

The Vicious War of the Fourth Beast

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[0 : 00] the world, bringing difficulty to everyone who lives on the earth. But Daniel has also seen, as we saw last week, that the end of this hard slog on earth is a glorious one.

He's seen that these violent and cruel beasts, these kingdoms of the earth, will not rule forever, and instead, God's king will rule forever. We saw last week, earth's kingdoms will be judged permanently, and their throne will go to the one that God's people have always been waiting for, God's king, the one who God has chosen.

Daniel has seen all this. He's seen an awful lot. I don't think I'd cope very well if I were to see all of this in a dream in a night. And I think Daniel's response to what he's seen can be quite comforting in itself for us.

Notice that in verse 15. Daniel is alarmed and anxious by these things. He may be receiving something good from God, but that does not mean he's comfortable with it. And I think it can be easy for us when we read things like this to feel slightly guilty if we feel alarmed and confused and scared by what we're reading.

But these things are scary. They are worrying. They are overwhelming. And that's Daniel's response to them as well. But notice where that alarm drives Daniel.

[1 : 26] It drives him towards God, to understand God more, not less. Daniel doesn't quite know what to make of these things, and so he grabs the attention of someone in the vision who's standing nearby, and he asks him for just a little bit more clarity to explain what he's seeing.

Particularly, you'll notice, about that fourth beast, the one that is strangely different, the last one that he saw, the one that seemed to be, earlier in the vision, so much more brutal than the others were. So that's where the attention of this last part of the vision turns. So it turns for the rest of the chapter, and that's where we turn our attention to as well today.

To the different and terrifying fourth beast, this final kingdom that Daniel sees. It is hard to say exactly what it means that this kingdom is very different from the other beasts, but there are several areas where it is clearly different from the other beasts.

Firstly, it seemed to be the most violent and aggressive earlier in the chapter, and that seems to be the same here. Notice in verse 19, Daniel remarks once more about its teeth of iron and its claws of bronze.

[2 : 45] And again, it loves to devour and aggressively smash everything it comes across, just in case it's missed something with its jaws, it crushes everything again with its feet.

So it's clearly more vicious. It also seems to be more ambitious as well. It will devour the whole earth in verse 23. It intends to rule universally.

It will trample down the earth and break it to pieces, leaving nothing left. Now a lot of this is repeated information, if we've read the whole chapter, but it does grip us with the terror and the distress that Daniel is seeing.

We see this is not a friendly beast. There is nothing delightful about it at all. And just like earlier in the vision, Daniel notices in particular that prominent little horn out of 10 that the beast has.

Remember, those little horns often represent individual kings or shorter time periods that embody the beast's ways most particularly. And so this little horn is a king who is especially violent, who is especially ambitious, who is especially destructive.

[4 : 02] This is a king who is so keen for dominion that he's even willing to destroy his own for that goal. So this little horn is the ultimate villain.

Again, none of this is new information if we've read through the whole chapter, but it does once again draw our eyes to just how awful this kingdom is and this king is.

Now these things are all noticeable. They're all scary. They're all significant. But there is something more significant about this little horn that Daniel is drawn to again and again throughout the chapter. This horn is making great claims for itself. It speaks great things with great there, meaning mighty and arrogant rather than wonderful.

So perhaps unlike the other beasts that Daniel has seen in this vision, this beast is first and foremost in its blasphemy against God. This king claims to be much more than he is.

[5 : 04] His claims throw down a challenge for the throne of God. For the Ancient of Days that we saw last week, he knows God is there and he hates God. He really detests him.

And because he hates God, we see he hates God's people as well. Because he hates God, he really hates God's people. And so that's the first thing that Daniel learns and that we learn from this beast in the second half of the vision.

Christians, Christians, God's people, are going to be attacked precisely because they are Christians. Now this whole vision has been filled with difficulty of one sort or another.

The beasts in the first half of the vision, the first three, really showed us that life would be generally difficult for everyone on earth. It showed us what power, human power, was like generally.

Specifically for the people of Daniel's day, it told them that they had a period of very difficult history ahead of them. That there'd be a sequence of difficult empires who would rule over them and everyone else, cruelly, just making life hard.

[6 : 17] But this part of the vision shifts focus a little bit and it focuses on a more specific difficulty for God's people. Not general hard life in this world, but direct persecution that comes to those who love God.

