

The Beasts At Large in the World

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[0 : 00] We are going to be turning to the Bible in just a moment. It's good to see you all this afternoon. We're going to read a chunk of Daniel chapter 7 this afternoon. We'll read verses 1 to 18 together.

So I think you'll probably find it very helpful to turn to page 744 in the Visitor's Bibles where you'll find the passage. So that's page 744, Daniel chapter 7.

Chapter 7. Okay, and I shall read the first 18 verses. So Daniel chapter 7, verse 1. 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, After this, I saw in the night visions.

And behold, a fourth beast, terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong. It had great iron teeth.

[2 : 12] 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.

[3 : 26] 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 note 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.

[4 : 32] Forever and ever. We're going to look at this whole chapter of Daniel, Daniel chapter 7, over the next four weeks.

And that allows us to move perhaps a bit more slowly through it than we would otherwise be able to. Today and next week, we'll look at this first half that we've just read out together.

And this week, we'll particularly focus on those four beasts that we saw. But before we get stuck into the passage itself, there's just a couple of important things to talk about.

The first of these is quite a simple thing to note. And I won't spend much time talking about it. But it's simply important to notice that this is a vision. This is a dream that Daniel is getting.

God revealing something to him in a particularly special spiritual way. And that might seem obvious. But it's perhaps easy to miss. So it's worth bearing in mind as we look into the rest of the chapter.

[5 : 28] That's all I'm going to say about that. We also need to think a little bit about why chapters like this matter. We can read things like this and quite easily be put off.

Because they seem quite odd. They seem quite weird. We don't normally talk like this. But it's a real shame if we get put off by chapters like this. Because these chapters are here in the Bible.

And because God has given them to us for our good. So these chapters matter. But why? Why bother with these? Well, what we have here in Daniel 7 is an explanation of the meaning of real historical events.

That are going to happen to and around God's people. God's people who are waiting in exile. This whole chapter is for the benefit of a people of God waiting in a foreign land for salvation to come at last.

So here in Daniel 7, God explains in broad brushstrokes the meaning, the flow, the pattern of ancient events. To help shape how his people understand the world that they will have to live in while they wait for God to come and rescue them.

[6 : 41] Now we modern people tend to struggle to believe that there's something behind the events that happen around us. A meaning and a pattern and a purpose. And we struggle especially, I think, when that's described in fantastical or poetic or supernatural terms as it's described here.

But one of the first illusions that the book of Daniel cures for us is the illusion that we see everything that there is. There is a reality behind what we see with our eyes.

There are hidden things that are just as real as what we touch. And that's what we're looking at here in Daniel chapter 7. The exiled people of God, living in a world they can't understand often, are given a glimpse of what's really going on behind the things that they see.

And in some senses, we Christians today are still exiles, still pilgrims waiting in a foreign land for salvation to finally come. And we're surrounded by all sorts of events that we don't really understand.

We have to live in this world for now. But we need help to understand it in God's way. And so these difficult chapters in the Bible give us help with that.

[7 : 57] They're very, very important, despite their unfamiliarity and difficulty. So they are very important, but they are still very complicated. So how on earth do we get started in a passage of the Bible that's like this?

Although the vision is a little bit crazy when we first look at it, if we look carefully, we are given a nice, simple outline.

Look with me at verses 17 and 18. These four great beasts are four kings who shall arise out of the earth.

But the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever, forever and ever. This is a sort of a map, a framework, a basic lay of the land.

It puts in place the structures that we need to understand the rest of the vision. It gives us some solid ground to place our feet as we set out. And so this is our starting point as we look at this vision together.

[9 : 02] And particularly as we look this week at the four beasts described in the first part of the passage. So as we've just read, these four beasts are four kingdoms. And they come from the earth.

That is, they are poetic personifications of four historical earthly states or empires or kingdoms. Now we have to be very humble when we're interpreting these visions.

There's simply so much that we don't know and that we can't say for certain. But I think it's best to say that these refer to historical kingdoms that were happening and were about to happen around the time of the first readers of this book.

And so have happened for us now in the past. But through them, God does reveal to us patterns and precedents for every earthly kingdom, for all human power, for all of time.

