In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon, Daniel had a dream, and visions passed through his mind as he was lying on his bed. He wrote down the substance of his dream. Daniel said: “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me were the four winds of heaven churning up the great sea. Four great beasts, each different from the others, came up out of the sea. The first was like a lion, and it had the wings of an eagle. I watched until its wings were torn off and it was lifted from the ground so that it stood on two feet like a man, and the heart of a man was given to it. And there before me was a second beast, which looked like a bear. It was raised up on one of its sides, and it had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth. It was told, ‘Get up and eat your fill of flesh!’ After that, I looked, and there before me was another beast, one that looked like a leopard. And on its back it had four wings like those of a bird. This beast had four heads, and it was given authority to rule. After that, in my vision at night I looked, and there before me was a fourth beast-- terrifying and frightening and very powerful. It had large iron teeth; it crushed and devoured its victims and trampled underfoot whatever was left. It was different from all the former beasts, and it had ten horns. While I was thinking about the horns, there before me was another horn, a little one, which came up among them; and three of the first horns were uprooted before it. This horn had eyes like the eyes of a man and a mouth that spoke boastfully. As I looked, “thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze. A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him. Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court was seated, and the books were opened. Then I continued to watch because of the boastful words the horn was speaking. I kept looking until the beast was slain and its body destroyed and thrown into the blazing fire. (The other beasts had been stripped of their authority, but were allowed to live for a period of time.) In my vision at night I looked, and 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. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men 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. I, Daniel, was troubled in spirit, and the visions that passed through my mind disturbed me. I approached one of those standing there and asked him the true meaning of all this. “So he told me and gave me the interpretation of these things: The four great beasts are four kingdoms that will rise from the earth. But the saints of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it forever-- yes, for ever and ever.’ Then I wanted to know the true meaning of the fourth beast, which was different from all the others and most terrifying, with its iron teeth and bronze claws-- the beast that crushed and devoured its victims and trampled underfoot whatever was left. I also wanted to know about the ten horns on its head and about the other horn that came up, before which three of them fell-- the horn that looked more imposing than the others and that had eyes and a mouth that spoke boastfully. As I watched, this horn was waging war against the saints and defeating them, until the Ancient of Days came and pronounced judgment in favor of the saints of the Most High, and the time came when they possessed the kingdom.
“He gave me this explanation: ‘The fourth beast is a fourth kingdom that will appear on earth. It will be different from all the other kingdoms and will devour the whole earth, trampling it down and crushing it.’ 24 The ten horns are ten kings who will come from this kingdom. After them another king will arise, different from the earlier ones; he will subdue three kings. 25 He will speak against the Most High and oppress his saints and try to change the set times and the laws. The saints will be handed over to him for a time, times and half a time. 26 ‘But the court will sit, and his power will be taken away and completely destroyed forever. 27 Then the sovereignty, power and greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be handed over to the saints, the people of the Most High. His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship and obey him.’ 28 ‘This is the end of the matter. I, Daniel, was deeply troubled by my thoughts, and my face turned pale, but I kept the matter to myself.’

Introduction

Now for the moment you’ve all been waiting for… Now we get to the weird stuff. Enough nice, inspiring stories about courage and fiery furnaces and lions’ dens… In ch. 7 we finally get to the wacked out, apocalyptic visions of the future – four-headed beasts and horns and numbers and guys whose eyes are like flaming torches. Now there are two common ways that people approach stuff like this.

First, some people avoid all the parts of the Bible like this like the plagues described therein. We visited my parents’ church last Sunday and they have this class after the worship service. And in the class the pastor was asking the people to look at the whole NT and see what it had to say about what a disciple looks like. So he broke down the 260 chapters in the NT into 3-4 chapter chunks and after the class everyone was to go get a sheet of paper with their assignment on it. People were squabbling over who got the parts from the book of Revelation. Andrea overheard someone adamantly insisting – “No, not Revelation. I won’t do Revelation. Anything but that!” Do any of you feel that way about the wacked out parts of Scripture – just avoid them altogether?

Now if that’s one extreme, there’s another that really could care less about the other parts of the Bible and are fixated on prophecy and eschatology. Does anybody know what I’m talking about? These people love passages like Daniel 7-12 and immediately get out their calculators and their papers and pens and start drawing charts. They map out the future in great detail. They get everything all figured out and neatly categorized and color-coded and then they sit back and wait to see things start to unfold as they’ve mapped them out.

