

The Comfort of Apocalypse

Daniel 7

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Good morning. Welcome to Christ the King. If we haven't met, my name is Penny and I'm the senior pastor here and it is good to be with you. Glad that you join with us this morning as we come to worship, as we sing and pray, as we participate in baptism, and soon we'll come to the Lord's Supper, and as we come to God's Word, it's good for us to gather together. And the portion of God's Word we're going to look at this morning is Daniel chapter 7. So if you have a Bible, you can turn to Daniel 7. If you don't have a Bible, there are Bibles in the chairs as well as we project the passage on the screens. And as we've been going through the book of Daniel, the first six chapters have been recounting for us the story of God's people in exile, as they have been living in Babylon, far from Jerusalem, away from home, living as an exilic people. And what we've seen in these six narrative chapters is that God's people are not assimilating to the world around them, nor are they separating from it, but they're seeking to live faithfully as an exilic community, surrounded by people who oppose the things of the Lord. That's what we've seen so far. That's been the six narrative chapters.

Well, chapter 7, we leave the narrative of Daniel, and we now move into the apocalyptic portion of Daniel. So this is the section of Daniel that is, well, strange, bizarre, very difficult to understand. In fact, this past week, I was talking to a friend of mine who's here in town. He does Christian ministry in another ministry. He attends a different church. And we were talking about what I'm preaching through. That's a normal question I get asked as a pastor. And I told him, Daniel, and said, "this week I'll be in Daniel 7." And he looked at me, and his eyes got big, and a smile went across his face, and all he said was, "oh boy." Now, if you didn't grow up in the church, or you haven't been in the church very long, or you haven't ever read through Daniel or Revelation, for that matter, then you may have no idea why my friend would respond that way. But if you've been around the church, then you know that this passage and the ones that follow in the book of Daniel are some of the most highly debated, most contested, most scrutinized passages in the Old Testament.

Every image is analyzed. Every metaphor is scrutinized. Everything that we see, these beasts, these nations, these kings, are assigned different events and nations, maybe in our world now, or that have already risen and fallen, or maybe that will come. This is how we approach, often, the apocalyptic literature. We're trying to assign different images and metaphors to different things that we experience in this world. And I understand why we do this. We have a fascination with apocalypse. We have a fascination with post-apocalyptic stories. I mean, think about even our world right now, the world that we inhabit, right? Whether it's the zombie apocalypse of World War Z, or the fight for Pan Am in the Hunger Games, or the underground city of Paradise. We love these imaginative stories of the future, and what the future might hold, and what the end of the world might entail. We're fascinated by it. And so, when the Bible presents us with apocalyptic visions and accounts, well, that fascination gets applied to the Bible. We want to analyze the vision and assign a metaphor to someone or something in this world. Like, who are these beasts? We know they're nations, and so we assign different nations to them. Maybe it's Babylon, or Persia, the Soviet Union, or the European Union. These are beasts. It's interesting that I've never heard anyone assign the U.S. to any of these beasts, but, you know, whatever. But we want to figure out how these events will play out.

We want to know exactly how the future will come. And so, recognizing this tendency, before we read, and I promise we are about to read the passage, I want to give a little bit of direction for how we approach apocalyptic literature, okay? Yes, we are to discern what it's saying about the future, and we're going to do that to some degree. But actually, before we ever think about the future, what we need to do is we need to approach it from the standpoint of how the original audience would have received this. Why is this given, this portion of God's Word, why was it given to this particular people living at this particular time? How did it function in the life of the exilic community? That's the first question we need to ask when we come to apocalyptic literature. In fact, actually, that's the first question we need to ask whenever we come to scripture. How would the first audience have originally received it? Why were they given it? Now, we're recipients of this Word, too. It's for us. But before we get into graphs and charts and maps, and actually there won't be any up here today, we need to ask what role did it function in the people who were living in this community? Dale Ralph Davis, an Old Testament theologian, he once wrote that "apocalyptic literature is a form of prophecy that is going to both enlighten and encourage the people of God." And that's a very helpful direction as we come to this passage. How is this helping us to be enlightened and encouraged? Well, with that in mind, let's read Daniel 7.

"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.

“As for me, Daniel, my spirit within me was anxious, and the visions of my head alarmed me. 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. ‘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.’

“Then I desired to know the truth about the fourth beast, which was different from all the rest, exceedingly terrifying, with its teeth of iron and claws of bronze, and which devoured and broke in pieces and stamped what was left with its feet, and about the ten horns that were on its head, and the other horn that came up and before which three of them fell, the horn that had eyes and a mouth that spoke great things, and that seemed greater than its companions. As I looked, this horn made war with the saints and prevailed over them, until the Ancient of Days came, and judgment was given for the saints of the Most High, and the time came when the saints possessed the kingdom.

