

“One Like a Son of Man”

The Thirteenth in a Series of Sermons on the Book of Daniel

Texts: Daniel 7:1-18; Revelation 19:1-16

The second half of the Book of Daniel is much different from the first half. The first six chapters of Daniel recount the career of the Hebrew prophet including a number of events associated with Daniel and his three Hebrew comrades (Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego), two Babylonian kings (Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar) and one Persian king (Darius the Mede—also known as Cyrus). The second half of the Book of Daniel (chapters 7 through 12) opens with a dramatic vision given by YHWH to Daniel which maps out the next six centuries of ancient near-eastern history. Yet in the following chapters, Daniel continues to recount some of the most fantastic and difficult visions in all the Bible. But the literary hinge between the two halves of Daniel is chapter 7. As one writer puts it, the nature of Daniel’s dramatic vision makes this “the single most important chapter of the Book of Daniel.”¹ Chapter 7 includes what yet another writer describes as the “the key to history.”² These are grandiose comments, but after we have spent some time in this chapter, I think you will see why these opinions are appropriate. The vision given Daniel in chapter 7 points us to a mysterious figure—“One like a Son of Man”—who is indeed the key to understanding all of human history.

Daniel’s vision of four strange beasts as recorded in chapter 7, covers the same time frame in human history (the 5th century BC-the 1st century AD) as the vision which YHWH gave previously to Nebuchadnezzar, recounted in Daniel 2. But this vision is YHWH’s revelation of the all-conquering king (Jesus) around whom all of human history ultimately centers. The subsequent visions given Daniel in chapters 8-12 speak of the great empires which arise after Babylon falls (the Persian, Greek, and Roman empires), while also foretelling of the rebuilding of Jerusalem (after the Jewish exiles return home from Babylon), the rise of an Antichrist figure (described as a blaspheming “little horn” who is the arch-enemy of God’s people), before the visions take us forward to the end of the age and the general resurrection when all the dead (believing and unbelieving) are raised bodily on the day of final judgment.

As we return to our series on the Book of Daniel, this week and next, we will explore in some detail the amazing vision given Daniel by YHWH while Belshazzar was in the first year of his reign as king of Babylon—specifically, the year 550 BC, which also happened to be the very same year that a relatively unknown Persian king (Darius) rose to become leader of the Medo-Persian empire (taking the royal name Cyrus), which will conquer Babylon in 539 BC (as we saw in chapters 5-6 of Daniel).

The first half of the Book of Daniel tells the story of Daniel’s life in exile and his service in the royal court, from the time he was kidnaped from his home in Judah (605 BC) until late in his life (539 BC), when he served as a trusted advisor, first to Nebuchadnezzar and then Cyrus. Daniel served the latter toward the end of Daniel’s life, when the Persian king was wrestling with the question, “what to do with the sizable population of Jews living as exiles in Babylon, but who anxious to return to their homeland, rebuild the capital city (Jerusalem) and the temple of YHWH?” The central message throughout the first half of Daniel, is that YHWH is sovereign over all kings and empires, seen in the fact that he gave his prophet

¹ Cited in Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Daniel*, 201.

² Baldwin, *Daniel*, 153.

Daniel great gifts of the Spirit to protect from harm while in exile, and to interpret the dreams which YHWH gave to the leaders of that very same nation (Babylon) YHWH used to punish his disobedient people (Israel), before bringing down the Babylonian empire because of its on-going persecution of the people of God, along with Babylon's zeal in worshiping false gods. The first half of Daniel ends with Daniel returning to the royal court near the end of his life, this time serving a Persian king in the period immediately before Cyrus issues his famous decree to allow the Jews to return home.

The second half of Daniel (chapters 7-12) opens with a dramatic night vision given Daniel by YHWH, likely given a time (550 BC) after Daniel no longer officially served in the Babylonian court. Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 BC and there is no mention that Daniel served among the counselors to either Nebuchadnezzar's successors or Belshazzar. In fact, there is no mention of Daniel appearing at court until the elderly prophet was summoned from retirement by a drunken Beshazzar on the night in 539 BC when YHWH crashed Belshazzar's blasphemous and sacrilegious party, announcing imminent judgment upon the king and his empire through a mysterious handwritten message on the wall of the palace which only Daniel could read. The words of warning—Mene, Mene, Tekel, Parsin proclaimed the immediate death of Belshazzar and the fall the Babylonian empire to the Persians that same evening, an event which was foretold in that dream given to Babylon's king Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 2), a generation previously—a dream which only Daniel could interpret.

