

A Parade of Empires

This last Friday an estimated 2 billion people watched the wedding of Prince William to Kate Middleton. Many stopped to admire the beauty, the ceremony, the tradition, the pageantry of a Royal wedding. There is a kind of nostalgia about watching a British royal wedding, like seeing the glories of a faded empire relived for a few hours. In the last 100 years the world has seen the fading of the British empire, and the rise of America into a superpower. Some in this room are old enough to have lived through Germany's attempt to establish its empire. Many of us remember the Cold War, as two superpowers squared up without World War Three breaking out, until we saw the Soviet Union crumble. Empires rise, have their moment in the sun, and empires fall. Their languages differ, their armies may look different, but the same thing has played itself out again and again in human history. Like a parade, different nations have taken turns to lead the parade, to be on top.

In 553 B.C., Daniel was privileged to see the main points of that parade played out. In a vision, Daniel saw the parade sped up so that hundreds of years were compressed into minutes, and he saw empires come and go from his time till the very end when God's empire reigns.. In this chapter we find Daniel's experience of Nebuchadnezzar's vision of four human empires, and the fifth and final one, being God's. Daniel's vision in chapter 7 is probably the grandest of all the visions, and its detail about the final human empire before God's kingdom comes is unmatched. The other visions in chapters 8, 9, 11 and 12 deal with details and portions of the future – but this vision takes in the whole sweep of human history.

Why should we be interested in this parade of nations? Why should we Christians study and understand Daniel's strange and terrifying vision?

First, because this chapter claims to be a prophecy. Every time the Bible contains a prophecy, the whole of the Bible's reputation is on the line. One wrong prophecy, and the whole book falls down as uninspired and simply another religious book. You'd think with so much on the line, that the Bible would be sparing in prophecy. Actually more than a quarter of the Bible is prophecy. And Daniel 7 is not a vague prediction, it is a bold prediction of four world empires, and how the last empire ends. We should be interested in this chapter because the truthfulness of the Bible is once again on the line.

Second, because if this prophecy is true, it tells us what kind of God we believe in. The kind of God who can write the future as history, is a God completely in control. The God who can successfully pull this feat off is not simply a great contender for the Most High God. The kind of God who ventures to prophecy about four world empires in succession becomes the undisputed, undefeated champion of the pantheon of gods. We should be interested in this chapter because the nature of our God and His power is revealed for us to worship.

Third, because this chapter explains how God controls our history to the very end. In a time of volatility and instability and uncertainty, Christians can have hope that the God they serve is watching history unfold like a master chef watches his creation bake in a timed oven. God is not worried, late, catching up, or surprised. God can write the end in advance, because He is in control. We should be interested in this chapter because knowing how things end ought to fill us with hope in the present.

After spending six chapters telling us who Daniel was, what kind of man he was, what kind of devotion he had, chapters 7 to 12 are now going to show us the visions God gave Daniel. Chapter 7

is a remarkable vision, and really comes in three parts. His vision of the first three animals, his vision of the fourth animal and his vision of God's kingdom. Following that, Daniel asks two questions, and receives the explanations.

I. Daniel's Vision of the First Three Animals

Daniel 7:1-28 *Daniel 7:1 In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon, Daniel had a dream and visions of his head while on his bed. Then he wrote down the dream, telling the main facts. ² Daniel spoke, saying, "I saw in my vision by night, and behold, the four winds of heaven were stirring up the Great Sea. ³ "And four great beasts came up from the sea, each different from the other. ⁴ "The first was like a lion, and had eagle's wings. I watched till its wings were plucked off; and it was lifted up from the earth and made to stand on two feet like a man, and a man's heart was given to it. ⁵ "And suddenly another beast, a second, like a bear. It was raised up on one side, and had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth. And they said thus to it: 'Arise, devour much flesh!' ⁶ "After this I looked, and there was another, 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.*

Daniel has this vision the year Belshazzar joined Nabonidus as co-regent of Babylon. This is a good fifty years after Nebuchadnezzar's dream, but 15 years before Daniel will be thrown into a lion's den. He sees the sea, and the wind whips up the sea. And from this disturbed sea emerge four animals, one after the other. First, a lion, with eagle's wings, whose wings are plucked, and it ends up standing on two feet. Second a bear, a lopsided bear, with one side higher than the other, with its last meal still in its mouth. It's told to devour. Third, a leopard, also with wings, but this time four wings, and also four heads.

