

Lesson 16

Last week we finished Chapter 6, which ends the first half of the book of Daniel and also ends the historical narrative portion of Daniel. What follows in the second half of the book are visions and dreams that Daniel received from God.

Last week, we also looked at what is called apocalyptic language, which is vivid image-filled language that God often uses to describe times of conflict and judgment. And we ended with some guidelines on how we should approach such language. It can be very difficult to unravel, but it becomes much less difficult when we follow some common-sense guidelines and let the easier parts of the Bible be our guide in understanding the more difficult parts.

Now that we have looked at half of the book, let's revisit a question we considered in the first lesson - what is the central theme of this book? I don't think our answer changed, but I suspect we are more confident in that answer. The central theme of Daniel is the answer to the question, "Who is in charge?"

Who is in charge? Is it Nebuchadnezzar? Is it Darius? Is it Cyrus? Is it Daniel? None of the above. The central theme of this book is that God is in charge. Or perhaps we should say, despite how things might seem, God is in charge. Why? Because things are not always what they seem.

Yes, God's people had been exiled. Yes, Jerusalem and the temple had been destroyed. But no, none of that means that God was not in charge. Those things happened because God was in charge, not despite God being in charge. They were all part of God's plan to teach his people a lesson, to display his power and glory to the surrounding nations, and to create the perfect cradle in which his son could come into this world to fulfill the ancient promise to Abraham.

Let's be on the lookout for this theme as we study the second half of the book.

Daniel 7:1

1 In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon Daniel had a dream and visions of his head upon his bed: then he wrote the dream, and told the sum of the matters.

The first thing we learn in Chapter 7 is when Daniel received this vision from God, and we are told that it came in the first year of Belshazzar's reign as king of Babylon.

The second thing we learn is that, while the book progressed chronologically through the first six chapters, that is no longer the case with Chapter 7. Instead, we have backed up in time to before the events of Chapter 5, where King Belshazzar was weighed, found wanting, and killed.

This vision was received while the Chaldeans were still in power and before the Medo-Persians conquered the city of Babylon.

The first year of Belshazzar probably refers to the year 553 BC. That, we are told, was when Nabonidus, Belshazzar's father, left the city of Babylon for 14 years to live in north and central Arabia. If so, then the first year of Belshazzar's reign in verse 1 refers to the first year of his co-regency.

Verse 1 is very clear - Daniel received a dream and a vision in the first year of Belshazzar's reign, and he wrote that vision down.

Do we believe that? I'm certain we do, but many do not. In fact, some who would otherwise like to call themselves Bible believers do not. But they cannot have it both ways. Either the Bible is true on all things, or the Bible is false. If we cannot trust the Bible about the things of history that we can see, then how can we trust the Bible about the things we cannot see?

Verse 1 tells us that Daniel was a real person who lived in the 6th century BC and who wrote down what he saw. The late-date crowd states just as clearly that Daniel was an impostor who lived in the second century BC.

If the late-date crowd is right, then verse 1 is a lie, and this impostor who called himself Daniel was a liar. But if this Daniel was a liar and an impostor, he fooled even Jesus because Jesus refers to Daniel as a prophet in Matthew 24:15.

Daniel was neither an impostor nor a liar. Verse 1 of Daniel 7 is just as much the inspired word of God as any other verse, and we can trust what it tells us. And we can also trust the evidence. So far, this book has been spot on about the history it has recounted, and these same liberal critics once told us that Belshazzar in verse 1 was a fictional character until they were able to see his name with their own eyes on historical engravings.

You would think that the liberal critics might learn something from that, but they have not.

Daniel 7:2-3

2 Daniel spake and said, I saw in my vision by night, and, behold, the four winds of the heaven strove upon the great sea. 3 And four great beasts came up from the sea, diverse one from another.

In verse 2 we see winds and a great sea. Both wind and sea are images that we frequently see in apocalyptic sections of the Bible, and elsewhere.

The wind very often denotes the action of God. Why? Because, like God, the wind is invisible yet can have very dramatic effects.

Psalm 18:10 - And he rode upon a cherub, and did fly: yea, **he did fly upon the wings of the wind.**

Hosea 13:15 - Though he be fruitful among his brethren, an east wind shall come, **the wind of the LORD shall come up from the wilderness**, and his spring shall become dry, and his fountain shall be dried up: he shall spoil the treasure of all pleasant vessels.

The sea often denotes the restless nations of the world as they toss and churn.

Isaiah 17:12-13 - Woe to the multitude of many people, which make a noise like the noise of the seas; and to the rushing of nations, that make a rushing like the rushing of mighty waters! The nations shall rush like the rushing of many waters: but God shall rebuke them, and they shall flee far off, and shall be chased as the chaff of the mountains before the wind, and like a rolling thing before the whirlwind.