In the first half of Daniel 7 (vv. 1-14), Daniel recounts the first vision given him by YHWH, which, in many ways, closely parallels the dream YHWH had given Nebuchadnezzar earlier, only this time the dream focuses upon the identity of the mysterious rock not cut by human hands, which eventually smashes the metallic statue which represented the four great world empires that Nebuchadnezzar had seen. The vision given Nebuchadnezzar covered a swath of human history from the fall of the Babylonian empire in 539 BC, to the rise of three successive world empires, each of which overcomes its successor; Babylon (the head of gold), Persia (the chest of silver), the Greek Empire (the bronze legs), which under Alexander the Great and his successors—the Seleucids ruled over Judah until the rise of the greatest of empires, Rome (the feet of iron mixed with clay). In Daniel's vision of chapter 7, these great world empires are not represented by precious metals, but instead by fierce creatures—some real, some imaginary. The mysterious rock is now given a personal identity—“*one like a Son of Man*”—a figure whom the New Testament frequently and unanimously identifies as Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, who is self-identified by none other than our Lord himself in the Olivet Discourse—a text, you may recall we considered as background to our study of the Book of Daniel.

In Matthew 24:29–31, Jesus told his disciples of a time when “*immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.*” The key then to understanding Daniel's vision is to realize that Jesus identifies himself for us. This is confirmed by the fact that Daniel 7 is cited or alluded to over 50 times in the New Testament, the vast majority of these coming from the Book of Revelation.³ Six centuries before our Lord's incarnation in the womb of the virgin through the power of the Holy Spirit, Daniel sees the heavenly glory of that rock seen by Nebuchadnezzar who will crush all the kingdoms of the earth, whose kingdom will never end.

³ Greidanus, Preaching Christ from Daniel, 231-232, n 90.

With this in mind then, we turn to our text, Daniel 7. In the opening verse we learn something we have assumed all along—Daniel is the author of this book. *“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 prophetic dream is written down by Daniel (as found in Daniel 7). Although speaking in the third person, given the similarities between this chapter and the rest of the prophecy, there is no doubt that Daniel is the author of this entire book, despite efforts of critical scholars to date this book in the 2nd century BC, after many of the things recorded in chapters 7-12 have already come to pass.⁴ Critical scholars simply will not accept any miraculous event, including predictive prophecy, such as that found in the second half of Daniel. For such critics, Daniel is bad history, not prophecy.

Yet Daniel informs us that the content of his vision is prophetic in nature (foretelling of future events), even though it is apocalyptic in terms of its literary style (or genre). Apocalyptic is an ancient literary style which uses highly symbolic language to describe a current struggle between the God’s people and those who oppress them, yet which is also designed to encourage God’s people in the midst of their trials, reminding them of God’s sovereign control of all things even when events *may look* as though God is absent, or has forgotten about us, or is even harshly judging his own people. Often times, the symbols used by the writer contrast the present struggle facing the people of God with a future time when things presently hidden are finally revealed.⁵ Often times what is foretold in Daniel’s vision is unpacked and explained in the Book of Revelation—describing these events in light of Jesus’ death and resurrection.

The scope of the vision is revealed by Daniel beginning in verses 2-3. *“Daniel declared, ‘I saw in my vision by night, and behold, the four winds of heaven were stirring up the great sea. And four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another.’”* This is quite similar to Zechariah’s so-called “night visions” (Zechariah 1:8), which also refer to the four winds of heaven, a common apocalyptic image of the four points of the compass—north, south, east, west (cf. Rev. 7:1). The sea, which was stirred up by the winds, is another common apocalyptic image of a mysterious and frightening realm of danger, storm, tempest, and thought to be the abode of the dragon (Satan). Isaiah says the nations are like the sea—in constant turmoil and upheaval (Isaiah 17:12-13), while the Psalmist reminds us in Psalm 103:23-29, that the Lord alone has the power to restrain the chaos of the waters.⁶

