

Living in the Future

SERIES: DANIEL: LIVING BY FAITH IN A FAITHLESS WORLD

A man stopped to watch a little league baseball game. He started to enjoy himself and so he asked the eight-year-old third baseman what the score was. Without taking his eyes off the batter, he answered, "We're losing 18-0."

"Well," said the man, "I must say you don't look discouraged."

"Discouraged?" the boy said, puzzled. "Why should I be discouraged? We haven't even come to bat yet."

In our study of the book of Daniel, we must remember that Daniel had every reason to be discouraged. He had been taken captive as a young teenager in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon. He and those like him may have never seen their mother and father again. And even though Daniel rose to positions of great influence in Babylon, he and his people must have battled through some significant seasons of discouragement where it seemed the score was 18-0. One of the songs that comes out of this period of time reflects this. Psalm 137 starts out and says, "**By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept.**" Later the Psalmist writes, "**How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?**" It's hard for us to even imagine how deeply connected to the Holy City and to the Temple that the people of God felt. We see some of that today, don't we, as battles in Israel continue over the land. We certainly might wonder how Daniel and the others kept from succumbing to a spirit of fatalism, bitterness and outright resentment towards God.

This is a question we face as well, isn't it? Many of us feel like we're in exile. We feel that alienation from family and friends so common during the holidays. We feel surrounded by a culture which doesn't value many of the things we hold dear. There is a spirit of hedonism and self-sufficiency that hangs over us like a San Francisco fog. What makes it even worse is that we see some of these things in our own hearts as well. Sometimes our exile is internal. We feel disconnected from God. We wonder if he really does care; if he really does hear our prayers. We ask the question too: "How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"

Daniel 7 answers that question. This begins a new section in the book of Daniel. The first six chapters were stories about Daniel in which God's sovereignty was demonstrated in a number of ways. In several of these stories Daniel reveals God's power by interpreting dreams or mysteries which pagan kings had. Starting in chapter 7 Daniel is not interpreting dreams; he's having dreams. So the bulk of the last half of Daniel is not made up of stories about Daniel but rather dreams and visions of Daniel. Most of these dreams are about the future. In these dreams, God is telling his people, "You may feel discouraged now, but I haven't even come to bat yet."

Bible scholars call this kind of writing, "apocalyptic." That word means "revelation." Of course, all Scripture is revelation from God, but apocalyptic literature has unique characteristics. It usually comes in times of great persecution. It usually deals with the end of history and the final triumph of good over evil. It's usually highly symbolic in form. This is where we have to be very careful. It's not always easy to interpret the meaning of these symbols. The temptation is to impose some of our own categories on these symbols. For instance, in this chapter we see a beast described as a bear. For years people identified this with the Soviet Union since it always had the bear as its chief symbol. But that's certainly not what Daniel had in mind. Of course, today the Soviet Union doesn't even exist.

The vision of chapter 7 is sweeping in scope as it takes us from Daniel's day right up to the end of history. The vision takes place in four scenes.

I. THE PROGRESSION OF EVIL POWERS

The first scene is found in vv. 1-8,

"In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon Daniel saw a dream and visions in his mind as he lay on his bed; then he wrote the dream down and related the following summary of it. Daniel said, 'I was looking in my vision by night, and behold, the four winds of heaven were stirring up the great sea. And four great beasts were coming up from the sea, different from one another. The first was like a lion and had the wings of an eagle. I kept looking until its wings were plucked, and it was lifted up from the ground and made to stand on two feet like a man; a human mind also was given to it. And behold, another beast, a second one, resembling a bear. And it was raised up on one side, and three ribs were in its mouth between its teeth; and thus they said to it, "Arise, devour much meat!" After this I kept looking, and behold, another one, like a leopard, which had on its back four wings of a bird; the beast also had four heads, and dominion was given to it. After this I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, a fourth beast, dreadful and terrifying and extremely strong; and it had large iron teeth. It devoured and crushed, and trampled down the remainder with its feet; and it was different from all the beasts that were before it, and it had ten horns. While I was contemplating the horns, behold, another horn, a little one, came up among them, and three of the first horns were pulled out by the roots before it; and behold, this horn possessed eyes

like the eyes of a man, and a mouth uttering great boasts.”

