

# Faith, Fear, and a Glorious Future

Christ the King Sunday, November 21, 2021  
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania  
Pastor James Haun

## Daniel 7: 1-3, 9-15

*In the first year of King Belshazzar of Babylon, Daniel had a dream and visions of his head as he lay in bed. Then he wrote down the dream: I, Daniel, saw in my vision by night the four winds of heaven stirring up the great sea, and four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another.*

*As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One took his throne, his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, and its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and flowed out from his presence. A thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him. The court sat in judgment, and the books were opened. I watched then because of the noise of the arrogant words that the horn was speaking. And as I watched, the beast was put to death, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire. As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time. As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.*

*As for me, Daniel, my spirit was troubled within me, and the visions of my head terrified me. I approached one of the attendants to ask him the truth concerning all this. So he said that he would disclose to me the interpretation of the matter: "As for these four great beasts, four kings shall arise out of the earth. But the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever—forever and ever."*

*Here the account ends. As for me, Daniel, my thoughts greatly terrified me, and my face turned pale; but I kept the matter in my mind.*

In this seventh chapter of Daniel, we find his glorious vision of the future. First there comes a succession of wicked empires, then a scene of final judgment, and finally the appearance of “The Son of Man,” the Savior who is appointed eternal ruler over all. It is an amazing and uplifting vision, and beyond the vision itself our understanding is greatly enriched by Daniel’s commentary on what he has seen. Daniel’s thoughts are there in plain sight for all to see, yet we commonly overlook his special understanding, and his thoughts on this vision speak to the faith of every believer. Let us consider the vision.

The passage begins with the explanation that Daniel had this great vision in a dream while he was sleeping, but the vision was not only for him. It was for the blessing of all God’s people and so he wrote it down. This grand dream begins with a parade of monsters which emerge from the sea. The Hebrews were not a seafaring people, and they had no affection for the oceans. To them this was a place of turmoil and evil, so something appearing from the sea was sure to be evil and these beasts did not disappoint! This dream is very similar to the dream had by King Nebuchadnezzar which is recorded in chapter 2 as it repeats the story of four empires, one now ending—the Babylonian, the Medo-Persian, the Greek, and finally the Roman Empire—with each being represented by a ferocious beast. The last beast is particularly strong and brutal and has several horns—a horn being a symbol of strength. This last beast, and the horns of this beast, had many eyes and also a voice which spoke loud blasphemies.

The scene changes dramatically as Daniel now sees a courtroom being set up. Many thrones are arranged, but only one is occupied, and that by the Almighty. He is dressed in white, and his hair is a brilliant white and his throne is one of flames, with this fire flowing from His presence. Much as with the vision of Ezekiel we see the throne of God upon wheels. In this era of exile the Lord was teaching them that He was not a minor deity tied to one particular patch of land but was the God of all the earth and that no land was a foreign land. In this courtroom scene we see God served by thousands upon thousands of attendants. The trial is brief and the beasts, still speaking loud insults against God, are judged guilty and destroyed. But this judgment is not quite complete as some of the beasts were allowed to live a while longer, and we are told that their dominion was taken away. As Christians we understand this ambiguous situation, for Christ has defeated Satan, and yet evil still persists in our world. Jesus has assured us of final and eternal victory while the Devil’s time is limited.

Then comes the final scene in which *I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him.* This special person is given all authority and power over all the world and for all eternity. Plainly this is the Christ who is to come, taking on human flesh and triumphing over sin and death for the sake of all humanity. As was true in the dream, this *Son of Man*, as many translations call him, will break the back of evil, and yet evil will persist for a season, foreshadowing the Christ who would triumph over death through the Resurrection, yet whose full reign would not be realized until His coming return in glory.

Daniel is stunned by all he has seen and asks the meaning of the vision. *I approached one of the attendants to ask him the truth concerning all this. So he said that he would disclose to me the interpretation of the matter: "As for these four great beasts, four kings shall arise out of the earth. But the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever—forever and ever."* Now we begin to experience some of Daniel's thoughts on this great vision. As the dream seems to reveal rather plainly, and as the attendant affirms, there shall be mighty and hostile empires to come, but God's people shall be victorious because of The Son of Man, and we know who this Son of Man is! This drama re-enacts the victory of our God and should cause us to rejoice, but Daniel's reaction was far from that of rejoicing! Daniel was shocked and afraid and immediately after seeing it all remarked, *As for me, Daniel, my spirit was troubled within me, and the visions of my head terrified me.* He was troubled and terrified by all that he saw, and this fear was not momentary. At the conclusion of the passage, we find another statement of fear. *Here the account ends. As for me, Daniel, my thoughts greatly terrified me, and my face turned pale; but I kept the matter in my mind.* This fear seems out of place as the vision of the four beasts and the judgment is very much a message of victory. The dream is also a repetition of the vision of Nebuchadnezzar which Daniel had interpreted many years earlier which told of four successive empires and God's victory, and that dream caused him no fear.