The faithful will be attacked because they are faithful. And so the first readers who have read this for the first time should expect a specific period in the approaching slice of history when an individual king rising from a brutal kingdom was going to come and persecute them in exactly the way described here.

Because they love God. Now for us, this specific historical time predicted here of brutal persecution has happened in our past.

The vision has been fulfilled. But only in a shadowy, partial way. All Old Testament promises and patterns have their fulfillment in this age. And so as we read this, as we read about this fourth beast and its attack on the people of God, we should expect this pattern promised here to rear its head again in this age, to find its ultimate fulfillment in this age whilst we wait.

We will see this fourth beast again. We will see many little reflections, little shadows of this fourth beast. And perhaps we will also see a more full-blooded, full-bodied fulfillment, a more concrete expression of this fourth beast pattern in the time leading up to the very end of history.

[7 : 58] And that's something I want to say tentatively, but it is something that the New Testament seems to suggest. Paul mentions a man of lawlessness who would come before the very end. And the book of Revelation picks up just this imagery and uses it to suggest difficult times for Christians ahead.

But whether we are waiting for this vision to be finally fulfilled at a specific time ahead of us or not, the general pattern is still very clear. We should expect hardship because we are Christians and because the world's kingdoms particularly hate Christians.

Because they hate God. Now, for any Christian here, that's probably not a huge surprise. After all, Jesus plainly said many times exactly the same thing, that Christians will be persecuted by the same world that persecuted him because it hated him.

But we do get more details in this passage that would help to flesh out our expectations. And God's exiled people always benefit from accurate expectations, especially when it comes to how brutally difficult the future might be.

Forewarned is forearmed. And remember the great purpose of a vision like this. It is to give God's people the understanding they need to keep going, to give them the necessary glimpses of knowledge, to keep them waiting faithfully, to keep them sane in a world where things just aren't as they should be.

[9 : 37] Look at verse 20 and 21 with me. This little horn is bold. This king is arrogant. And he utterly, utterly detests God.

And that flows quite naturally into a war on the people who belong to him. It says, as I looked, this horn made war with the saints and prevailed over them.

And this is an old, old conflict that reaches all the way back to the beginning. Conflict between the offspring of the devil and the offspring of the woman. And that war bursts out again here in this vision.

This violence is not momentary. It's not accidental. It's prolonged and aggressive. This is a concerted campaign against God's people. It's deliberate.

This king intends complete destruction. In the first part of the vision, if you were here a couple of weeks ago, we had to acknowledge that God's people would get caught in the crossfire of trouble in this world.

[10:40] Here, they're no longer caught in the crossfire. They're no longer collateral damage. Here, Christians, God's people, are in the sights, directly targeted because they are Christians.

And this war, it says here, is going to wear out the saints. I find that a really evocative way of putting it. I think we all know a little bit of what it's like to be worn out when we have no energy left, when we feel spent with everything drained away.

Well, that's just a small picture of what it will be like for God's people in a time like this. What's described here is a long war of attrition, where morale and stamina and perseverance seem to be chipped away bit by bit as more damage is done to the faithful every day.

Perhaps it's helpful to put that in some sort of real terms. What will these people live through? Well, this vision announces that God-fearing Israelites were going to live in a time when one by one, sisters, brothers, friends, family would have their property stolen.

They'd have their reputation stripped away from them. They'd live through a time when any dignity they had is removed as they're utterly humiliated before the whole world.

[12:05] And then, one by one, bit by bit, they're brutally murdered for loving God. This really does describe an awful, awful time to live in.

And because of this war, because of this kind of hatred, the people of God will be utterly worn out, struggling for scraps of hope and scraps of strength, utterly bedraggled and tattered.

Daniel sees here that faithful believers are going to face a time just like that. It's no wonder that he's alarmed and anxious about what he's seen.

This is scary stuff. Friends, I think we can sometimes be quite glib when we say Christians will be persecuted without having any real idea of what that might be like.

But I wonder, I wonder if we do realize quite how bad things might get for Christians. Times just like this have come for Christians in the past.

[13:08] The shadow of this fourth beast looms large over the history of the church. Many faithful believers have faced it. Many faithful Christians have been burnt.

Many Christians have died to the roar of cheering crowds who are quite frankly overjoyed to see the blood of someone who loves God pour out on the ground. These things might not happen here now.