And so the wind striving on the sea in verse 2 might be expected to depict the actions of God on the restless nations of this world, and in fact that is exactly what we are about to see in this chapter.

Why are there four winds? That stresses that these winds are directed to the earth. Why? Because the number four is very often used as a symbol for the earth.

And why does four denote the earth? There are four great elements: earth, air, fire, and water. There are four directions: north, south, east, and west. There are four seasons: fall, winter, spring, and summer.

These symbols are not chosen randomly. Instead, there is some link or often (as here) many links between the symbol and the thing that is symbolized.

Another reason why there are four winds is given in verse 3 - there are also four great beasts.

There is a great deal of similarity between the book of Daniel and the book of Revelation, both in the symbols that are used and in what those symbols depict. Here we see four great beasts coming up from the sea, and in Revelation 13:1, John sees "a beast rise up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns ten crowns, and upon his heads the name of blasphemy."

A good way to interpret these symbols is to ask ourselves what we would expect them to mean given the context. Here, for example, we see a great beast coming up out of the sea. If the sea represents the restless nations of the world, then what might be depicted by a great beast coming up out of that sea? Wouldn't we expect that great beast to be some great earthly power that arose from those restless nations?

One thing rings very loudly in these verses - the world. We see it in the image of the restless sea, and we see it in the symbolic number four, which we see in both verse 2 and verse 3.

Anytime we see the number four, we should generally be on the lookout for something of worldly origin that will most likely be contrasted with something of heavenly origin.

Not to give everything away too soon, but we will not be left entirely to ourselves in figuring out what these images depict. Starting in verse 17 of this same chapter, Daniel will be given an inspired explanation of some of what he is seeing. There, for example, we will learn that these four great beasts from the sea depict four kings from the earth. And that, of course, will immediately bring our attention back to the four great kingdoms we saw in Chapter 2.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Instead, let's take in this vision the same way Daniel did. Let's study the symbols before we study what the angel will later tell us about them.

But let's deal with one objection now. How can the number four be both symbolic and literal? How can it symbolically depict the earth while literally describing the four kingdoms of Daniel 2 (Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome)?

The answer to that complaint is simple, and we have already mentioned it - these numbers were not chosen at random and did not occur randomly. The reason there were four great kingdoms between

Daniel and Christ was that God wanted there to be four great kingdoms between Daniel and Christ. The reason the people were in captivity for 70 years was that God wanted them to be in captivity for 70 years? Why did God choose those numbers 4 and 70? Perhaps because those numbers by themselves teach a lesson - the four kingdoms are earthly kingdoms unlike the eternal kingdom, and the 70 years taught a perfect and complete lesson to God's people.

Let's next ask a question we should constantly be asking ourselves to make sure we don't go astray in our interpretation of these visions: How do verses 2 and 3 fit into the central theme of this book?

And what is that central theme? "The most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will" (4:32). In short, God is in control. Yes, things may look bad, and yes it may seem that earthly kingdom have the upper hand, but things are not what they seem. "The most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will."

We see that theme in verse 2 and 3. We see four earthly powers, diverse from one another, rising up out of the restless sea. But what do they find? They find four winds of heaven coming against them. These four beasts will not be able to do whatever they want. Instead, these winds from God will turn them one way or the other.

And something else we see in verses 2 and 3 is a great contrast. We see a great contrast between the kingdoms of this world and the eternal kingdom of Daniel 2:44. These four beasts come from the sea, which tells us that they are of human origin. But the eternal kingdom was not cut out by human hands (Daniel 2:45).

And that gives us another great theme of this book, a theme that we have seen already but that we will see much more often in these final chapters. And what is that great theme? There is a great dividing line in this book between the kingdoms of men and the kingdom of God. No man-made kingdom is eternal, whether it is a man-made political kingdom or a man-made religious kingdom.

The last thing we learn from verse 3 is that these four beasts are not all the same, but instead they are diverse from one another. How are they different from each other? We need to keep reading.

Daniel 7:4

4 The first was like a lion, and had eagle's wings: I beheld till the wings thereof were plucked, and it was lifted up from the earth, and made stand upon the feet as a man, and a man's heart

was given to it.

The first great beast is like a lion with eagle's wings. But those wings are plucked, and the lion is made to stand on its feet as a man, and it is given a man's heart.

What does all of that mean?

Let's start with the easy part - if (as we will learn in verse 17) this beast represents a king or a kingdom, then this beast must represent Babylon.

