

DANIEL

Part 6: "History Unveiled"

Daniel 7—8

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Summary

Delve into the latter chapters of the book of Daniel, which unveil profound apocalyptic visions that span past, present, future, and the eternal. In Daniel chapters 7 and 8, we will encounter visions of beasts symbolizing earthly kingdoms and a little horn representing oppressive figures. Then, the focus shifts to the Ancient of Days, a divine judge beyond time, bringing justice to all nations. Finally, we will behold a triumphant vision of the Son of Man, who restores dominion to humanity, defeats the beasts, and offers eternal hope. Through Daniel's vision, learn to see beyond the curtain and embrace the hope of an eternal kingdom that remains unshaken.

Scripture Reading

"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. 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. 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. 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.' 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. "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" (Daniel 7:1–14, ESV).

Introduction

In the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*, the heroes of the story journey to a magical place called Emerald City, where they seek wisdom and protection from a legendary wizard named Oz.

When the travelers come into the presence of Oz, they are overwhelmed and frightened by his appearance [Show [1The Wizard of Oz](#)]. His head is monstrously large and green. His voice is loud and terrifying. Fire and smoke surround him. The wizard demands silence as he speaks and absolute compliance toward all he commands. And all who see him tremble before him and obey his every word.

But toward the end of the film, a shocking discovery is made. Off in a quiet corner, where the image of the imposing Oz flashes and thunders, there is a drawn curtain. And behind the curtain [Show [2The Man Behind the Curtain](#)], is an elderly man who controls the sights and the sounds of the supposed great and mighty wizard.

It becomes evident that, for all of the fanfare and pyrotechnics and booming sounds, the wizard is a farce. The truth behind the mirage is a relatively weak and unimpressive man who simply knows how to put on a good show. And as his secret is exposed, he cries out, "*Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain!*"

Today, I want to argue that this famous scene from *The Wizard of Oz* and the latter chapters of Daniel are exact opposites of one another. In both Oz and Daniel, a veil is lifted, and a hidden truth is revealed. But whereas Oz forbids us to pay attention to the man behind the curtain, Daniel wants us very much to pay attention to the One who is behind the curtain.

The latter half of Daniel is a section of Scripture that both fascinates and mystifies. Gone are the familiar stories of the fiery furnace and the lion's den. Now, we behold mysterious visions of the night.

These visions are a part of a genre (or literary type) called "*apocalyptic literature*." When you hear the word "apocalyptic," you typically think about the end of the world. And indeed, apocalyptic literature often does address topics like the final judgment and the end of history. But apocalyptic literature is about so much more.

The word apocalyptic literally means to unveil and reveal. Thus, apocalyptic literature isn't only about the future—it's about our past, present, and future; it's also about the eternal. Apocalyptic literature allows us to look behind the curtain and see the hidden spiritual reality behind all things.

In today's sermon, we will take a bird's eye view of the apocalyptic visions of Daniel chapters 7 and 8. They are both visions that the prophet Daniel witnesses during the reign of King Belshazzar at the twilight of the Neo-Babylonian Empire. They are visions designed to show God's people a hope that is bigger and stronger than all the empires of this world.

Like the Jewish exiles in Babylon, we live in an anxious age of history filled with war, terror, and uncertainty. We are limited in what we can see and know and understand about our world. But these words of inspired Scripture are meant to lift the curtain so that we might see "History Unveiled" and know we have reason for hope in our own time of exile.

So, for the rest of our time, we are going to walk through three big images in these apocalyptic visions. We will explore 1.) *The Beasts of Earthly Kingdoms*, 2.) *The Power of the Ancient of Days*, and 3.) *The Dominion of the Son of Man*. We have a lot of ground to cover, and it gets really dense—so buckle up!

Exposition

1.) *The Beasts of Earthly Kingdoms* (which is by far the longest point)

As you would approach the ancient city of Babylon, the first sight you would have seen would have been a colorful walkway that led up to the main portal of the city known as the Ishtar Gate [show 3The Ishtar Gate].

This beautiful and imposing gate was filled with images of various animals [Show 4Dragon and Auroch of the Ishtar Gate], like lions and goats and even dragons, set on a deep indigo background. These animals represented Babylon's claim to mastery over the nature and the world. Thus, these images would be interpreted by all who saw it as a claim to power.

No doubt, the Ishtar Gate would have made a strong impression on the imagination of any onlooker, especially exiles or captives like Daniel, upon their arrival to the imperial capital.

