from His God.

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