Daniel's vision took place during the first year of King Belshazzar. We have now gone back to the time frame prior to chapter 5 when Belshazzar was killed after seeing the writing on the wall. Belshazzar was a very evil king. This had to be a time of great anxiety and concern for Daniel. No wonder he had a bad dream!

What we have here is nothing less than a panorama of history prior to the return of Christ. The setting of the vision is dark and foreboding. Daniel sees the four winds of heaven stirring up the great sea and four beasts coming out of the sea. The sea is a symbol of chaos and destructive evil. Throughout the OT God's battle with evil is pictured as a fight against the sea and its monsters (Ps. 18:15; Job 7:12; Jer. 5:22; Nah. 1:4; Hab. 3:5; Isa. 27:1). Each one of these beasts is designed to invoke a sense of horror and revulsion. They are ferocious and grotesque creatures unlike anything in God's creation. This is like the ultimate science fiction film. We start with Godzilla and end with Robo-beast.

We told specifically who these beasts are referring to. All we know is what Daniel is told in v. 17, that these beasts represent four kings who will arise from the earth. There is a clear parallel here to the vision which Nebuchadnezzar had in chapter 2. There he saw a statue divided into four parts from head to toe. The head was made of gold, the breast and arms of silver, the belly and thighs of bronze, and the legs and feet of a mixture of iron and clay. Daniel said that the four parts of the statue represented four kingdoms. He said Nebuchadnezzar and the kingdom of Babylon were the head of gold, but the other three kingdoms are never identified. It's safe to say that here also the first beast represents Nebuchadnezzar and the kingdom of Babylon. Both the lion and the eagles were symbols of the Babylonian empire. Even the description of a beast becoming like a man fits what happened to Nebuchadnezzar in chapter 4. But nowhere are we given the identity of the other three beasts.

There are many theories about this. Most evangelicals say that the four beasts represent Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome, respectively. Others divide up the Medo-Persian empire and say they refer to Babylon, Media, Persia and Greece. Still others say they refer to kings and kingdoms which come much later, such as Great Britain, the Soviet Union, Israel, and the European Union. I have to tell you, I'm skeptical of all these views. As I've said before, we should let the plain thing be the main thing. What is plain here is that evil kingdoms will succeed one another until the end of time. And when the end does come, a king and kingdom will be in power who is more evil than anything that came before it. If you skip down to v. 21 you will see that the little horn who becomes king of this fourth kingdom is **“waging war with the saints and overpowering them.”** In v. 23 the fourth beast **“devours the whole earth and treads it down and crushes it.”** In v. 25 the little horn **“speaks out against the Most High and wears down the saints.”** The plain truth of this vision is that things are going to get worse and in the end things are going to be very, very difficult for God's people.

You can understand why Daniel was so alarmed after this dream. Verse 15 says he was **“distressed”** and the **“visions in my mind kept alarming me.”** In v. 28 his **“face grew pale.”** We can understand. This is pretty scary stuff. If we don't feel that, even just a little bit, it might be because we don't take it that seriously. We in America don't really know anything like this. We may be worried about this election, but I'm not convinced either candidate will wage war against the saints and overpower them. We worry about the church losing its tax-free status, or allowing our children to pray in school, but where is the beast gnawing on the bones of God's people in the United States? If we believers were living in Serbia the last few years, or China, or Iraq, we might have a better sense of how ferocious human evil can be. We live in a society and culture which allows us to live with the illusion that things are getting better and better. Diseases are being cured, more and more people are being educated, democracy is spreading, poverty is being irradiated. We in the West tend to think we have an answer for everything. God's word says that's a lie. Behind the façade of progress there is a sinister and diabolical force that will culminate in a world power that is violently and ferociously opposed to God and his people. Don't be fooled! At the end of history, the score will be 18-0 and we won't be ahead.

Now you could be discouraged by that. You could walk around and belly ache about how bad things are, but that's not the whole story. God hasn't even come to bat yet. In the second scene of Daniel's vision we see the triumph of God.