That's why it is so interesting that Daniel 7 uses similar images of various beasts—images that would have connected to the imagination of anyone who lived in this cultural moment—to reveal a subversive truth about Babylon's power. In Daniel's visions, these beasts symbolize the kingdoms of this world of which the Babylonian empire is only one of many to come.

Daniel 7 begins with a vision of four beasts rising from the sea [Show 5The Beasts from the Sea]. They come from the "four winds," which is a figure of speech that means all four corners

of the compass. In other words, these beasts represent kingdoms that come from all corners of the known world.

The sea that they rise from is a symbol chaos throughout the Old Testament. Like violent winds and waves, the nations are chaotic, unpredictable, and often destructive. It is a perfect metaphor for the political uncertainty in the ancient Near East, where wars and conquests of kingdoms could suddenly destabilize all of life.

In Daniel 7 [Show 6The Four Beasts of Dan 7], the first of the four beasts is a winged lion that eventually loses its wings but is later given the mind of a man. It is an image that, most likely, represents the Babylonian Empire, especially in its height of glory under the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II.

The second beast is a powerful bear that devours and even holds the ribs of a recent victim in its mouth. This image has often been associated with the mighty and massive Persian empire.

The third image is a leopard with four wings. It is a beast most often associated with the Greek empire, which quickly conquered much of the known world.

It is notable that the first three beasts are terrifying, but they are each rooted in nature. The fourth beast, however, is monstrous, unnatural, and the most disturbing of all.

Our text describes it as “...*terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong.*” Its teeth are made of sharpened iron, like the swords and spears of ancient war. Its legs and feet are so immense and colossal that they crush all that comes under their weight. Ten horns adorn its head. Taken together, it's an image more like a kaiju monster from a Godzilla film rather than an animal in the natural world.

Many commentators have associated this beast with the empire of Rome. But perhaps it is a composite image of all empires that have evolved into monstrous perversions of nature that consume and kill. In apocalyptic literature, there can be—and often intentionally are—multiple fulfillments of various visions.

But Daniel 7 is not the only vision of beasts in Daniel. Daniel 8 also includes images of beasts as well, but in Daniel 8, the interpretation is much more pinpointed and clear.

In chapter 8, Daniel beholds a vision of a charging ram that none can stand before. But the ram, who stands on the east side of a river, is confronted from the west by a goat with a long horn protruding from its head [Show 7The Ram and the Goat of Dan 8].

The goat is so swift that its feet appear to not even touch the ground as it moves toward the east. The goat defeats and kills the ram, but its mighty horn eventually breaks and is replaced by four smaller horns.

We learn from the text that the two horns of the charging ram represent the kingdoms of the Medes and Persians that compose the Persian empire. The goat, on the other hand, is the kingdom of Greece. It's lightning-quick moment, and the great singular horn represents the history-shaping conquest of Alexander the Great [Show [8Alexander the Great](#)]. The confrontation of the ram and goat is a prophetic image of the battle of Gaugamela, one of the most decisive events in world history, in which King Alexander prevails, and the Persian empire is brought to an end.

But the horn of the goat is broken. Alexander dies of illness at the young age of thirty-two years old. Ironically, his place of death is the city of Babylon.

However, Alexander dies with no succession plan. His kingdom is divided among his generals, who often warred and feuded with one another. This was represented by the four smaller horns that grow in place of the large one.

It's also notable that both Daniel 7 and 8 involve the symbol of "a little horn" that grows. Often a raised horn is a symbol of pride in the Old Testament. The horns of these two visions are not necessarily identical, but they clearly present a pattern. In both cases, they seem to represent antichrist figures who exalt themselves in pride against God and use their power to oppress God's people.

Here is the interpretation of the horn in Daniel 8: *"As for the horn that was broken, in place of which four others arose, four kingdoms shall arise from his nation, but not with his power. And at the latter end of their kingdom, when the transgressors have reached their limit, a king of bold face, one who understands riddles, shall arise. His power shall be great—but not by his own power; and he shall cause fearful destruction and shall succeed in what he does, and destroy mighty men and the people who are the saints. By his cunning he shall make deceit prosper under his hand, and in his own mind he shall become great. Without warning he shall destroy many. And he shall even rise up against the Prince of princes, and he shall be broken—but by no human hand"* (Dan 8:22–25).

So, what can we learn about this horn?

In chapter 7, we see the little horn speaking great things. It blasphemes against God, makes war against the saints, and commands for the worship of God to cease. In chapter 8, the little horn reaches to heavens, like the tower of Babel, and pridefully places itself in the place of God. But in both chapters 7 and 8, the horns are defeated by the power of God.