In verse 4, Daniel describes the first creature which he sees. *“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.”* The winged lion was a well-known symbol of Babylon. Even the Old Testament prophets commonly speak of Nebuchadnezzar and his empire as being like a lion. The eagles’ wings enable this creature to move quickly, which is likely a reference to the rapid growth of the Babylonian empire under Nebuchadnezzar. But the wings being plucked off remind us that this expansion eventually came to a halt. The reference to a “man’s mind” being given the creature recalls Nebuchadnezzar losing his mind after the second vision YHWH gave him (Daniel 4), only to be restored to sanity later. The humanizing of this fierce beast is a veiled indication of this empire eventually weakening in its power.⁷ This first beast is clearly a symbolic reference to the Babylonian empire, just as the image of

⁴ Steinmann, Daniel, 340-341.

⁵ Greidanus, Preaching Christ from Daniel, 206-207.

⁶ Baldwin, Daniel, 154.

⁷ Steinmann, Daniel, 342-343.

the golden head had been in the metallic statue of the vision in Daniel 2.

The second creature is described in verse 5. *“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.’”* Bears, like lions, were considered dangerous predators, not uncommon at that time throughout the local mountains and foothills. The image Daniel sees is of a bear raised up on one side as though it was preparing to lunge, although this may mean that the bear was being raised up by the one who rules the universe (YHWH). Following the same order as that of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, the bear is clearly the Persian empire, now raised up by God to displace the Babylonian empire, just as Daniel would witness with the death of Belshazzar and the Persian capture of Babylon.⁸ The bear has three ribs in its mouth, likely representing small empires previously conquered, but its conquest, while great and even though it will eventually dominate the region, will not be unlimited—YHWH restrains this beast, commanding it to rise up and conquer (presumably Babylon, as in Daniel chapters 5-6).

The third beast is another hybrid creature, which Daniel describes in verse 6. *“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.”* As with the bronze (or third) successive empire of Nebuchadnezzar’s vision in Daniel 2, the third creature Daniel sees represents the rise of Alexander the Great and the Greek empire about 330 BC, some two centuries yet future to Daniel (a fact which drives critical scholars crazy since they will not accept even the possibility of predictive prophecy such as this). The leopard was known as fast attacker, a point emphasized with the addition of four wings on its back.

That this is the Greek empire is clear when we consider how fast Alexander’s rise to prominence really was. Alexander attacked the Persian empire in 334, and after a series of well-known battles, finally defeated the Persian armies in 330. Alexander’s armies conquered massive amounts of territory until finally his troops revolted in 324. After ten years of conquest, Alexander’s empire extended from Greece and Egypt all the way into what is now India—a massive empire much larger than any of the preceding empires had been. When Alexander died in Babylon at the young age of 32, the empire was divided among the Ptolemaic and Seleucid kings—perhaps symbolized by the four heads. More likely, however, the heads are symbolic of Alexander’s conquest of a vast amount of territory stretching to the four points on the compass yet dominated by one man (Alexander). This beast too was given dominion—YHWH raised it up for his sovereign purposes—a matter addressed in later visions in chapter 8, and 10-12.⁹ It is from the remnants of this empire that an arch-persecutor of the people of God will come (Antiochus IV Epiphanes), who will desecrate the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem in 167 BC, and who will figure prominently in these visions as an Antichrist figure.

The fourth beast Daniel sees is the most frightening of all. *“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.”* There is really no comparing of this beast to any earthly creature. All Daniel says of it is that it is terrifying, dreadful, and strong. It frightens him. The iron teeth clearly ties this beast directly to the fourth empire of Nebuchadnezzar’s vision in chapter 2—Rome, its empire and its emperors—still 500 years future to Daniel. The beast conquers all others (devouring and trampling them), but unlike its predecessors, this beast has “ten horns”—a reference to the fact that it is ten times greater and

⁸ Steinmann, Daniel, 343-345.

⁹ Steinmann, Daniel, 345-347.

more powerful than its predecessors.¹⁰ The ten horns do not refer to ten modern nations which supposedly constitute a revived Roman empire as taught by dispensationalists.