But that's an anomaly. They happen in other places now. The list of countries where being a Christian means losing your property, means losing your dignity, means losing your life, is huge. And these things will continue to happen. And perhaps there will one day be a time of particularly terrible difficulty in the future for us. Perhaps before the final end, this terrible beast will rear its ugly head once again.

We simply don't know what we will have to live through, or what our children or grandchildren will have to live through. And are we prepared to be faithful when times like this come?

[14:15] And really importantly, do we teach children and grandchildren that being a Christian comes with a real cost? It comes with a cost of hatred, and it may come with the cost of their earthly life.

And this may not happen in our lifetime or our children's lifetime. But in God's wisdom, something like this might happen. And we need to be prepared for that.

What else is this awful king going to do? You might have noticed a slightly odd detail in verse 25. It says that this king will seek to change the times and the seasons.

That strikes us as a strange detail. Who really cares about a calendar? But we need to remember how special the calendar was for God's ancient people.

Festivals, times of the week, times of the year, all gave special opportunities for them to get together and to worship God openly. The way the times and the seasons were arranged meant that their whole rhythm of life was a declaration to the world of God's good rule and his righteousness.

[15 : 30] The king who hates God can't stand that kind of reminder of God. And so he tries to remove it. By changing the times and the seasons, he destroys the opportunities that God's people have to gather openly together.

He removes their chances to meet with other Christians and to worship. And he gets rid of many of the reminders of their God and his goodness. This king will not rest until there's no trace of God left on the earth.

That's his goal. This is targeted bitterness. And that kind of persecution makes it very, very hard for God's people to persevere.

Especially if they didn't know it was coming. But they do know now. They do know it's coming. And so again, being forewarned of this is being forearmed.

This warning is here to anticipate a very normal fear for Christians when they're being driven underground wherever they look. When they can't meet together to worship God. When every trace of his name seems to be driven from the world, from public life, from the seasons of the year.

[16 : 43] When you're in that situation, it is tempting to fear, to wonder, has God been completely blindsided by this? Has he been caught off guard?

Has he been defeated? When the visible expression of God's worship and his people is driven into hiding, so that even times and seasons have been changed to get rid of him.

It does not look then like God has the upper hand. And so it's perhaps entirely natural to ask yourself, has God been defeated?

Is he anywhere to be seen? Or has he? Well, no. And the simple fact of knowing that God knew it would happen beforehand is tremendously reassuring there.

God has not been caught by surprise. He's not been blindsided. This is not outside his plan. The enemy has not taken God's people out of his hands.

[17 : 45] Notice that in the end of verse 25. Though it might look and feel like God has lost control of this situation, it is God himself who has taken his people and given them into the hands of this enemy king.

God is still in complete control here. This is not the result of success on the part of God's enemies. That is comforting.

But of course, that also raises many issues. How on earth could God do that to his people? Isn't he supposed to protect them? For us, this seems completely counterintuitive.

Why would God hand his people over to face real and difficult suffering? This is comforting. It's good to know he's still in control. But it's also very challenging. Why would God do this?

And so again, we benefit from God showing us the bigger picture in these visions. We always live with a very narrow perspective on life. We see earthly things with our eyes.

[18 : 51] We live earthly experiences. And so we're quite easily convinced that earthly things are the only things, that earthly death and earthly life are it. And so we get very confused when we see things like God will hand his people over to earthly suffering.

But we come to a passage like this, and we're forcefully reminded that earthly things are not all there is when God is involved. Why is God okay with letting his people face physical suffering, physical death, physical difficulty?

Well, because he has a power that goes far, far beyond earthly life and earthly death. He knows that if a Christian suffers and loses and dies on the earth, then it isn't the end.

Because earthly loss is not eternal loss. God knows this. And so God sometimes does this. He sometimes gives his people over to earthly suffering.

Not because he doesn't understand how hard it is. On the contrary, he understands how hard it is perfectly well. After all, Christ has faced more of it than many of us ever will.

[20 : 01] But because he sees more, because his perspective is truer than ours, it's bigger. And he knows that earthly loss is not eternal loss.

He hands his people over to suffering. But that's a far cry from God's enemies being able to do whatever they want with his people for however long they want.

God's people are handed over by God to this terrible king. But notice again in verse 25 how long that is for. It is for time, times, and half a time.