Now remember that a vision is interactive. None of us would like to get out of our cars when in the lion enclosure at the lion park. Here Daniel is watching a lion, a bear and a leopard right in front of him. But that was not what really frightened him. What frightened him was the fourth animal.

II. Daniel's Vision of the Fourth Animal

⁷ "After this I saw in the night visions, and behold, a fourth beast, dreadful and terrible, exceedingly strong. It had huge iron teeth; it was devouring, breaking in pieces, and trampling the residue with its feet. It was different from all the beasts that were before it, and it had ten horns. ⁸ "I was considering the horns, and there was another horn, a little one, coming up among them, before whom three of the first horns were plucked out by the roots. And there, in this horn, were eyes like the eyes of a man, and a mouth speaking pompous words.

This animal is unlike all the other animals. It is unlike anything Daniel knows – it's not a lion, a bear or a leopard. It's just a beast. And it's terrifying. Its teeth are iron. Later we find out its claws are bronze. What it doesn't devour with its mouth, it smashes with its limbs; what it doesn't smash with its limbs, it stomps with its feet. It is, in Daniel's words, exceedingly strong. It is seemingly unstoppable. And then Daniel's attention is drawn to its head where it has ten horns. While watching those ten horns, an eleventh horn comes up and pushes out three of the ten. And this eleventh horn has eyes and a mouth which speaks.

And it is at this point that Daniel sees the third and climactic part of the vision, the vision of God's kingdom

III. Daniel's Vision of the God's Kingdom

⁹ "I watched till thrones were put in place, And the Ancient of Days was seated; His garment was white as snow, And the hair of His head was like pure wool. His throne was a fiery flame, Its wheels a burning fire; ¹⁰ A fiery stream issued And came forth from before Him. A thousand thousands ministered to Him; Ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him. The court was seated, And the books were opened. ¹¹ "I

watched then because of the sound of the pompous words which the horn was speaking; I watched till the beast was slain, and its body destroyed and given to the burning flame. ¹² "As for the rest of the beasts, they had their dominion taken away, yet their lives were prolonged for a season and a time. ¹³ " I was watching in the night visions, And behold, One like the Son of Man, Coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, And they brought Him near before Him. ¹⁴ Then 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 the one Which shall not be destroyed.

Daniel sees a being called the Ancient of Days. He sits on a throne of burning fiery colour, with some kind of river of fire coming from Him. His garment is blindingly white, as is His hair. Millions of beings serve and stand before him. Now who could this be? Well, the description sounds much like other revelations of God in Scripture. Ezekiel saw an appearance of the Lord with very similar descriptions. The account of millions ministering before him sound like John's description of heaven in Revelation 5. His name Ancient of Days suggests one who is very old, perhaps older than all others. But all of this is not conclusive. What clinches this for us is that this being takes away the kingdom from the beast and gives it to the Son of Man. And throughout the book of Daniel, who is it that set kings up and takes them down, that gives the kingdom to one and takes it from another? God Himself.

Daniel sees a manifestation of God Himself, and it is apparently a courtroom or governmental scene. Books are opened. The noise of the little horn's speech comes up, and before you know it, the beast has been killed, and thrown into the fire. And then, the climax. With the beast killed, someone called the Son of Man comes before the Ancient of Days, and a coronation ceremony takes place. The Ancient of Days gives the Son of Man a global kingdom that lasts forever.

Now Daniel seems to assume that his readers know who this Son of Man is, so not much further explanation is given. But let's pause and think who this might be. Commentators have suggested all kinds of things, from Gabriel to Michael to Daniel himself, to a Davidic king, to the high priest. We know that this person receives the kingdom. But notice two things about this person: he comes on the clouds of heaven, second he rules over an eternal kingdom. In Scripture, the clouds often refer to the glory of God, His majesty. The Son of Man comes with the very glory of God. Second, he lives forever. What kind of man will live forever?

It seems that Daniel knows his readers will identify this person as Messiah. Messiah is God's chosen king, the one God appoints in Psalm 2 to rule. Messiah is one like the Son of Man, but He is clearly more than a man, for he is given glory, and comes with God's glory.