Why such fear? Was this because this dream was more graphic and violent than the earlier dream? This one did involve raging wild beasts while the earlier vision was about a tumbling statue. In this latter vision the warning and terror of these empires feels much more real and near.

Perhaps it all had to do with Daniel's advancing age. As a younger man he may have found it easier to stand up for what is right and to see and interpret great visions. Young people are known for their strength and resilience, and this was certainly true of Daniel. And perhaps the wisdom which comes with age lets us know when fear is warranted! I think of my childhood and learning about the Second World War. From a child's perspective this was our parents' great and exciting global crusade against

the evils of fascism and imperialism. It was a thrill to learn of battles, great war machines and men of courage. As I grow older my fascination with the War endures, but I experience it all quite differently. Now it all seems much more frightening, and unlike earlier years I am much more attuned to the massive suffering which it all caused. A mature adult sees things much differently than does a young person, and part of that difference is an appropriate sadness and fear. In my childhood I watched the United States race toward the moon and was fascinated by all the rockets and spacecraft. It was pure excitement to watch a televised blast-off of a Mercury, Gemini or Apollo mission. Many years later I took one of my sons to the movie theater to see Apollo 13. The movie took me back many years, and I realized how differently I viewed the event as an older adult. The most frightening part of the movie for me was not their brush with death in space but was the launch of the rocket into space, which actually went very smoothly. The film showed the huge Saturn V rocket being readied for lift-off and the astronauts boarding the craft. As the moment of launch neared, I found myself gripped by a fear over all the dangers of such an endeavor. I had this urge to stand up and shout toward the movie screen, "You fools! Can't you see this is one big bomb? Run away while you can!" A rocket launch looks very different to an adult than to a youth, and while the child sees only adventure, the adult experiences real fear. Was it the graphic nature of the dream along with a more mature understanding of all the pain and suffering caused by empires rising and falling which made Daniel fear?

The world is a scary place, even for the winners that we are. John 16:33 has long been a treasured verse for many. Our Lord assured us that *In the world you will have troubles, but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world.* Too often we recite that verse hoping that the victory we have in Christ will erase the troubles, but this is not what Jesus is promising. While our victory as believers is sure, trouble will be real and painful in this present age. It is a scary world full of much suffering, and Daniel's fear was real, reasonable, and not to be ignored.

Daniel's witness offers us a lesson for the fearful times in which we live. Our victory is real and sure as the vision predicts and as the New Testament proves. First and foremost, we must stand firm and assured on this hope. And though God's people will triumph in the end, should we not be frightened for the many who perish and suffer through the wars and tragedies which are so much a part of this fallen world? Shouldn't our hearts break for the suffering, even those who have deliberately rejected God?

Victory is real, and so is pain. Many times, I have remarked that we should not be shocked as we read of terrible things in the newspaper. We, of all people, should know that a world in rebellion is going to be this way. But as we see so many people

perishing and hurting, let us be saddened. Let us be heartbroken and terrified as Daniel was. We were never meant to be smug, uncaring spectators of the world's disasters. Perhaps we should spend more time meditating over Jesus' weeping at the sight of Jerusalem and being gripped with sadness over the judgment which they were bringing upon themselves by their rebellion (Luke 19:41). Jesus even cried out in anguish for those who were crucifying him. In John's Revelation we find the apostle receiving a scroll which he was instructed to eat. This was a symbol of God wanting John to fully receive and digest God's message. John reported that this scroll tasted sweet, for God's plan of the rescue of His people is wonderful. Yet this scroll would turn sour in his stomach, for the plan of God also involves much turmoil and trouble, as the wild images of that book make clear. There is no room in Christianity for a triumphalism which fails to mourn for those who suffer—even those who have rejected God's offer of salvation.

As believers in Jesus Christ, we live as a people assured of victory, yet also in a world of troubles and pain. The great war between good and evil goes on and will not conclude until Christ returns in glory. In the meantime, we stand with Daniel and are terrified. We live in a tension, sensing on one side a joyful hope, and on the other a heavy heart for a hurting world. How can we not be heartbroken in the world in which we live?

Our attitudes toward the future often bounce back and forth between deep anxiety and triumphalism, and neither extreme is appropriate. In Daniel we find the very real and genuine faith of a godly man who saw the big picture. He knew and was assured that the last word was the victory of God over evil and an eternal joyous Kingdom, but in this time before that final victory he knew also to care and pray for the hurting and for the pain of this present order. Daniel's fear and terror lasted for a while, but it was not the last word. The last word for Daniel was a joyful trust in our victorious Savior. Onward!