I think both approaches miss the point. “All Scripture is God-breathed and useful…” (2Tim 3:16). We can’t ignore the parts of the Bible we find weird. They’re there for a purpose. However, they’re not there for us to completely figure out and feel smug in our firm grasp of the events of the future. I think these weird, prophetic visions of the future are in the Bible to give us goose bumps, to make us stand in awe; to boggle our minds with the immensity and intensity of God’s power and his authority over human events.

I’ll show my hand a little bit and let you know that I don’t think each number and detail of apocalyptic visions has a direct, literal correlation to something in history or the future. Books like Daniel and Revelation aren’t codes to be deciphered so that locusts become helicopters and the 10 horns have to refer to the 10 elected members of the UN Security Council. There’s all kinds of stuff like that out there.

I’m a big picture kind of guy. Here’s my chart (notice it’s much simpler than the others) – Creation; Fall; the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus; and the return of Jesus at the end of this age to usher in the eternal state. It’s pretty simple. And
I think Daniel and John and others are simply seeing and describing this BIG PICTURE in unusual, freaky, wacked out ways to get our attention and instill in us a sense of awe and wonder and worship; to give us goose bumps. It’s not just a dry, proposition – Jesus is coming back. It’s a cosmic conflagration and consummation – beasts will be slain and thrown into fire, thrones, kingdoms, dragons, chains, claws, scorpions, bowls of wrath, trumpet blasts, flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, severe earthquakes, great hailstorms, jasper, sapphire, chalcedony, emerald, sardonyx, carnelian, chrysolite, beryl, topaz, chrysoprase, jacinth, amethyst, pearls, gold, transparent glass. And our response should be like Daniel’s – we should get pale in the face and be utterly blown away by these realities.

As we look at this vision today may we all be utterly blown away by just this:

**Jesus will win in the end and we can be on his team!**

*Let’s pray…*

**Daniel’s Dream**

As we start off today the tables are turned. In chapters 1-6 we saw Nebuchadnezzar or Belshazzar having dreams or visions and Daniel came in to interpret them. Now Daniel is the one having dreams. We’ve followed Daniel’s life from a young boy in Nebuchadnezzar’s court to an old man working for Cyrus; his life has spanned an empire. Today, Daniel reports of a dream he had back during the Babylonian empire, in the first year of Belshazzar’s reign (remember: Belshazzar came after Nebuchadnezzar and he was they guy who saw the writing on the wall).

Well, in his dream Daniel finds himself on the edge of the sea. Picture the scene. The sky is dark with only the eerie incandescence of the moon. And the winds are violently, turbulently blowing from all directions, stirring up the waters into a frothy frenzy. It’s chaos, waves crashing against each other with terrifying force. As it has been said, “Apocalyptic is a metaphor-rich genre.”1 And in the ancient world the sea was representative of evil – it was a pool of dark and fearful forces.

And as Daniel stands on this ominous shore, with “the four winds of heaven churning up the great sea” (v. 2) – the seat of evil – suddenly four beasts spring forth from it. In v. 15 Daniel asks someone standing nearby in his vision what everything meant and this person told him that “the four great beasts are four kingdoms that will rise from the earth” (v. 17). This is reminiscent of ch. 2 where Nebuchadnezzar has that vision of a statue. Remember, “the head of the statue was made of pure gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron [with] its feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay” (2:32-33). And we saw there that these were symbols for kingdoms/empires: the head symbolized Babylon, the torso Persia, the thighs Greece, and the legs and feet Rome. And in the middle of the Roman empire a rock that was cut out but not by human hands came rolling in and toppled the statue, destroying it, and the rock grew to become a mountain that filled the whole earth. Jesus in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension was that rock and when he comes again his kingdom will be a world-wide mountain.

Here in ch. 7 there are four beasts that appear in sequence. “The first was like a lion, and it had the wings of an eagle. [Daniel] watched until its wings were torn off and it was lifted from the ground so that it stood on two feet like a man, and the heart of a
man was given to it.” This is likely also referring to Babylon, and the humiliation and restoration of Nebuchadnezzar when he was made to act like an animal until he humbled himself.