Isaiah 9:6-7 *For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷ Of the increase of His government and peace There will be no end, Upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, To order it and establish it with judgment and justice From that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.*

This is Daniel's vision – four beasts, a courtroom scene, the last beast slain, and the kingdom given to Messiah.

Well, happily for us, Daniel was not content to just see the vision and not understand. Daniel wanted to know what it all meant. So that brings us to:

IV. Daniel's First Question

¹⁵ "I, Daniel, was grieved in my spirit within my body, and the visions of my head troubled me. ¹⁶ "I came near to one of those who stood by, and asked him the truth of all this.

The difference between a dream and a vision is that in a dream the person is essentially passive. A vision, on the other hand, occurs when the person is awake, and allows them to interact with the vision, talk to people, ask questions. So Daniel turns to one of the millions serving before the throne, and asks him what it all means.

V. The First Answer

So he told me and made known to me the interpretation of these things: ¹⁷ 'Those great beasts, which are four, are four kings which arise out of the earth. ¹⁸ 'But the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom, and possess the kingdom forever, even forever and ever.'

The angelic being summarises the entire vision in two sentences. The four animals are four kings. But in the end, God's people possess an eternal kingdom. So here we have the key to understanding the whole vision, Four kings, or kingdoms, which are then defeated ultimately by Messiah and his saints.

Now where have we seen this idea of four kingdom replaced by a fifth, eternal kingdom before? Chapter 2. There Nebuchadnezzar had a dream of a massive stature made of four parts – gold, silver, bronze and iron, with the iron mixed with clay at the feet. And a stone cut out with hands hit the image on its feet, causing the whole thing to disintegrate, while the remaining stone became a mountain which filled the whole earth. Chapter 2 and 7 are really twins. In chapter 2, these four world empires are seen from human perspective: they look impressive like a statue. In chapter 7, they are seen from God's perspective: beastly and immoral. In both of them, the fourth kingdom has some kind of division, and the fourth kingdom smashes head-on into God's kingdom. So with the answer from the angel in our one hand, and the truths of chapter 2 in the other, we can figure out which kingdoms these four animals represent.

The sea seems to represent humanity, and it is God who controls the winds and stirs things up. He sets up kings. The first animal is like a lion with eagle's wings. Which is the king of all beasts, and the king of birds? The lion and the eagle. Who was the human king greater than all others? Nebuchadnezzar. Because of his pride, Nebuchadnezzar was humbled, like a bird plucked of its feathers and wings. However, after seven periods of time, he was given again the mind of a man, like a lion stood on its two feet. The first beast is Babylon, symbolised by Nebuchadnezzar. If you remember pictures of the gates of Ishtar from Babylon, one of the things which lined the walls were lions. The first and grandest of the kingdoms – Babylon.

The second kingdom is the one which replaces Babylon, represented by a lopsided bear. The bear is large and ferocious and not as dignified as the lion. Just like silver is stronger, but not worth as much as gold, from Nebuchadnezzar's dream. The second kingdom in chapter two was the kingdom of the Medes and Persians. Just like the bear was lopsided, so one part of the kingdom, the Persians ended up stronger than the Medes. It conquered much territory. What the three ribs in its mouth represent, we don't know, it may refer to its biggest conquests. The bear was the MedoPersian empire which took over from Babylon in 539 B.C. and continued until 331 B.C.

The third kingdom is the leopard, with four wings and four heads. We remember from chapter 2 that the bronze belly and thighs was the kingdom of Greece. A leopard is characterised by being sleek, agile, and very fast. With the addition of four wings, this will be bindingly quick. Alexander the Great conquered the known world in just eleven years, conquering from Egypt to India. When he died at age 33, his kingdom was divided amongst his generals. How many generals were there that each took a piece of the empire? Well, how many heads did this leopard have? Four. Daniel, writing

200 years in advance, predicted that this kingdom would be divided four ways. And that's exactly what happened. Alexander's four generals: Ptolemy, Seleucus, Lysimachus and Cassander. For a time, dominion was given to this empire.

Notice something else that Daniel had seen about those kingdoms:

"As for the rest of the beasts, they had their dominion taken away, yet their lives were prolonged for a season and a time.