II. THE VICTORY OF THE SON OF MAN

“I kept looking until thrones were set up, and the Ancient of Days took His seat; His vesture was like white snow, and the hair of His head like pure wool. His throne was ablaze with flames, its wheels were a burning fire. A river of fire was flowing and coming out from before Him; thousands upon thousands were attending Him, and myriads upon myriads were standing before Him; the court sat, and the books were opened. Then I kept looking because of the sound of the boastful words which the horn was speaking; I kept looking until the beast was slain, and its body was destroyed and given to the burning fire. As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but an extension of life was granted to them for an appointed period of time. I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and men of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed.”

The scene changes from the raging sea to the heavenly courtroom. First we see God himself, pictured as the Ancient of Days, seated on his throne. His white robes signal his purity and goodness; his wisdom seen in his woolen hair; there is fire all around because it's time for judgment - his throne is ablaze, a river of fire rushes out of him. Myriads attend to him. The books are opened where the evil deeds of the beasts are recorded. The

little horn continues to chatter until he is drowned in the river of God's holy fire.

Then Daniel says he kept looking. He thinks he sees someone coming on the clouds of heaven. Who could it be? Certainly in his mind he's thinking of words from the Psalms, **"Sing to God, sing praise to his name, extol him who rides on the clouds; his name is the Lord, rejoice before him"** (Ps. 68:4). **"He makes the clouds his chariot and rides on the wings of the wind"** (Ps. 104:3). Daniel expects to see another vision of the great and mighty God. But there is a surprise here. Instead he sees **"One like a Son of Man coming."** He expected to see God, but he sees a man! How could a man be a match for the fourth beast? And yet he is. He comes before the Ancient of Days and is given dominion, glory and a kingdom that will last forever and ever. This is Jesus, whose favorite title for himself was Son of Man, the next time he comes.

When the army of Julian the Apostate was on the march to Persia, some of the soldiers got hold of a Christian believer to torment and torture him in brutal sport. As they wearied of beating him, they looked into his eyes and said to their helpless victim, "Where is your carpenter God now?" The prisoner looked up through pain, blood and agony to say, "He is building a coffin for your emperor!"

For every God-defying person, every God-defying power, every God-defying principle that exalts itself against God and his word, the coffin is now being built. This is a vision of the final triumph of Jesus Christ at his Second Coming. Once Jesus was rejected of men; then every knee shall bow. Once men railed him with their tongues; then every tongue will confess. Once he responded with silence; then his voice will shake heaven and earth. Once twelve humble men followed him around; then all the people and nations and men of every language will serve him. Once they pressed a crown of thorns upon his head; then we will crown him with many crowns.

Are you ready? When he comes back, will he know you as friend and follower? Will your voice be familiar to him? Will your hands be such that he knows them because they have been about his work? The only way to prepare for his return is to be in relationship with him. The only way to enter into a relationship with him is by trusting him as Lord and Savior. He doesn't want to be your judge, he wants to be your Savior. Jesus said, **"I didn't come to judge the world, but to save it"** (Jn. 12:47). He didn't just say that, he gave his life to prove it. On the cross, he was judged for sin so you and I don't have to be. Dorothy Sayers said, "Whatever the answer to the problem of evil, this much is true, God took his own medicine." That's what the cross is, it's God taking the medicine of his own judgment upon himself so that you could be set free.

Now we could end the story right here and go out feeling better. All that stands against us and oppresses us and mocks us will be overcome on that great day. As the old Negro spiritual says, "King Jesus rides on a milk-white horse; no man shall hinder thee. The river of Jordon he did cross; no man shall hinder thee. Ride on, King Jesus, no man shall hinder thee." He will ride on. That's good news. We could end it right

there. But what if I told you there is something even better? What if I told you that's only half the story? What if we were still at bat?

III. THE REIGN OF THE SAINTS OF GOD

In v. 16 Daniel approaches one standing by. We know from later in the book that this was the angel Gabriel, the same angel who announced to Mary that she was pregnant with the Son of God. Daniel asks to know more about the vision. The angel responds in vv. 17-18,

""These great beasts, which are four in number, are four kings who will arise from the earth. But the saints of the Highest One will receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever, for all ages to come.""