Then Daniel saw “a second beast, which looked like a bear. It was raised up on one of its sides, and it had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth. It was told, ‘Get up and eat your fill of flesh’” (v. 5). This is probably Persia (sometimes referred to as Medo-Persia because it included an alliance with the Medes). And Persia devoured its enemies. Attempts have been made to identify the three ribs as three kingdoms they conquered (i.e. Lydia, Babylon, and Egypt), but that’s not necessary, nor is it the probably the intent. The bear simply defeated its enemies. As Calvin put it, “the three ribs [simply] portray the insatiable nature of the beast, not being content with one body it devoured many.”

“After that,” Daniel said, “I looked, and there before me was another beast, one that looked like a leopard. And on its back it had four wings like those of a bird. This beast had four heads, and it was given authority to rule” (v. 6). The leopard and the wings are probably referring to the swift rise to power of Alexander the Great and the Greeks. The four wings and heads some have found to refer to the four generals that succeeded Alexander (Ptolemy, Seleucus, Cassander, Lysimachus), but again, that’s probably pressing it too far and they are most likely just symbolic for the scope of Greece’s rule that extended north, south, east, and west.

The fourth of these grotesque mutants is unique in its deformity. One person has called it “Robo-beast.” “It had large iron teeth; it crushed and devoured its victims and trampled underfoot whatever was left. It was different from all the former beasts, and it had ten horns” (v. 7). There is debate, but in keeping with the scheme from ch. 2, this is probably also referring to Rome.

There were 10 horns coming out of this fourth beast, again probably not to be taken literally, but signifying kingdoms that succeeded Rome. And then there was a little horn that came up and uprooted some of the other horns. This horn was a nasty little booger. And spooky too – it was a horn, yet it had eyes and a mouth. And out of its mouth spewed threats and blasphemies.

Okay, so here is a graphic depiction of evil, the evil that has held sway in the world through empires. Four evil beasts coming out of a tumultuous sea, ten horns coming from the fourth filthy beast, and one horn coming at the end that is full of venom and hatred and pride.

Now the scene shifts abruptly. No longer is Daniel seaside viewing animal like creatures. Now he’s in a heavenly throne room. Again, the symbols are rich. It’s a stately place of authority. God is symbolically depicted as a wise, old man, garbed in white, with hoary white hair – the Ancient of Days. He is seated on a throne, but not just any throne. It’s a throne of fire, wheels of fire. Have you ever seen one of those 4th of July fireworks that spins and shoots out sparks with a high-pitched howl. It even describes a river of fire flowing from his throne. I picture red-hot, molten lave stream running down from the throne or an incessant nuclear explosion barreling out from underneath the Ancient of Days. And multitudes encircle this throne – “thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him” (v. 10). Can you see it? Legions of angels as far as the eye can see. And the books were opened. Righteous judgment was executed from this majestic place.
The horn continued to brag and then the final beast was slain. Evil was defeated. Fire from the throne of the Ancient of Days consumed its ugly representatives.

And then Daniel looked a little closer and what did he see? This is spectacular! “There before me,” he writes, “was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven” (v. 13). This figure is human – one like a son of man – and yet he’s divine. Why do I say that? Because he’s riding on the clouds and in the Ancient Near East only divinity is described as riding on clouds. More specifically, in the OT it is Yahweh who is the cloud rider – “Sing to God, sing praise to his name, extol him who rides on the clouds – his name is the Lord – and rejoice before him” (Ps. 68:4). In Ps. 104:3 we read that “he makes the clouds his chariot.” The Lord led the Israelites out of Egypt with a pillar of cloud by day (Ex. 13:21) and when he appeared on Mt. Sinai a cloud descending over the mountain (Ex. 19:16). Likewise, on the Day of Atonement when the glory of the Lord descended on the tabernacle, a cloud filled the Holy of Holies (Lev. 16:2). Here in Daniel 7 we have a man riding on the clouds – a God-man – coming to the Ancient of Days and he is given a kingdom that will never be destroyed. He is made to rule over men and women from every people, nation, and language. Amazing!

**The Significance of What Daniel Saw**

I can’t underscore enough how central Daniel 7 is to understanding the NT. It’s interesting, isn’t it, that when Jesus walked the earth by far his most common way of referring to himself was as ‘the Son of Man’. 81x that title is on his lips in the Gospels – “the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost” (Lk. 19:10); “[Jesus] said to [his disciples], ‘The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life’” (Mt. 17:22-23); “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt. 20:28). The Son of Man, the Son of Man… Many people simply think it’s a clever way of referring to himself or that it emphasized his humanity. But actually in nearly every instance it’s an allusion to Daniel 7:13 where a son of man figure approached the Ancient of Days on clouds. Jesus identified himself with that Son of Man that received “authority, glory and sovereign power” (v. 14) from the Ancient of Days. He was human and he was divine and he was initiating “an everlasting dominion that will not pass away” (v. 14). He came announcing the arrival of the kingdom of God.