That's a very enigmatic phrase. It's hard to decipher. And numbers in books like Daniel are notoriously hard to interpret.

So it's probably best not to lean too much weight on any particular interpretation of that. Perhaps historically it refers to a particular length of time. It certainly seems to in other parts of the book of Daniel.

[21 : 02] But whatever else it does mean, it's a fixed time. It's a time with limits and an end. This is not God's people will be handed over to his enemies indefinitely, forever, for as long as they want.

But this is God's people will be handed over for a limited amount of time and for no longer. No matter how hard this king, this little horn, strains itself, it can't extend this time for even a moment. Not for a minute. Not for a second. This particular historical time of difficulty will come to an end. And so will every similar time of persecution throughout the history of the people of God. And so if we ever face a time like this, God knows its limits. It's hemmed in on either side and can't spread. Often in history, God does do this.

His people face real difficult times. But those times don't last forever. They're temporary. And a measure of peace is restored before long. A reprieve, a breather is given.

[22 : 13] God is kind and he often brings temporary end to difficulty for his people. But often the shadow of this little horn does seem to be a long one.

The stretch of long periods of time. And it might be tempting for Christians in that situation to believe that it will never ever end. But it will. Because even if a temporary end doesn't come, there is always the promise of a permanent end to persecution.

Remember what we saw last week. The Ancient of Days, God is sat on his throne and will judge for his people and bring an end to all of their suffering.

So if there's a particularly terrible time of difficulty in the future, it will end. And what better help is there for enduring pain than knowing that it is finite.

It's temporary and won't last forever. And so God's people in Daniel's day will be able to keep going through difficulty as they wait for salvation to come.

[23 : 17] And if we come to a time when we have to endure the death of friends and family because of our faith. Or a time when every night seems to be filled with terror waiting for a knock on the door that signals our end.

We will know now, having seen this vision, that it will not last forever. And thankfully, even in an alarming passage like this, that is exactly the message that we're left with.

A message of immeasurable hope and joy as we're given one last glimpse at the glory lying beyond the suffering in verses 26 and 27.

As we finally, we finally see that Christians are going to get everything in the end. So as we come towards the end, look at verse 26 with me.

We get here one more glimpse at that moment we were thinking about last week. That moment when the dominion of the worst human kingdoms of history is taken away forever and ever.

[24 : 21] There's a total reverse in fortunes here. The one who is powerful is judged and the helpless one is upheld. The one who goes around on the earth claiming it for his own loses it.

And look who gets it instead. In verse 22, it's the ones who appear to have lost it. The saints of the most high possess the kingdom. And in verse 27, the saints of the most high are given the kingdom. In the end, all the people of God will be given the earth. Everyone who has become a Christian and been added to God's holy people will get the earth as an inheritance.

Perhaps that's something that's slightly surprising to you. After all, when we thinking last week that it's the son of man, not any other human that gets the kingdom. So why do we get the kingdom as well?

But to think like that separates the king and his people in a way that just can't be done. What the king gets, his people get too. That's the pattern throughout the Bible.

[25 : 30] What the king gets, his people get. What Jesus Christ gets, we share in. And so the people of God will receive the kingdom.

What incredible news that is for people in Daniel's day who have been exiled in a foreign land, who look to everyone else like they have no share in the earth.

They have no place of their own. They have no kingdom. They have no home. Well, that won't be the case forever. One day, once they've endured the suffering, they will get the earth as their king ascends to the throne of the earth forever.

We might lose everything for being Christians. We might. Many Christians already have. But though we have to be realistic about that and we have to face up to the facts, we can know, we do know for

certain, that we will get back much, much more abundantly everything that we lose for Jesus Christ's sake.

To quote Jesus himself as we come to a close, as it's recorded in Mark's gospel, he says this, Let's pray together.

[27 : 11] Heavenly Father, we thank you for these alarming and confusing words. We thank you that you have given us these glimpses of what we should expect in the world.

Lord, we admit that thinking about these things sometimes fills us with fear, fills us with alarm. And so we pray that you would encourage us, that you would give us courage.

We pray that you would strengthen us to keep going to the end. And Father, please, keep us always looking forward to the day that we also glimpse in this passage, the day when Christ returns and claims the kingdoms that are already his.

We ask all of these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Thank you for all.
Amen.