“Thus he said: ‘As for the fourth beast,
there shall be a fourth kingdom on earth,
which shall be different from all the kingdoms,
and it shall devour the whole earth,
and trample it down, and break it to pieces.
As for the ten horns,
out of this kingdom ten kings shall arise,
and another shall arise after them;
he shall be different from the former ones,
and shall put down three kings.
He shall speak words against the Most High,
and shall wear out the saints of the Most High,
and shall think to change the times and the law;
and they shall be given into his hand
for a time, times, and half a time.
But the court shall sit in judgment,
and his dominion shall be taken away,
to be consumed and destroyed to the end.
And the kingdom and the dominion
and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven

shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High;
his kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom,
and all dominions shall serve and obey him.’
“Here is the end of the matter. As for me, Daniel, my thoughts greatly alarmed me,
and my color changed, but I kept the matter in my heart.”

Friends, this is the Word of the Lord. Let me pray for us.

Father, we ask that as we come to this Word, that you would give us understanding. Father, if you don't open our eyes, if you don't enlighten our hearts, if you don't change our minds, then we will not understand what you have for us. They will just be words, and we want to know more of who you are, and so we ask by your Spirit that you would lead us, that you would guide us, that you would help us, and we pray this in Christ's name. Amen.

Distress

So, before we read this scripture, I said that Dale Ralph Davis told us that this passage, this apocalyptic literature, is to help enlighten and encourage us. So, where do we look for encouragement? I mean, where do we find encouragement in this passage, right? In an ultimate sense, where are we supposed to look, and why do we need encouragement? Well, the reason we need encouragement from this passage is because how the passage began. It didn't begin with encouragement, did it? It began with distress and terror, right? Daniel's vision of the four beasts, it doesn't begin with peace and comfort, but distress. Now, I said that historically, people have tried to assign these beasts to different nations, to different categories of people and whatnot, and so historically, people have seen them as Babylon, and Persia, Greece, and Rome. Now, let me just say, the Bible does at times assign images and metaphors to specific nations or peoples, right? We saw this back in Daniel chapter 2 with the statue and the golden head, right? Daniel said to Nebuchadnezzar, this is you, Nebuchadnezzar, this is Babylon, and next week in Daniel 8, we're going to have a goat, and we're going to tell, not greatest of all time, an actual goat, right? The vision of a goat, and this goat is going to be assigned the nation of Greece.

So, there are times when the Bible is explicit, but actually, in this case, the Bible is silent. Daniel doesn't tell us who these beasts represent. He doesn't tell us who these nations are. When even we're given the interpretation, what we're told in verses 17 and following is that these four great beasts are four kings who shall arise out of the earth. The fourth beast is a fourth kingdom. It shall devour the earth, trample and break down. It'll have 10 horns and 10 kings, and there will be another horn that comes out, and it'll destroy the three other horns, that's what we're told. We're told a lot, but we're not told who they are, and because we're not told who they are, I think this actually invites us to see this as depicting the scope of human history, the entirety of human history, that nations rise and they fall, that things we experience in the world are things that are incredibly distressing. I mean, what Daniel sees, beasts, teeth, fangs, devouring, brawns, right? Like, all that he sees, it's terrifying and dreadful and distressing, and that actually speaks to the experience of the exiles, doesn't it? I mean, think about what the exiles would have experienced, what they would have gone through. They would have been taken from their homes by a foreign invading army. They would have lived in a foreign land. They were thrown in a fiery furnace. They were thrown into a lion's den, and those are just the things that we know about. They would have lived every day of their exilic experience in fear and dread of what may come. It would have been terror and fear for them. For us, it's just stories on the page, but for them, it was distress.

And we know something of that distress, because we too live as exiles, right? I mean, when we look around at the world, we know that the world isn't kind. It's a world filled with war and disease, with theft and violence. I mean, just think about this past week, this past week at ODU, right? A man walks into a room and asks, are you ROTC? And when the men and women in that room say yes, he opens fire and violently murders a well-decorated vet who was a professor. I mean, for no reason, no rhyme, no reason, right? Nothing that would ever make sense to us, and yet that is what is marked by our world. And not just in foreign lands, but in this land. And so we know this, right? It does us no good to pretend that the world that we live in is one full of peace and calm, that it is an easy place for us to live. No, it is a distressing place. Now, we know that it's not the end. We know that there is a time coming when all things will be made new, and we hold on to that hope, and we're going to get to that hope.