Certainly the New Testament takes this language and picks up a lot of the same language to talk about similar things. Especially in books like the book of Revelation. So there's much to gain from looking at these beasts.

[10 : 06] We live in a similar framework of kingdoms and nations and we always will. We can't avoid it. This is how the world is. So there are four beasts here.

Four earthly kingdoms. What should we notice about them? Well, we've already noticed that they are from the earth. That means they are not from heaven. Not from God's realm. But in verses 2

and 3, we get more than that.

It says they rise up out of the sea. And it's not a calm sea either. It's a sea that's being whipped up by wind from every direction. It's a roiling mass of water and foam.

And out of this storm rises these horrifying beasts. Why the sea? Why is that detail there? Is that important? Or is it just for dramatic flair?

Well, the sea in the Bible is often symbolic. It represents the anti-God forces of the universe. It represents chaos and rebellion against the order of creation.

[11 : 07] It represents the realm of the great evil that stands against the Lord of that creation. Think of Genesis 1, where it's a picture of darkness and things are not yet ordered by God.

And the spirit of God is hovering over the waters. And it's calling back that similar imagery there. And it's this realm that these beasts rise up from.

Where the kingdoms of the earth come from. They're from the belly of the sea. From the domain of everything that is against God. And so these beasts are not pleasant.

They're not at all on God's side. And ultimately they stand completely opposed to him and to his throne. Now friends, where do you think the human nations and powers come from?

I think it's quite a common philosophy for people to think that the nations of this world, governments and states, come about when good, rational people get together to do a sensible thing because they all want good for everyone.

[12 : 13] But look at where these beasts really come from. They come from the depths of the sea. They come from the realms of those who hate God. And that's an image to put pay to any blind patriotism for us who wait in this world.

The kingdoms of the world are not at heart on God's side. Now as Christians, we often feel that quite easily these days.

It's quite easy to believe now that governments seem to be turning more and more against us. But we also at the same time seem to be stricken with something of a nostalgia when we think about the nations of the past.

It seems to us that at heart, sometimes there were good nations who thought good things about Christianity, who were really on God's side. But Daniel here reveals the truth.

Even then, underneath the veneer, there were beasts. The kingdoms of man have never really at heart been on God's side. No matter how mercifully God used them or restrained them, they are represented here by four great beasts, horrific beasts, rising out of the depths of the chaotic, destructive, God-hating sea.

[13 : 28] Let's look briefly at each of these beasts individually. And we get a few more details that show us how we should think about the powers that surround us as we wait on the earth.

In verse four, we look at the first beast. It is a ferocious lion with eagle's wings. Now historically, this probably represents the kingdom of Babylon.

And there's no doubt that this is a mighty and blood-soaked beast, carnivorous, grotesque, and in itself against God. But there is an interesting twist for this beast.

It is given the mind of a man, and it is set on two feet like a man. Its wings are taken off. Suddenly, this beast becomes slightly more human as opposed to beastly.

That seems to be turned just a little bit from its beastliness. Now if you know the book of Daniel well, the rest of it, perhaps the first half, this might remind you of the story of King Nebuchadnezzar, who as a mighty anti-God emperor for a lot of his life was humbled and became a true worshipper of God.

[14 : 33] So perhaps we see here in the first beast something of the mercy of God in restraining the evil of these earthly kingdoms. Though they are evil, they do not have full reign over the world.

They are from the depths of the sea, but God does hold them back, restraining them. And they are not as bad as they could be. I think that's something we know quite well, living in the UK as we do. Living here can be very frustrating, but it is not as bad as it could be when we look at other places in the world. And so here we see living in these earthly kingdoms whilst we wait for the kingdom of God to come is mixed.

It's good and bad. It is evil mixed with God's mercy. But even so, at heart, it is still a beast. And so, at all times, we should expect life in this world whilst we wait to be difficult.

In verse 5, we are shown beast 2. It looks like a bear, and he is commanded to devour much flesh.

[15:40] Historically, this probably symbolizes the Persian Empire, an empire that conquered an awful lot of the known world at the time, and so devoured an awful lot of flesh.