We will have more to say later about whether the beast is a king or a kingdom, but recall from Chapter 2 that we have already seen those two words used interchangeably in this book, and I think we will see that the same thing is happening here.

Why must this verse beast be the kingdom of Babylon?

First, as we will see, Chapter 7 is closely related to Chapter 2, and in Chapter 2 we saw four kingdoms represented by the giant image in Nebuchadnezzar's dream. Those four kingdoms were Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. Here we also see four kingdoms, so we should not be surprised if Chapter 7 turns out to be showing us the same four kingdoms but from a different perspective.

Second, a winged lion was a very common symbol for Babylon, especially during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar. One of the most common images for Babylon (still seen today in many museums) is that of a winged lion with a human head.

Third, ALL commentators agree on this point, and, although that unanimity might make us justifiably a bit nervous, here it turns out to be correct. Just as Revelation would later use a symbol for Rome that no one can miss (a woman seated upon seven hills), so Daniel 7 here uses a symbol for Babylon that no one can miss (a winged lion). (Daniel and Revelations are like bookends on these four kingdoms, with Daniel looking forward in time and Revelation looking backward in time to describe them.)

Fourth, like Babylon, this first great beast is hindered and humiliated by God. Its wings are plucked, and it is made to stand up and act like a man rather than act like a lion. In historical fact, the king of Babylon was a man who was humiliated by being given the heart of a beast. In this vision, Babylon is pictured as a beast who is given the heart of a man. Either way, that role reversal points us straight back to the events in Daniel 4 when the great King Nebuchadnezzar lived as a beast with the donkeys for seven years.

The first beast in this vision is the kingdom of Babylon.

Daniel 7:5

5 And behold another beast, a second, like to a bear, and it raised up itself on one side, and it had three ribs in the mouth of it between the teeth of it: and they said thus unto it, Arise, devour much flesh.

The second beast is like a bear. It is raised up on one side, it has three ribs in its mouth, and it is told to devour much flesh.

If we are correct that these four beasts represent the four kingdoms of Daniel 2, then this second beast should be Medo-Persia. Do these descriptions apply to Medo-Persia? Yes, they do.

First, the historical order is correct. The Medo-Persian empire followed the Babylon empire, and in fact in Chapter 5 we saw the very day when that transition occurred.

Medo-Persia was the second kingdom in Daniel 2, so it should not surprise us that Medo-Persia is the second kingdom in Daniel 7. Daniel and secular historians are in complete agreement on this point - the combined Medo-Persian empire conquered the Babylonian empire.

Second, one side of this bear is higher than the other side. That part of the image stresses another historical fact about the Medo-Persian empire - the Persians quickly became the dominant partner in that confederation.

Third, this bear is told to continue eating even before it has finished its last meal. It is voracious and greedy, and that image is a perfect description of the Medo-Persian empire, as Babylon found out!

But what about the three ribs in the bear's mouth?

Usually when we see the number three in apocalyptic language we should look for a reference to God. Can we find such a reference here? How can God be shown by three ribs in the mouth of a bear?

I think the best answer is that the three ribs depict the three major Medo-Persian conquests that occurred under Cyrus and his son Cambyses.

- The conquest of the Lydian kingdom in 546 BC.
- The conquest of the Chaldean kingdom in 539 BC.
- The conquest of Egypt in 525 BC.

If so, then this image of the three ribs is another example where the literal number was chosen by God because of its figurative meaning.

What do I mean? What I mean is that God was the reason why Cyrus achieved those three great military victories, and that there were three of those great victories was also determined by God. Perhaps the number three was chosen by God to remind us that God was the one behind King Cyrus' success.

That fact was known to Isaiah long before Cyrus was even born!

Isaiah 44:28-45:1 - That saith of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid. Thus saith the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him; and I will loose the loins of kings, to open before him the two leaved gates; and the gates shall not be shut

And that fact was also known to Cyrus himself.

Ezra 1:2 - Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The LORD God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

So, I think the three ribs are both literal and figurative - literal in that they point us to Cyrus' three great military victories, and figurative in that they remind us that those victories came from God.

Daniel 7:6

6 After this I beheld, and lo another, like a leopard, which had upon the back of it four wings of a fowl; the beast had also four heads; and dominion was given to it.

The third beast is a leopard that has four wings and four heads, and dominion is given to it.

If we are correct that these four beasts correspond with the four kingdoms of Daniel 2, then this leopard should be Greece. Do these descriptions apply to Greece? Yes, they do.

And here we should keep in mind that these prophecies were written long before Alexander the Great led Greece to conquer the Persians in 331 BC. In fact, it is prophecies such as this one that explain why liberal critics try so hard to move the date of this book until after the Greek conquest.