In verse 8, Daniel speaks of yet another unique and terrifying characteristic of this beast. *“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.”* The little horn with eyes and a very loud mouth (likely making this a reference to a king or government) seeks to exercise its authority over the other ten horns, but is only able to uproot three of them. Its influence is not so much its power, but its speech—“great things.” It may well be that this “little horn” claims divine rights and prerogatives for itself.¹¹ It is but a mere ruler or nation, yet acts as though it is the creator and ruler of all—when only YHWH can claim this, and when only YHWH’s kingdom is everlasting. This becomes even clearer, when we compare this with John’s description in Revelation 13:11-18 of the “second beast from the land” (the Roman emperor cult in which emperors were worshiped as deities). John’s second beast has horns like a lamb (imitating Jesus), but speaks like a dragon (or serpent who is the father of lies). This ties John’s second beast to Daniel’s fourth beast as one who wages war upon the people of God, and who speaks blasphemous things against God, while futilely seeking to defeat the kingdom of his son, Jesus.¹² Clearly, this is Rome.

In verse 9, the visionary scene changes yet again—seemingly as a divine response to the blasphemous challenge issued by the little horn and the fear it brought to Daniel. The imagery which follows is framed in poetic parallelism, reflected in modern English translations which place these verses in stanzas. The vision which Daniel describes in verses 9-10 and 13-14 of chapter 7 is one of the few passages in the Bible where we are given even slight glimpses of the heavenly glory of the Ancient of Days and the Son of Man. There is, of course, the scene in Revelation 4-5 of our Lord’s coronation after his obedient life as suffering servant, his death for our sins, his triumphal resurrection, and his ascension into heaven. There is the scene of final judgment in Revelation 19-20, in addition to the wonderful image of the Marriage Supper of the Lamb found in Revelation 19:1-16 (which we read as our New Testament lesson). But the heavenly vision of verses 9-10 and 13-14 is also a visionary re-enactment of Psalm 2 and 110, which speak of YHWH proclaiming of the Lord, *“you are my Son”* (Psalm 2:7) and when the LORD says to David’s Lord *“sit at my right hand”* (Psalm 110:1). These two passages are understood by the apostles to refer to Jesus’ eternal and divine nature, and to his coronation and enthronement in his ascension.¹³ In this wonderful vision, Daniel is pointing us ahead to our Lord’s first and second advents, as well as Jesus’ reign until the day of final judgment and the recreation of all things.

In Daniel’s vision, the heavenly court in session, with thrones in place, with one for Ancient of Days. One commentator reminds us of a very basic change in the scene before us. “The balanced poetry conveys the order and beauty which surrounds the divine judge as opposed to the chaos of the sea and its beasts.”¹⁴ In verses 9-10, Daniel tells us that *“as I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat;*

¹⁰ Goldingay, *Daniel*, 164; Steinmann, *Daniel*, 348.; Young, *Daniel*, 149-150.

¹¹ Young, *Daniel*, 148.

¹² Steinmann, *Daniel*, 348-349.

¹³ Steinmann, *Daniel*, 359-360.

¹⁴ Baldwin, *Daniel*, 157.

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 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.” The first question is who is the “Ancient of Days?” Calvin correctly says this is “the eternity deity himself ascended [to] the throne of judgment.”¹⁵ The Hebrew means “advanced in years,” but the context tells us that the figure is eternal in contrast to the four beasts whose existence is very short in comparison.¹⁶ The whiteness of his clothing and hair are symbols of holiness. The vast number of those serving him are the host of heaven—angels and the redeemed (saints). The fire is symbolic that the Ancient of Days is the judge of all the earth and its creatures who will destroy his rebellious enemies by fire (including the fourth beast).

The second question is “who sits on the other thrones, next to that throne with its ‘wheels of fire’ (an image found in Ezekiel 1:15-21) in connection with the throne of God?” In Matthew 22:42-44, Jesus tells us that in him, Psalm 110 is fulfilled, because it is he who occupies one of these thrones. Jesus answered a question about his identity put to him by the Pharisees by “asking, ‘what do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?’ They said to him, ‘The son of David.’ He said to them, ‘How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet?’” One of these thrones belongs to Jesus.