Many died at the hands of the Persian Empire. And so we see here, earthly kingdoms devour people. They destroy and they kill. We are a bit sheltered from that sort of thing in the UK in the 21st century, but we really don't have to look very far to find evidence of exactly this character of earthly kingdoms.

For example, if you go to the Wikipedia page for genocide, a cheery Wikipedia page, as I'm sure you imagine, you can see that the lowest estimate of the number of deaths from genocide is 28,319,730 people.

That's an estimate. But that's the very lowest estimate listed on that page. And that doesn't include, to quote the page, non-strictly genocidal mass killing. So that doesn't include deaths from war, in combat, from human negligence either.

The kingdoms of this world have devoured an awful lot of human flesh. And as we know from the 21st century, this is not something that barbaric primitive nations do.

[17:00] This is the sophisticated kingdoms of the world that do these things. And so, at all times, we should expect life in these kingdoms whilst we wait to be difficult.

We see beast 3 in verse 6. And this one looks like a leopard. It has four wings and four heads. And it's given dominion for a time.

Historically, this likely symbolizes Alexander the Great and his Greek empire. After his death, his empire was split into four. And so that's likely what these four wings, four heads are pointing towards.

Again, this is what to expect from earthly kingdoms. Conquest and war and dominion. At all times, whilst we wait, expect life in this age to be difficult.

And finally, we are shown beast 4. This seems to be a very different kind of creature. We'll come back to beast 4 in quite a lot more detail in a couple of weeks' time.

[18:07] Daniel is particularly alarmed by this beast. And so he asks more questions about it. And so we'll come and ask similar questions in a couple of weeks. It's hard to say historically who this is.

But from other places in Daniel, I think the strongest candidate is probably some of the Roman-ruled powers that come along a few hundred years after Daniel's time. But this beast clearly outclasses the others in several areas.

Number one, it is far more terrifying. It has teeth of iron. It is dreadful in its violence. Secondly, it is mightier. It crushes everything.

Stamping its feet to destroy whatever it hasn't devoured with its teeth. And it does seem to be greater in its ambition. Notice the great claims it's making.

And it also has a lot of horns. Eleven horns, to be precise. I can't quite imagine a creature with eleven horns. It must be quite something to behold. But in Daniel, horns often represent individuals or perhaps particular times that are especially concentrated manifestations of an idea or an attitude.

[19:21] And so these ten horns probably represent ten kings that display more clearly the attitudes and ideals behind this kingdom, this beast. And notice there is one small horn.

There will be a king who is so awful, so ambitious in his quest for power, that he will uproot even his own for the sake of his ambitions.

And notice something about this little horn. He is heightened in his blasphemy. All of these beasts have come from the realm that hates God. But this one is explicit.

He makes great claims for himself. He's explicit in his anti-God rage. God sits on the throne of the universe. And this king does not hide the fact that he wants that throne.

He thinks God is sitting in his seat. As I said, we'll come back to this beast in a couple of weeks' time. There's much more to say about it. But for now, we can see that though we always expect life in this age to be generally difficult, there will be times when it is especially difficult.

[20:34] From time to time, rulers will appear who do especially terrible things, who will devour and destroy like very few others. So behind the veil, these four beasts sum up something of what the kingdoms of the world are like in this age whilst we wait.

When we take all four beasts as a whole, we see what we should expect from the governments and kingdoms of this world whilst we wait. All of them aim for a secure rule of the world.

One by one, they step up to the stage to make their claim to be lord. And they all want a throne that lasts forever. It's quite common these days for governments to denounce imperialism.

But no earthly kingdom ever really denounces imperialism. It's written into their fabric. They may trade military imperialism for a trade empire, or an empire of influence, or an empire of ideals. But every nation wants this, to rule forever, to be established in their throne, to take the throne of God. And they will not be content as long as God holds the throne and they don't.

[21 : 48] We mustn't be naive about that. And yet we also see here that none of them ever manage to get what they want. They never manage to rule forever.

Now that is both a blessing, but also a source of great difficulty. Look at everything that they produce in their struggle for the throne of the world. War, as one kingdom falls to another, and another, and another.

They never achieve peace, because no one sticks around long enough to end all their enemies. And none of them are strong enough to hold the throne for all eternity.