But sometimes, there are some of us who, because we know and we long for that day when Jesus will return and all things will be made new, we sometimes embody what theologians call an over-realized eschatology. Now, that sounds way more complicated than it is, okay? Eschatology is simply the theology of the end times. When Jesus returns, we call that the eschaton. So eschatology is the study of his returning, the end times, okay? And so when he comes, we know he's going to make all things new, and the wicked and the evil and all those things are going to go away. And so there are some who know that the kingdom has broken in, but because it's coming again, they long for it so much that they actually make very little of the pain and distress and sadness of this world. And y'all, we shouldn't do that. Daniel doesn't do that. He doesn't run to comfort and peace. He begins with distress, because that is the honest evaluation of our world. It's not the way it's supposed to be. I mean, think about what the past would have entailed for the people of God. Think about what the present entails. Think about what the future will come. I mean, this fourth beast, it is the beast. It's the nation that rises up before the kingdom of God will come. And so it's still in the future. And this fourth beast, right? Ten horns and a little horn with eyes like a man and a mouth that, I mean, that is a strange vision. It would have been terrifying.

Now, some people think that this horn that comes out and removes the three horns and has got eyes and a mouth and speaks and that and whatnot, think that this is Paul's man of lawlessness from 2 Thessalonians 2. And others think that it's the antichrist spoken of in the New Testament. Now, what's interesting is that John, in 1 John, actually speaks of many antichrists. You can go check me on that. I'm right. There are many antichrists. Not just one. That's not what John says. He says there's actually many. And that we live in the spirit of the antichrist. And what is the spirit marked by? Well, it describes those who lie and oppose God and put down his people. Which is actually what the little horn does, right? That's what we see in verse 25. He speaks against the Lord. He opposes the most high. He wears out or persecutes the Lord's people. So, maybe this is the man of lawlessness. Maybe it is antichrist or one of the antichrists. But ultimately, I think what this is pointing us to isn't for us to try to figure out some person who might rise or fall, or even if it's a singular or multiple person.

No, the point that Daniel is making is that for the people of God, there will be trial. There will be tribulation. There will be distress. So, where do we look for comfort from this monstrous reality? Well, there's plenty of places we could look. In the book, *Peace of Mind*, Rabbi Joseph Liebman, he wrote this. He said, "I believe that man has infinite potential. And that given the proper guidance, there is hardly a task he cannot perform or a degree of mastery in work and love he cannot attain." This writer, this religious leader, he was embodying what

was described as having an infinite faith in the infinite goodness of men and women. That's one place we could look. And lots of people embody that, right? They embrace that perspective. The goodness of men, the goodness of women. Like, that's what will triumph when we are confronted with evil, with distress. We look to one another. We look to ourselves. In fact, not too long ago, I was listening to an interview with Dario Amadi. I don't know if I pronounced his name correctly, but he is the owner of Anthropic, which makes the AI, Claude. Now, in this interview, he was asked, how will we prevent the abuse and the misuse of artificial intelligence now and into the future? And what he pointed to was himself. He said, "you have to look and trust the creators of it. That you have to put your hope in humanity." That we will set up the right barriers and the right restrictions and the right qualifications so that it can't be misused and abused. You have to look to these benevolent inventors. Now, that kind of sounds like Liebman, right? Now, the irony of Liebman, this religious leader, this writer, is that his book, where he articulated his position, was published in 1946. So, if you do the math, that is immediately after World War II. So, after millions of his fellow Jewish people were murdered, he is now talking about the infinite potential and goodness of man. I mean, that sounds strange, doesn't it? I mean, I understand why he and Amadi might appeal to trust, their trust in humanity, because we need to hope.

Comfort

And we need to hope in something or someone. We need comfort that evil isn't the end. And so, maybe we do look to man, to woman. But actually, instead of looking to humanity, instead of looking to man, what Daniel points us to is the Son of Man. That's where he points us to. Because in the midst of the distressing vision that is given to Daniel comes a vision of comfort. Look at verses 13 through 14. Daniel says, "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 people's 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." So, we have this one who is like the Son of Man, but he's not just a man, right? Because he clearly embodies divine qualities. We see the divine qualities in these verses. In verse 13, he comes with the clouds of heaven, which is a clear pointer of divinity. Because in the Old Testament, God would often arrive and meet with his people in the cloud. We see it in Psalm 18, we see it in Isaiah 19. So, this coming with the clouds is pointing to the divinity of this Son of Man.

