

“Kingdoms in Conflict”

Daniel 7:1-28

There’s a well-known quote; “The only thing we learn from history is that we don’t learn from history.” You may have heard this so often that it’s become a cliché, but it’s still true. Throughout human history we’ve been repeating the same mistakes made by previous generations. At some point, we have to stop and ask, “why is this happening?”

I’m sure there are numerous reasons, but here’s a couple for you to think about. First, we humans are proud. Our tendency is to think we know what’s best, that we’re more intelligent than our predecessors. In our technologically developed world, we sometimes look at our ancestors as unenlightened and ignorant.

If you doubt that, then why is it that so many seemingly intelligent people in the western world embrace socialism as an acceptable model of governance? It is a model of governance that has never worked and has led to the death and destruction of millions of people. Yet the common argument given is, “well, they just didn’t get it right.” Pride says, “it will be different this time because we, the brilliant ones, will be in charge.” Give me a break!

A second reason we don’t learn from history is the mistaken idea that human beings are basically good. Anyone who believes that hasn’t had children. Either that, or they haven’t looked into the mirror long enough! Yes, we humans are made in God’s image and likeness; but that image has been marred by the sin nature we inherited from our first father, Adam. We’re not sinners as a result of our sinful acts. Our sinful acts spring out of our nature as sinners; it’s in us.

Which leads us to another quote, this one attributed to Lord Acton, a 19th century British politician. “Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely.” In other words, as a person’s power increases, their moral sense diminishes. Even a superficial knowledge of human history proves the overwhelming truth of this statement.

One of the unique things about the founding of the United States of America was the understanding of the founders that human beings aren’t basically good. Because of that, they placed a high priority on teaching biblical morality. John Adams said, “Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.” Without the restraints of morality and conscience, societies quickly dissolve into chaos.

The founders also created checks and balances in our governing systems so that no one

person could amass too much power. Today, those checks and balances are being undermined and our nation is in grave danger of being destroyed from within.

Pride and power have motivated most of the conflicts of history. Satan himself was expelled from heaven over these two things. His statement, “I will be like the Most-High,” is clear proof of these twin desires. The vast majority of the wars fought throughout history have their source in pride and the lust for power. Mere mortals have assumed that they are in control of their own destiny and the destinies of millions of others under their control.

As followers of Christ, we believe the Holy Scriptures have the answers to life’s most important questions. From the Scriptures we learn that God has an overarching plan for human history; it’s literally His-story. And interestingly enough, God has given us a window on what those plans are; especially through the prophetic portions of Holy Scripture. While we certainly don’t know or understand all the details, we have the outlines of what God has planned.

The book of Daniel is a very important book in the study of prophecy. Some scholars call it “the key to understanding all the other prophetic books of the Bible.” Conservative scholars, who believe in biblical inspiration and inerrancy, accept the book of Daniel as a complete unit, written during Daniel’s lifetime. Mc’Ilvaine says, “Prophecy is a declaration of future events such as no human wisdom or forecast is sufficient to make. It depends on a knowledge of the innumerable contingencies of human affairs which belongs exclusively to the omniscience of God so that, from its very nature, prophecy must be divine revelation.”

Those who deny the inspiration of Scripture, deny the whole concept of predictive prophecy. They claim that someone writing under Daniel’s name created “a pious sounding forgery in the second century.” We reject that conclusion. Daniel’s writings are accurate historically and have been a long-accepted part of the biblical canon.

In our study in this book we’ve come to chapter seven. The first six chapters of Daniel have been narrative; that is, they have told us the stories of faithful, God-honoring men in the context of a pagan, polytheistic culture. But these stories are not just tales of morality. There is the overarching theme of God’s sovereignty over all humanity, over the world of nature and the elements, and over all the kingdoms of the world.

John MacArthur has stated, “the first six chapters of Daniel are mostly history with a little bit of prediction; the last six chapters are mostly prediction with just a little bit of history.