When we looked at the Nebuchadnezzar's image, we saw that something of the previous kingdom carried over into the next. We noticed that today we still have elements of Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome with us. The fourth kingdom, which was the legs of iron in Nebuchadnezzar's dream, is what fascinated Daniel. So that's what he asked about in his second question.

VI. Daniels' Second Question

¹⁹ "Then I wished to know the truth about the fourth beast, which was different from all the others, exceedingly dreadful, with its teeth of iron and its nails of bronze, which devoured, broke in pieces, and trampled the residue with its feet; ²⁰ "and the ten horns that were on its head, and the other horn which came up, before which three fell, namely, that horn which had eyes and a mouth which spoke pompous words, whose appearance was greater than his fellows. ²¹ "I was watching; and the same horn was making war against the saints, and prevailing against them, ²² "until the Ancient of Days came, and a judgment was made in favor of the saints of the Most High, and the time came for the saints to possess the kingdom. ²³ "

Daniel asks the angelic watchers about this fourth beast, repeating the details he had seen, but adding the fact that this fourth beast made war against the saints and beat them, until the courtroom scene of the Ancient of Days, where the beast's time was over. The saints time to reign with Messiah was to begin. Daniel was probably deeply disturbed as he saw that this beast was allowed to fight against God's people and defeat them, for a time.

VII. The Second Explanation

Thus he said: 'The fourth beast shall be A fourth kingdom on earth, Which shall be different from all other kingdoms, And shall devour the whole earth, Trample it and break it in pieces. ²⁴ The ten horns are ten kings Who shall arise from this kingdom. And another shall rise after them; He shall be different from the first ones, And shall subdue three kings. ²⁵ He shall speak pompous words against the Most High, Shall persecute the saints of the Most High, And shall intend to change times and law. Then the saints shall be given into his hand For a time and times and half a time. ²⁶ ' But the court shall be seated, And they shall take away his dominion, To consume and destroy it forever. ²⁷ Then the kingdom and dominion, And the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven, Shall be given to the people, the saints of the Most High. His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, And all dominions shall serve and obey Him.'

The angel tells Daniel that the fourth beast is a fourth kingdom, which dominates the whole world. Back in Nebuchadnezzar's vision, what was the fourth kingdom? It was Rome, the kingdom of iron, stronger and fiercer than all the ones before. This beast has great iron teeth, and takes over the whole earth. The angel then goes on to say that from this Roman empire will come ten kings. An eleventh Roman ruler will come, supplant three of the kings. And once on the throne, he will speak blasphemous words, try to change times and law, persecute God's people. But the good news is—once God's court sits, his time is up. A universal, eternal kingdom is then given to God's people under God's Messiah.

Well, what does this mean?

Let me give you the two options for understanding what these eleven rulers are. One is historical, the other is future.

The first option is to say that all this was fulfilled in the first century. The ten rulers were ten Roman emperors from Julius Caesar to the destruction of Jerusalem. The eleventh horn would be Nero, who persecuted Christians, but eventually died. Such interpreters believe that with the destruction of Jerusalem, a new age began, and God's kingdom in Christ begun after the resurrection was now established in a very special sense. Christians at that point received a spiritual kingdom, with the authority to conquer the world through the preaching of the gospel.

There are several problems with this view. First, you have to do a bit of playing with numbers to arrive at Nero from Julius Caesar. In fact, some say it's not Nero, it's Vespasian. But I doubt that this Roman ruler is one that could be confused for another. He's clearly unique.

Second, once this ruler is killed, the whole beast is killed. In other words, no more Roman empire. Did the Roman empire end in the first century? No, in fact, it reached its strongest point in the second century.

A third problem is that this eleventh ruler seems to supplant three rulers at once, which suggests that the ten are not a succession of kings, but ten people ruling at the same time.

Was there any time in Roman history where ten rulers ruled at once, and an eleventh came up, supplanted three, spoke blasphemy, attacked God's people for times, time and a half, tried to change times and seasons, until eventually he was destroyed along with his kingdom, and the whole earth was handed over to God's people? There doesn't seem to be, any more than the first coming of Christ catastrophically hit the Roman empire like a missile and devastated it.

You can make Nero fit, the way four-year-olds sometimes make puzzle pieces fit. You can squeeze it in there with sheer force. But given how elegantly and easily the other parts of the prophecy were fulfilled, it seems the best solution is to expect an elegant and straightforward fulfilment that is yet future.