He died for his people’s sins, rose again victoriously from the dead, and just before he sent the Holy Spirit on the church to enable them to do what is seemingly impossible, namely to bring others into the kingdom of God, he ascended to heaven on what? A cloud (Acts 1:9)! And now he is at the right hand of God, in the presence of the Ancient of Days, waiting… until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet” (Heb. 10:13). And Jesus, during his earthly ministry, just before his death said, “In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Mt. 26:64). He has disarmed the [evil] powers and authorities on the cross (Col. 2:15), his kingdom is spreading like yeast through dough, he is reigning at the right hand of the Father in heaven right now, and one day this present evil age (Gal. 1:4) will be brought to a complete end, the current heavens and earth will be rolled up like a robe and changed like a garment (Heb. 1:12), all the stars of the heavens will be dissolved and the sky rolled up like a scroll (Is. 34:4) and everyone will be able to see the unseen reality behind all reality – the Son of Man, the resurrected Lord
Jesus Christ, coming with the clouds of heaven, approaching the Ancient of Days and receiving authority, glory and sovereign power and all peoples, nations and men of every language will not be able to do any else but fall flat on their faces before him, and he shall reign for ever and ever. Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

This was all quite perplexing to Daniel and so he asked an angel, presumably, that was standing nearby to tell him what it meant. I like this angel, because he just gives the big picture – “The four great beasts are four kingdoms that will rise from the earth. But [have no fear, one day the Son of Man] will receive the kingdom and will possess it forever – yes, for ever and ever” (vv. 17-18). Cool, but wait a second… that’s not what it says, is it? That’s what you might expect it to say, but it doesn’t. It says, “[Evil empires will come and go, but one day] the saints of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it forever – yes, for ever and ever” (v. 18).

Whoa! What’s going on here? One like a son of man received the kingdom in Daniel’s vision, but now this angel interprets it as the saints of the Most High – a collective group – receiving the kingdom. And look at vv. 21-22 – “this horn was waging war against the saints and defeating them, until the Ancient of Days came and pronounced judgment in favor of the saints of the Most High, and the time came when they possessed the kingdom.” And again look at v. 27 – “Then the sovereignty, power and greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be handed over to the saints, the people of the Most High.” But then what does it say in the very next breath? “His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship and obey him.”

So which is it – the Son of Man or the saints of the Most High? Who will rule the world throughout eternity – Jesus or those who believe in Jesus? Daniel 7 seems to be saying something very interesting. It seems to be saying both. To be a follower of Jesus is to be identified with him, it’s to be in him, it’s to be incorporated into Christ. He is the corporate head, the representative of his people. So what goes for him, goes for them. The church, the collection of saints in Christ Jesus, is mystically the body of Christ and so we share in Christ; we’re part of him. Therefore, in Mt. 19:28 Jesus could say to his disciples, “I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Mt. 19:28). “Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him” (2Tim. 2:11-12). The last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation, describing the final state, draws to a close by saying, “And they will reign for ever and ever” (Rev. 22:5), “they” being the servants of the Lamb – which is a term for Christ in the book of Revelation. So those who put their faith in the Son of Man are included in the Son of Man and will reign with Christ forever and ever.

Brothers and sisters: there is evil and the world is full of it. Everything is tainted. Sin has infected even the very fabric of society – the system, the Man, the Machine are all fallen and wicked. Evil is systemic. Daniel saw this clearly on the edge of the dark ocean as the repulsive beasts came forth, yet it’s interesting to remember, however, that this happened during the first year of Belshazzar. So what? Well, we know that he still served his God by serving in the fallen empires of this world for several more years! Recognizing that evil permeates this world is not a reason to run from it. That’s not what Daniel did; neither should we. Recognizing that evil permeates this world is a reminder to cling to God and to live in the hope that the evil kingdoms of this world will not last
forever. God will one day eradicate evil once and for all and set up his eternal kingdom. Jesus and all who are in him will reign over a new earth, which Revelation 21:1 tells us metaphorically will have no sea, no evil.