So who or what is this horn? Well, the best candidate for an initial fulfillment of this prophecy is the historical figure of Antiochus IV Epiphanes [show [9Antiochus IV Epiphanes](#)], who was one of the great villains of the intertestamental era who tyrannized and oppressed the Jewish people. We will learn more about this man as we continue in Daniel.

But I would argue that there is more to the horn than just Antiochus. History is littered with the tales of other diabolical tyrants. And no doubt there will be more evil leaders who exalt themselves in pride at the expense of the weak.

I'm reminded of a scene in the first *Avengers* film. The big villain of the movie is an evil, godlike being named Loki. He reveals himself before a crowd in Germany, where he displays his overwhelming power. Instantly, he demands that people kneel in submission to him.

As everyone in the crowd bows, an older gentleman refuses to comply and says he will not bow to such a man.

Loki says, "There are no men like me." The old man says, "There are *always* men like you."

From age to age, there will always be wicked men who rise to prominence and acquire through violence and cruelty. Kingdoms and nations will rise, and some will even become monstrous beasts that consume and crush innocent human lives.

But through this vision of apocalypse—through this supernatural unveiling—we can see that God is neither surprised nor intimidated by the kingdoms of this world. Nations will rise, and they will rage for a time—but they will not endure forever.

For the people of God, our hope must rest in a far more eternal power.

2.) The Power of the Ancient of Days

In Daniel 7, the terror of the beasts is outshone by an utterly overwhelming vision of God's glorious power and infinite might.

It is a vision of one who sits on a throne. The Enthroned One emanates the full spectrum of a bright white light, which is a symbol of his absolute holiness, pristine purity, and undefiled perfection. A royal court and council is seated next to him, and before him stands a vast multitude.

It is an image of the final judgment. But who is the judge?

Here, he is known as "the Ancient of Days." He is the God who exists before and beyond time.

Before there were days, God was there. Before there were days, God was ancient, existing eternally in the past as he will exist eternally into the future.

This is not a God who is bound by the contingencies of time, space, and human history. This is the maker of heaven and earth. He is the Lord of all!

Even the most powerful of kings and kingdoms are still but creatures within his creation, and before him, all will be held to account.

Daniel 7 describes him as one who dwells in and is surrounded by holy fire; yet not consumed. This image of fire is meant to evoke the memory burning bush that stood before Moses. This isn't just a god—this is the “Great I Am”; the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob! This is the covenant-making, covenant-keeping God; the God who heard the cries of his people when they were enslaved; the God who has not forgotten his people in exile.

This vision is meant to be a fearful reality that far surpasses any power the empires of this world would claim to possess. For the Ancient of Days holds a power that is more powerful than the beasts; a power that can depose and even destroy entire empires in judgment.

It is a striking, awe-inspiring, and terrifying vision. For divine judgment is a fearful reality. But in the Bible, it is also a *longed-for* reality. The Day of the Lord is good news, for it is the day when perfect justice comes and all evil is vanquished. For this reason, the promise of divine judgment is meant to be a source of comfort for the weak, the oppressed, and those who have been wronged by the powerful with no recourse.

The vision of the Ancient of Days means that even the most powerful of earthly kingdoms are but temporary. Our hope must be in an eternal kingdom. As the author of Hebrew says, *“Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire”* (Heb 12:28–29).

3.) The Dominion of the Son of Man

In the beginning, Adam and Eve—the first man and first woman—were created in the image of God. And as those who were created in the image of God, they were designed to be representatives of God's authority over the world. They were created to possess a dominion wherein they stewarded God's creation and unfolded its latent potential and wonder unto God's glory.

The first acts of Adam's dominion are to cultivate a garden and to name the animals. For in the Hebrew mindset, to name something was to possess power over what was named.

But humankind rebels against God's rule and reign. Sin enters in and fractures the perfection of God's creation. And now, instead of humankind ruling over God's creation, we are enslaved to the power of sin, we live in fear of the power of death, and we are dominated by monstrous powers of this world that are often like the beasts we were designed to rule. Instead of naming these beasts, the beasts often name us.

But God has not abandoned his creation. Through all of the chaos and contingencies of history, his sovereign hand is authoring a plan of redemption. And the glorious culmination of this is witnessed in Daniel 7 with the Son of Man, who is coming with the clouds of heaven.

Now, why is the image of clouds important? Like the fire before the Ancient of Days, the clouds also evoke the memory of Moses. Only now it is Moses and the people of God before Mount Sinai, the place where God revealed his word and ways to the people of Israel. The clouds, in other words, are an image of God's presence among his people.