Remember we saw in chapter 2 that the fourth kingdom is not iron all through. At its feet, it is mixed with clay. It is first divided, and then diluted. In its diluted state, it is struck by Christ, who causes it to disintegrate completely. In other words, to take chapter 2 as our guide, the Roman empire does not go out of existence before the kingdom of God comes. It is diluted, and mixed, but not destroyed until God's kingdom comes. And so again Daniel is seeing mountain-peaks of history. He is not interested in all that happened to Rome, he is interested in how Rome ends. And either we have a mistake in our Bible, or Rome is still with us in some way. And it seems that at the very end, the last kingdom of this world will be ruled simultaneously by ten rulers, who choose to give their authority to one very outstanding man.

Revelation 17:11-13 ¹¹ "And the beast that was, and is not, is himself also the eighth, and is of the seven, and is going to perdition. ¹² "The ten horns which you saw are ten kings who have received no kingdom as yet, but they receive authority for one hour as kings with the beast. ¹³ "These are of one mind, and they will give their power and authority to the beast.

This man will rule for time, times and half a time, which looks a lot like 3 and a half years, or the 42 months we see in the Revelation again and again. He will rage against God's people, and perhaps even seek to change established norms.

2 Thessalonians 2:1-8 Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, we ask you, ² not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come. ³ Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, ⁴ who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God. ⁵ Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? ⁶ And now you know what is restraining, that he may be revealed in his own time. ⁷ For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only He who now restrains will do so until He is taken out of the way. ⁸ And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming.

Notice when this lawless one will be destroyed. At the brightness of his coming. When Paul wrote that, was he referring to Christ's first coming or second coming? If it was his second coming, then this eleventh horn couldn't refer to Nero, or Vespasian or any such Roman ruler. This must refer to a future Roman ruler, who will be destroyed at Christ's second coming.

And I think the clincher that tells us when this will all happen are the words of the Lord Jesus Himself. Remember back I verse 13

³ "I was watching in the night visions, And behold, One like the Son of Man, Coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, And they brought Him near before Him. ¹⁴ Then 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 the one Which shall not be destroyed.

Now consider how Jesus speaks about His own return:

Mark 14:61-62 But He kept silent and answered nothing. Again the high priest asked Him, saying to Him, "Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" ⁶² Jesus said, "I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven."

If Jesus wanted us to think that He establishes the kingdom at his first coming, why does He use Daniel's exact words to describe his Second Coming?

Matthew 25:31 ³¹ "When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory.

When does Messiah come in the clouds of heaven to destroy the Roman ruler and receive the kingdom? At his first coming? No. There the victory is purchased. There the stone is launched. But when does it hit the image? When does the court rule that the beast be slain and the kingdom given to the Son of Man? At His Second Coming, when He comes on the clouds of heaven.

The message of comfort to Daniel and to us, is that the parade of human history is completely under God's control. As surely as Babylon was replaced by Persia, which was replaced by Greece, which was replaced by Rome, this last empire of Rome will finally end with the returning Christ. The world will be ruled under the lordship of Christ. The very last world empire to rule without God will contain a man with incredible power and incredible blasphemies. He will seem to triumph over Christianity and even stamp it out. When opposition to God and blasphemy reaches its pinnacle, God declares that time is up. He sends His Son, who is already the King, to claim His prize, and rule the earth. He destroys the little horn, puts down human self-rule

God's people are not to fear. For it will simply take one sitting of the court, and God will declare that the time is over for human rule apart from God. As surely as He could protect Daniel in Babylon, He can protect us and keep us, as He unfolds history according to His plan.

His Son will return in glory, and claim the kingdom that is already His. He will rule over all peoples from shore to shore, and His kingdom will not fade, end, or be passed on to another. Best of all, He will reign with His people.

Revelation 5:9-10 ⁹ *And they sang a new song, saying: "You are worthy to take the scroll, And to open its seals; For You were slain, And have redeemed us to God by Your blood Out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation,* ¹⁰ *And have made us kings and priests to our God; And we shall reign on the earth."*

Whatever the chaos or volatility around us, Christians need never be hopeless or despairing. Our God is in complete control of the parade of history. Believers are children of the King.