Instead, there is constant warfare as one kingdom takes over from another. And that rarely happens peacefully. No security, no flourishing, just warfare, bloodshed, and difficulty, as long as these beasts are on the earth.

And look, look at what humans become when they claim the throne of God. They become beastly, less than human. So what will life under the rule of the kingdoms of the world be like?

[22 : 57] What should we expect from this world that we have to live in while we wait for God? How do we interpret the events of history around us? What should we expect? Well, inevitably, it will be chaotic, difficult, and at points incredibly violent.

It won't be at peace. It won't be stable, not in the long run, though there will be moments. And that's because the people who rule it and the powers that govern it are not morally neutral.

They are, at heart, terrible beasts that rise up from the depths of the sea, from the realms of darkness, who seek to rule the world in the place of God. If this is what the kingdoms of the world are like, then as Christians we need to realistically evaluate our political ambitions.

We need to have a bigger hope than getting our earthly governments to turn themselves around. And we shouldn't be surprised when society discards Christian things.

We need to introduce an element of nuance here. Through us, God may restrain evil for a time. So there is still a lot of value in being involved in society.

[24 : 09] God does delight to have mercy and restrain evil. But we need to have our goals set realistically. God may restrain evil through us, being involved with politics, being involved with society.

But we can't tame the beasts. Sooner or later, the beast will emerge again. And I think a passage like this ought to smash our rose-tinted glasses as well. It is tempting when we find ourselves in difficulty to look back at a better time and think our country was a better thing.

But it has always been a beast. It might have been a beast on a chain for a while. But it was only restrained. Not a utopia of Christian values and true Christian belief.

Living in the midst of history is going to be difficult for everyone. Because there is a hidden war going on. A hidden contest for the throne of the world. No matter who you are, Christian or not, you will likely get caught in the crossfire for now.

But if you aren't a Christian, and you don't believe the Bible, then these beasts are all that you have to hope in. You can only hope that earthly kingdoms and ideals and politics and movements will bring security and peace.

[25 : 27] So even if you don't call yourself a person of faith, you are. You have faith that these things, these beasts, will build a utopia.

But Daniel's vision must smash that hope against the rocks. Because it shows that history does not work that way. The beast that comes closest to that, comes closest to success and the stable rule, is beast four.

The most terrible, the most violent. And in short, the most awful one to live under. So don't be surprised if you're let down time and time again.

And don't be surprised when difficulty finds you time and time again. There is no hope for peace in Brexit. There's no hope for peace in the EU either.

And there'll be no Marxist utopia. There'll be no capitalist paradise of wealth. There'll be no steady progress to better and better things. Because the world is a stage for a war of beasts.

[26 : 29] So if at the moment, all you hope in is earthly kingdoms, then you really need to get yourself a bigger, better hope than that. You must lift your eyes away from those beasts.

Stop listening to their claims that they can never fulfill. And look beyond. Look beyond to something greater. The reason that we read the whole first half of this chapter this week, as well as next week, is so that we'd see something very important before we left today.

Something that we will think about much, much more next week. So if this has been bleak, come back next week. Please do. At the end of this passage, we do see that there is something much greater to hope in.

Much greater to lift our eyes to than the earthly beasts. We see that the war for the throne of the earth will end one day. Someone will win.

Security and peace and stability are coming. But it's not going to be one of these earthly kingdoms, one of these beasts that rise from the depths of the sea, from the domain of darkness.

[27 : 38] But it's going to be someone who comes from God himself. So if you are only hoping in these earthly beasts today, wouldn't it be so much better to align your hope and destiny with him who will come from heaven instead?

Wouldn't it be better to do that now before it's too late? Because to be on his side when the dust settles and the war is finally won will truly put you on the right side of history forever.

Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for these chapters in Daniel that are hard to understand.

We thank you that you have given them to us. And we pray that you would help us to understand and be blessed by them. Father, we thank you that you've shown us what to expect from life in this world whilst we wait.

And we pray that that understanding will help us to get our expectations right and help us to persevere to the very end. Because we know, Lord, that the day is coming when a hope greater than earthly things will appear once and for all.

[28 : 57] That Jesus Christ will return and will settle these things forever. So help us now to put our hope in him and in him alone. In Jesus' name.

Amen.