Why the title "Son of Man"?

Well, Adam and Eve fell from glory and dominion due to the deception of a serpent, the first of all beastly powers. As a result, God passed judgment on humanity and all the earth. But even in God's words of justice, there was hope.

All the way back in Genesis 3, God foretold that from Adam and Eve would come forth a Son that would crush the head of the serpent (cf. Gen 3:15). One day, there would be one who would reclaim creation from the power of sin and death, and the humanity would be restored.

This is the Son of Man. And through this Son of Man, the beasts of this world are defeated, the reign of God over creation is restored, and the saints of God even get to participate in his dominion.

For many of the ancient Jewish interpreters, the Son of Man was believed to refer to the righteous remnant of Israel that would one day rise, defeat the nations of his world, and bring forth the kingdom of God on earth. For others, this may have been thought to be an anointed political messiah whom God would use to restore an earthly kingdom to Israel.

But it does seem that the Son of Man is so much more. In Daniel's vision, he is a singular figure—not a nation. And he can't be a mere political leader, for he is an eternal figure.

Even more, the vision of rescue does not come from a king or kingdom coming up to heaven. No, this is a vision of salvation wherein the power of heaven comes down to earth!

And this is exactly what happened when God sent his own Son, Jesus Christ, into the world so that we might know the hope of an everlasting kingdom and everlasting life.

The Son of Man points forward to the New Testament miracle and mystery of the incarnation, wherein God the Son—who is God of God and light of light—was made man and born into this world. Jesus is completely God and completely man, and because of this dual nature, he is our only Redeemer.

Jesus is the visible image of the invisible God; he is the radiance of God's glory and the exact imprint of his divine nature! Yet he is also a vision of true humanity, restored humanity, and resurrected humanity.

Through his own life, death, and resurrection, what the first man lost, the *Son of Man* has restored.

Conclusion

Daniel is a book that is most famous for the story of the lion's den. But it is this "Son of Man" passage in Daniel 7 that is arguably the most important text in Daniel and the theological center of the book. It is this text that becomes pivotal for the New Testament for understanding the true nature of Christ.

In fact, in the gospels, Jesus often chooses not to identify himself as "the Messiah." After all, by the time of Jesus, the term "Messiah" had taken on a more political and militaristic meaning.

No, the number one self-designation of Jesus is "Son of Man."

Now, the "Son of Man" is also a phrase used by the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel in reference to himself. As a prophet, Ezekiel was a representative of man before God and of God before man. And you can see how this description could describe Jesus.

But when Jesus is arrested and stands before the Sanhedrin, we can see that this title means something so much more.

As the Jewish council examines him and tries to find a reason to condemn him. They even bring forward accusers who give false and contradictory testimony concerning Jesus. Finally, they point-blank ask him whether or not he claims to be the Messiah. They want to know if he plans to make himself a political king.

Jesus's response is fascinating. He wants them to know that, yes, he is the Messiah. But he is far more than just a human king or military liberator. He is the Son of Man, who was foretold in Daniel 7.

This is how the gospel Matthew describes this moment, *"But Jesus remained silent. And the high priest said to him, 'I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.' Jesus said to him, 'You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven'"* (Matt 26:63–64).

In this moment, Jesus not claiming to be just any king. He is claiming to be the eternal king, the king who is worthy of all dominion, the king who will be seated at the right hand of God, the king who represents the very presence of God among his people!

The high priest rips his robes in outrage! How dare a lowly rabbi claim to be the Son of Man!
The Jewish councils declare that Jesus is worthy of death, and they send him to be sentenced by Rome to die on the cross.

But the Judged-One will soon be the Judge. The One who would be crucified by the power of an empire has now defeated the far greater power death and be given dominion over all empires.

He is our judge, he is our justice, and he is the only one worthy to receive a kingdom that knows no end.

This is the reality that the visions of Daniel aim to unveil. They are fantastical visions that are mysterious and disturbing. Yet they are divinely inspired and divinely revealed, and they impart a truth that is meant to give us hope.

The first half of Daniel—filled with familiar stories and narratives—is designed to give us a vision of a faithful life in exile. But the second half of Daniel—filled with mysterious visions and dreams—is designed to give us a vision of hope that gives us strength to endure in exile.

For us today, may we learn to see behind the curtain and beyond the veil. May we hold the hope we have in Christ when we feel homeless in this world and when nations rage in a sea of chaos. May we rest in the promise that the Ancient of Days is enthroned in glory, and the Son of Man will one day come very soon to make all things new.

AMEN.