How does this image of the leopard apply to Greece?

First, as with a leopard, Greece was known for its speed. The Greeks, especially under Alexander the Great, moved and conquered very rapidly.

Second, this beast has four wings and four heads. What does that mean?

I think we once again see a number that is both literal and figurative.

How is the number four literal?

After the death of Alexander, Greece was split into four pieces that were ruled by his four generals: Cassander in Macedonia and Greece; Lysimachus eastward in Thrace and Asia Minor; Ptolemy in Egypt, Cyprus, and nearby Asia Minor; and Seleucus to the Indus River.

And how is the number four also figurative?

Because anytime we see the number four we should be thinking about something that is of this world, something that is earthly. And despite Greece's claims to grandeur, Greece was just another in a long line of earthly kingdoms. Greece was not the eternal kingdom, and Alexander was not the son of God. The number four is a reminder of that - as is the reason why the kingdom was split into four pieces. That happened only after Alexander's death!

So, the second beast is Medo-Persia, and this third beast is Greece.

What is meant by the end of verse 6 - that dominion was given to it?

That phrase is a reminder that God is controlling things here, and I think it confirms that we are on the right track with our understanding of the number three and the number four.

There is only one explanation for how Greece conquered Persia, and that is because God wanted it to happen. Why? Because God was creating the perfect cradle into which his son and his kingdom would be born - Roman peace combined with Greek language and culture.

As Horace famously stated, Rome may have conquered Greece, but Greek culture conquered Rome. The combination of Greek culture with Roman might created the perfect cradle for the coming of Christ and the beginning of his kingdom, and it was not by accident! The Greeks brought reason, rationality, logic, and language. Rome brought peace, roads, trade, law, and communication.

Although Roman religion later brought emperor worship and persecution (which Daniel will also be told about), initially it was open and tolerant, particularly during the time when Christianity was viewed simply as a Jewish sect and allowed to freely spread across the known world.

What we are seeing so far in these images is simply a figurative restatement of the central theme of this book - "The most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will." (Daniel 4:32)

Daniel 7:7

7 After this I saw in the night visions, and behold a fourth beast, dreadful and terrible, and strong exceedingly; and it had great iron teeth: it devoured and brake in pieces, and stamped the residue with the feet of it: and it was diverse from all the beasts that were before it; and it had ten horns.

And finally we meet the fourth beast. It is dreadful and terrible. Unlike the three prior beasts, there does not seem to be a known creature to which this fourth beast can be compared. It is exceedingly strong, it has great iron teeth, it devours, it breaks in pieces, it stamps the residue from its feet, and it has ten horns.

Even if we had not seen Chapter 2, we would know the identity of this fourth beast. With this description the fourth beast can be none other than the mighty Roman empire. And yes, Rome was mighty, but as we saw in Chapter 2, Rome also had feet of clay.

Rome, like this beast, was different from the beasts that came before it. The world had never seen anything like Rome. Like this fourth beast, Rome was dreadful and terrible and strong. Like this fourth beast, Rome devoured and broke and trampled its enemies.

Why did God create such a kingdom? Two words - Pax Romana! Roman peace! It took a kingdom such as Rome to establish peace across the known world, and God used that peace to spread the gospel to the known world. And that peace was no accident!

And we learn one more thing in verse 7 about this beast - it has ten horns. What does that mean? We will get an answer to that question when we get to verse 24. But as a preview, any time we see a horn, we should be thinking about a king or a kingdom. So don't be surprised if these ten horns turn out to be ten kings. But is 10 literal or figurative? Let's save that question for now until we learn more about these horns in this chapter.

As we saw with the rise of Greece, the only way to explain the rise of Rome is that God wanted it to occur. And, in fact, God had told Daniel about the rise of Rome hundreds of years before it happened. God was behind all of this.

How else can we explain the rise of Greece under Alexander the Great? How else can we explain the ascendancy of Rome over such great powers as Carthage, and the Hellenistic kingdoms of Macedon, Syracuse, and the Seleucid empire?

Listen to a few sentences from the introduction to the recent book, *Rome and Her Enemies: An Empire Created and Destroyed by War*:

Lying at its heart is a mystery as profound as any in the records of human civilization. How on earth did the Romans do it? How did a single city, one that began as a small community of castle-rustlers, camped out among marshes and hills, end up ruling an empire that stretched from the moors of Scotland to the deserts of Iraq?

I love that! "A mystery as profound as any in the records of human civilization!" It isn't a mystery at all to those of us who believe in God!

These secular historians ask why - Daniel answers that question. The answer to their question is that it happened because God made it happen. The answer to their question is that the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will!

#daniel