But there’s one more question that was bugging Daniel and is important for us to look at. What about that weird last beast and that pesky little horn. What was God revealing to Daniel there? I think it’s this: that after the fourth kingdom – the legs of iron and feet mixed with clay; the hideous, indescribable beast; the empire during which the kingdom of God rolled into human history in an ironic, veiled, unexpected, little rock/mustard seed/pinch of yeast sort of way – after that kingdom there will still arise an assortment of other, worldly kingdoms until finally one last evil entity comes forward that is the last gasp of the dying beast from the cesspool of wickedness. Whether it’s a king, a religious leader, an economist, an ideology or whatever, we don’t know. But we know he will hate God and distort the truth. He will ravage the church, through persecution, through infiltrating it with false teaching, through oppression. And there will be a short period when the darkness will seem to resurge stronger than before and descend over the world. “Time, times and half a time” (v. 25). We are not supposed to figure out exactly what this means and how long this tribulation will last. One commentator puts it this way, “It is better to understand this reference to be as vague as it sounds on first reading.” All we need to know is that there will be a period of time of intense tribulation for God’s people just before the sky is ripped open to reveal the Son of Man riding on clouds toward the Ancient of Days and the books are opened and judgment is executed and Satan and unforgiven sinners are thrown into the lake of fire.

The NT hints at this in several places. Most clearly in 2 Thessalonians and 1 John. In 1 John 2:18 John writes, “Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come.” There is one final Antichrist who is coming who will wage war against the saints, even as there are mini-antichrists present now who oppose God’s people. Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4 makes it clear that the Day of the Lord “will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God’s temple, proclaiming himself to be God.” This “man of lawlessness” is the Antichrist, the final horn of Daniel 7. But, Paul goes on to say, this “man of lawlessness” “the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming” (2Thess. 2:8).

Conclusion

I’ve told this story before, but when I was a kid we had these ponds out back on our farm. And there were snapping turtles in there. Now snapping turtles are not nice, cute little turtles. They’re mean, ugly, ferocious turtles that can kill small animals and snap with powerful jaws at anything that gets close. Well, somewhere we heard that snapping turtles taste like chicken. So we took some rope and tied it to a post at the edge of the pond and on the other end we tied a milk jug. Hanging from the milk jug was some fishing line with a hook on the end and on the hook was some meat. And we waited a couple days for the milk jug to be submerged, indicating that a snapping turtle had been caught.
And it was and so we reeled it in and my dad took his axe and chopped off the turtle’s head and began to cut out the meat to put in the crock pot for dinner (by the way, it doesn’t taste like chicken; it’s kind of rubbery). But meanwhile my little brother began to play with the severed turtle head to the side. And as we were looking at it, I kid you not, all of a sudden the reptilian eye on the side of the head opened up and it snapped down on my brother’s finger. He started crying. I started freaking out!

But what a picture of what has happened to that ancient serpent who is the devil or Satan. By Christ’s life, death, resurrection, and ascension he has been defeated. His head has been chopped off. He has been slain. But yet until Christ comes again he is still biting people and inflicting pain and harm on the church. There is still evil in this world and pain and suffering, but they are just last ditch attempts by a defeated foe.

Jesus is the Danielic Son of Man. He has delivered the death blow to sin and death and Satan and all the powers of evil. And one day he will throw Satan into the crock pot of hell and establish his righteous rule over a newly created cosmos. Evil will be defeated and vanquished forever. Jesus will win and we can be on his team! We can reign with him for eternity. Does that give you goose bumps? Does that encourage you in the face of evil to persevere in faith? I hope so. That’s what Daniel 7 is supposed to do.

The Lord’s Table

Jesus will win and we can be on his team! But the only way we can be included in Jesus in his victory and his reign is if we were included in him on the cross. If Jesus represented us on the cross, dying for our sin, receiving the judgment that was due us for the evil that lurks within our hearts, then and only then will he represent us for eternity and will we have a place ruling with him in his kingdom…

Benediction

May you have the faith and perseverance to overcome the evil in this world and thereby be given the right to sit with Jesus on his throne, just as he overcame and sat down with his Father on his throne. – Revelation 3:21

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Immanuel Baptist Church, Chicago, Illinois, by Pastor Nathan Carter on Sunday morning, June 17, 2007. It is not meant to be a polished essay or substitute for personal Bible study. The vision of Immanuel Baptist Church is to transform sinners into a holy people who find fulfillment for their hunger for beauty, meaning, and eternal satisfaction in the glory of Christ alone.

End notes:

1 Tremper Longman III, Daniel, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 178.
3 Longman, 190.