Also, he's given authority in verse 14 and glory and sovereign power, the authority of the ancient of days. Now, the ancient of days, this is speaking of God the Father. And when he's called the ancient of days, right, it's not just saying like he's old, right? Like he's, you know, he's kind of like getting worn out. That's not what it's saying. It's speaking of his eternality, that before heaven and earth existed, there was God, creator and sustainer and judge over the world, over what was to come. And the Son of Man comes with the glory of God. He comes with the glory of the ancient of days, but he doesn't just come with this divine authority. We're also told in verse 14 that he is worshipped. He is worshipped. Peoples and nations and languages will serve him. And so, he comes as this divine king, deserving of worship, whose kingdom in verse 14 is forever. His kingdom is unlike the kingdoms of this world, because the world's kingdoms, as terrifying as they might be, as strong as they might be, as long-lasting as they might be, they will fail, and they will fall, and they will fade, and they will come undone.

But this kingdom of the Son of Man, it is forever. Forever. It is everlasting and will not pass away and will not be destroyed. You see, the Son of Man brings, as Ian Duguid put it, an everlasting and indescribable dominion, a sovereignty that belongs to God himself. He's like a man, but he's really the God-man. Because when the Son of Man comes, he turns the nightmares of the world to peace and calm. It reminds me of what happens to the Boggarts in Harry Potter. I don't think I pronounced that correctly. Boggart? Boggart? Regardless. If you've read the books, you've seen the movies, you know what I'm talking about. These Boggarts, if that's how you pronounce it, are these spirits who they change into the most terrifying thing, the greatest fear that the person in front of them experiences. Our worst nightmares come to fruition right before our eyes. That's what they do. And it is terrifying. It's horrible to look at.

But if you've seen Harry Potter, you know that the terror is displaced by a charm. The charm is ridiculous. Again, I probably didn't say that right. I didn't go to Hogwarts. But the terror is turned into something amusing. And so a snake is transformed into a jack-in-the-box. A spider is found sliding around on roller skates and can't stand up. And Professor Snape, the most terrifying professor at Hogwarts, he's found wearing old ladies' clothing. You see, the monster, the terror, is replaced with peace and comfort. And that's the promise of Daniel 7, that comfort will come, but it comes not by incantation and not by turning monsters into something amusing. No. No, the monsters, they stand in judgment before God. That's what we're told in verse 26, that the court shall sit in judgment and his dominion shall be taken away to be consumed and destroyed to the end. The fourth beast, he will be judged and he will be defeated and he will be destroyed. Comfort will come because the kingdoms of the world are replaced with the kingdom of God. And this comes by the Son of Man.

And of course, we know that the Son of Man is Jesus himself. Because in Mark chapter 14, when asked if he was the Christ, the Messiah, when the religious leaders asked him who he was, Jesus said, "I am." And you will see the Son of Man seated on the right hand of power and coming with the clouds of heaven. Jesus quoted this passage, Daniel 7, because he knew that Daniel 7 was pointing to the coming Messiah, the king who would bring the kingdom. Daniel 7, which is associated with the king of Revelation 14, the one who is seated on the cloud, who is wearing the golden crown, who bears the sickle, he will bring judgment against his enemies and comfort to his people. That's who Jesus is. He is the Son of Man of Daniel 7. Roughly 82 times in the gospels does Jesus call himself the Son of Man. It was his favorite title because he is the one who has come. He is the one who has inaugurated the kingdom of God. He has come and he has lived and died and risen again. He has ascended into heaven and he sits at the right hand of the ancient of days, even now. And the promise of Daniel 7 is that he's coming again and he will bring an everlasting kingdom where the people, his people, will dwell with him forever. That's what verse 27 tells us.

And so, friends, do you see why this would be such an important message, such an important vision for an exilic people? A people who are living in another kingdom. A people who are longing to return to the new Jerusalem. A people who are living surrounded by foreign gods. For Daniel's contemporaries and for us, do you see why this is an encouragement, a word of comfort? You see, it assured them and it assures us that the very real distresses of this world are not the end. They are not the end. That as terrifying as the beast might be, as powerful as the nations might be, that when the son of man comes, riding on the clouds, he will bring justice and truth and goodness. He will bring a kingdom that is everlasting and his people, we will have nothing to fear. We will have nothing to fear, but instead we will dwell with him in

peace and comfort forever. That is the promise and the encouragement to all those in exile, those in exile then and those in exile now. Amen. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you thank you that you have promised that the terror and distress of this world is a shadow. It is a whisper. It is a vapor and it is blown, will be blown away. That Lord Jesus, you will come on the clouds of heaven and you will bring judgment and justice. You will bring truth and beauty. You will bring renewal and you will bring a place for your people to dwell with you forever. And so we long for that day. And we ask that you would help us to be encouraged by that promise, that hope, so that the distress, the terror, the fear of this world would not weigh us down, but instead we would hope for that day of eternal living with you. We long for it. We ask, Lord Jesus, come quickly. Come quickly and make all things new. Come quickly and dwell with your people. And we pray all this in the powerful name of Christ and all God's people said together. Amen.