There is something you shouldn't miss there. Here it's not the Son of Man who receives the kingdom, but it's the "Saints of the Highest One." And this becomes the repeated drum beat of the rest of the chapter. In v. 19 Daniel asks for information about the fourth beast. The angel says the fourth beast is a fourth kingdom and the ten horns are ten kings which arise from that kingdom. It appears this fourth kingdom is a conglomeration of many nations. The angel then explains how the little horn is a king who will rise up and subdue three of the kings and speak out against the Most High and wear down the saints. But finally, at the end of time, he describes the judgment. Look at v. 26,

""But the court will sit for judgment, and his dominion will be taken away, annihilated and destroyed forever. Then the sovereignty, the dominion, and the greatness of all the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be given to the people of the saints of the Highest One; His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all the dominions will serve and obey Him.""

Did you see it again? Once again, nothing is said about the Son of Man. That which was given to the Son of Man in v. 14 is now given to the people of the saints of the Most High. What's going on here? Could it be that somehow WE will reign with Jesus Christ? Could it be that somehow those who were overpowered by the little horn will share in the sovereignty and dominion of the Son of God? Did you notice back in v. 9 when Ancient of Days sat there were "thrones set up." Not just one throne, but many. Who are those thrones for?

Timothy was a young pastor in Ephesus who was having a hard time of it. He was being criticized and opposed and he was worn out. He wondered if serving God was worth all the trouble. Paul wrote him a letter from prison to encourage him. He wanted to get the words just right so he wrote a little poem. It went like this: **"If we died with him, we will also live with him. If we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will disown us. If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself"** (2 Tim. 2:11-13). Did you catch that second line? "If we endure, we will also reign with him." Why should we go on? Why should we endure now when the score is 18-0? Because if we endure now the day will come when we will reign with him; there are thrones waiting for you and me.

The Corinthians were a mess. They had lawsuits going on

within the church. They were going against one another in the secular courts. Paul writes them a letter and says, "You can't do that!" What's his reasoning? He says, "**Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? Do you not know we will judge angels? If you're going to judge the world, aren't you able to deal with these trivial matters within your own ranks?**" (1 Cor. 6:3-4). That's quite a thought. We are going to somehow participate with God in the judgment of the world and angels.

We've all been riveted as the Supreme Court deliberates over its role in the Florida recount. There is something so dignified about those Supreme Court justices. They wear those robes. They're all kind of old. I was listening to them hear the arguments on Friday and they just seem so wise. Nobody is allowed to interrupt them. Nobody really even argues with them. Then they go into their chambers and hash it out. Wouldn't you love to be in there and just listen? Guess what? As a follower of Christ, the day will come when you sit on that bench and wear those robes and participate in discussions about what to do with angels!

CONCLUSION

You may be discouraged. Right now the score is 10-0. The time will come when it gets even worse, 18-0, even 180-0. But right when it seems things can't get any worse, the Ancient of Days will take his seat and the books will be open and the fire will flow. And then a surprise - One like the Son of Man will come riding on a chariot of clouds! The Ancient of Days will present him with glory and dominion and a kingdom. And somehow, there with him, ready to share in his rule, we will sit.

What do we do in the meantime? Well, what did Daniel do? Remember Daniel received this vision in the first year of Belshazzar. Eventually Daniel became third in command in Belshazzar's kingdom. Then he served in a similar fashion in the administrations of both Darius the Mede and Cyrus the Persian. In other words, Daniel didn't use this vision as a cop-out. Daniel continued to show up and serve pagan kings whom he knew eventually would be vanquished. Chapters 1-6 tell us what we are to do in light of the revelations of chapters 7-12. We are to hold the fort.

In 1876 a train went off the tracks and over a bridge. One of those who died was the Rev. P.P. Bliss, a hymn writer and evangelist. His most famous hymn was "Hold the Fort." It was written after the occasion during the Civil War when General Hood of the South attacked General Sherman at Alatoona Pass near Atlanta. Sherman watched from a nearby mountain as Hood's army gained the upper hand. So Sherman heliographed to his struggling troops, "Hold the fort, I am coming." Major Whittle, a member of Sherman's army told that story to Rev. Bliss and Bliss wrote this hymn:

"Hold the fort, for I am coming,
Jesus signals still.
Wave the answer back to heaven,
By thy grace we will."

The message from the Son of Man to you this morning is, "Don't be discouraged. Stay at it. Hold the fort, for I am coming."