But in the gospels, Jesus also says his disciples will sit on thrones and judge along with him. According to Matthew 19:28, “Jesus said . . . ‘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.’” These thrones are for the Ancient of Days, the Son of Man, and the saints who will rule with him, after Jesus calls them into his kingdom, saving us from the penalty of our sin (death). It is a heavenly scene which would have been virtually unintelligible to Daniel, before Jesus’ messianic mission, inauguration of his kingdom and our Lord’s death and resurrection. With the hindsight of redemptive-history seen through the person and work of Jesus, we know exactly what these things mean. We know to whom this refers, even though this was hidden from Daniel.

The vision is interrupted by the blasphemy and boasting of the “little horn.” In response, in verses 11-12 Daniel reveals the fate of the beasts (world empires). “*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. As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time.*” Each of these successive kingdoms rules as the Ancient of Days wishes, powerless for a “time and season” until the final judgment.¹⁷ The horn may repeat his proud words of boasting drawing Daniel’s attention, but when summoned before the heavenly court the “little horn’s” fate (along with that of the beast on whom he appears) is sealed. Eternal judgment awaits, an image expanded and explained for us in Revelation 19:20. “*And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who in its presence had done the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur.*”

¹⁵ Calvin, Daniel, 2.15

¹⁶ Young, Daniel, 151.

¹⁷ Steinmann, Daniel, 355.

After the interruption of the “little horn” and a preview of its fate along with the beast upon which it appears, Daniel’s attention shifts back to the heavenly scene and the vision of the very Lord of history. *“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. 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 identity of the Son of Man is no mystery to readers of the New Testament. Although the Hebrew expression can be used of humans (it is used this way some 107 times in the Old Testament),¹⁸ as we have seen, Jesus applies this term to himself as an overt reference to his messianic office as that one who comes to reign as the Davidic king promised to Israel and then to the new covenant people of God.

The phrase “Son of Man” as used by Jesus speaks of our Lord’s incarnation as one who is both true man and true God, who, in his incarnation, left the glories described by Daniel in this vision to save us from our sins. It is Jesus, who, in his messianic office, ushered in the kingdom of God which will be consummated on the last day, when Jesus returns in judgment. This kingdom has no end. In several places, the gospel writers quote or allude to this passage, believing that it refers directly to Jesus. Luke (21:27) says of Jesus’ return (his second advent—which of course assumes he proves himself to be the Son of Man in his first advent), *“and then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.”* When he sees one like a “Son of Man” Daniel sees the pre-incarnate Jesus, who will take to himself a true human nature in the womb of a virgin to suffer and die for our sins, before being raised from the dead and ascending into heaven, taking his place upon his throne.

We should not be surprised when Daniel states in verse 15, *“As for me, Daniel, my spirit within me was anxious, and the visions of my head alarmed me.”* Blown away by what he has seen and unable to understand much of it, in verse 16, the prophet tells us, *“I approached one of those who stood there and asked him the truth concerning all this. So he told me and made known to me the interpretation of the things.”* The simple answer given Daniel is given him in summary form in verses 17-18. *“These four great beasts are four kings who shall arise out of the earth. But the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever, forever and ever.”* This answer sets the stage for the balance of the chapter (vv. 17-28), to which we will return next time, Lord willing.

What application, then, do we take with us from this amazing and wonderful vision? Although many have sought the beatific vision (I want to “see” God) this is one of the few texts in all the Bible where we are actually given a glimpse of heaven. The glory which Daniel sees is beyond his comprehension, but one thing that is clear, “One Like a Son of Man” has taken his throne, rules over all creation, exercises dominion over all things, and possesses a kingdom which never ends. Daniel saw the figure but did not know who this is. But we do. This is Jesus—seen in his heavenly glory by Daniel—the same Jesus who rules over all the kingdoms of this world, even those of which Daniel had personal knowledge (Babylon and Persia) and those yet to come (Greece and Rome). What comfort it must have been for Daniel to know that even as he stood in the presence of great kings and emperors (Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, Cyrus), he knew that these men were given their temporary dominion by one far greater than they—that one who Daniel saw who dwells eternally in the presence of the Ancient of Days, the one “like a Son of Man.” This “Son of Man” is Jesus, our Savior and Redeemer, whom we worship and serve, and who gave himself for us, and even now calls us to believe and trust in him.

¹⁸ Steinmann, *Daniel*, 356.