Mortal men think they’re powerful and can pursue their own agenda for the world. The

kingdoms of men are in direct conflict with the Kingdom of God. Yet time and time again God humbles earthly rulers and uses them to accomplish His sovereign divine will. I've titled our study, "Kingdoms in Conflict."

So, we begin our study of Daniel chapter seven with this assurance; God is completely capable of revealing His future plans to us in the pages of His Word. That reality is reason for much hope, joy, and assurance. To begin, I will read the text, **Daniel 7:1-28**.

The events of Daniel chapter 7 occur chronologically between chapters 4 and 5. Chapter 7 begins the "second half" of the book. Chapter 7 is a summary of what has been previously revealed. The first half provides a general overview of human history, especially the "times of the Gentiles" and the relationship of Israel to world history, while the second half provides much more detailed explanations.

This text gives us a broad overview of kingdoms of the world from Babylon to the return of Christ. In it, we will see the kingdoms of this world in conflict with the Kingdom of Christ. As all Scripture proclaims, the Kingdom of Christ will triumph. So, let's begin our study with looking at...

The Kingdoms of this World

Daniel begins by stating that in the first year of Belshazzar (552/553 BC), he (Daniel) *saw* a dream and had visions while on his bed. It was fitting that this vision of the downfall of world empires should come to the prophet during the reign of the last king of Babylon. This wasn't an ordinary dream. So, he wrote down the substance, or the main facts, of the dream. Since this is a dream, many of the things Daniel "sees" are symbolic of reality. The angel interprets these symbols for Daniel and us.

There are significant contrasts between Nebuchadnezzar's vision in chapter 2 and Daniel's vision here in chapter 7. The vision in chapter 2 is given to a heathen king; the vision in this chapter is given through a godly prophet. The vision in chapter 2 pictures world history from the viewpoint of humanity in a gloriously imposing image - in human form. Daniel's vision "views world history from God's standpoint in its immorality, brutality, and depravity." And, our text gives details that expand our understanding of the image in chapter two.

In his vision, Daniel sees "the four winds of heaven" stirring up the great sea. Some think

this is a reference to the Mediterranean, but that's unlikely because it's not supported by the context. Most likely, this is a universal picture of humanity all over the world. The use of winds in Scripture often speaks of God's sovereign power to accomplish His purposes.

Isaiah 17:12 and 13 speak of both wind and sea. *“Woe to the multitude of many people Who make a noise like the roar of the seas, and to the rushing of nations that make a rushing like the rushing of mighty waters! The nations will rush like the rushing of many waters; But God will rebuke them, and they will flee far away, and be chased like the chaff of the mountains before the wind, Like a rolling thing before the whirlwind.”*

As Daniel was watching the vision unfold, he saw the four winds stirring up the sea, and out of the sea arise four great beasts, very different from one another. In verse 17, the kingdoms represented by the beasts “arise out of the earth. This is another reason why the “great sea” in verse 2 is not likely the Mediterranean. Most Bible students agree that the four beasts represent the same entities that make up the image of Nebuchadnezzar's dream in chapter 2.

The first beast, representing the kingdom of Babylon, looks like a lion, except that it has wings like an eagle. Archeology proves the Babylonians were familiar with winged lions. Lions were a common symbol of power in the ancient world. Eagles were masters of the heavens. Combining those attributes suggested complete mastery.

But, as Daniel continues observing what is happening, the lion has his wings torn off and it stands upright, like a man. This beast was also given the heart of a man. Now I don't think that means the lion got a human heart transplant. It's quite possible this refers to Nebuchadnezzar's experiences in chapter four. Remember, at the height of his power, Nebuchadnezzar “had his wings clipped” by God and was turned into a beast, grazing on all fours. Once he acknowledged God, he was once again given the heart of a man and walked upright as a man.

Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel prophesied at length on the fall of Babylon.

The second beast Daniel saw, representing the Medo-Persian empire, looked like a bear. A bear was the second-most feared animal in Palestine. A bear is powerful and ferocious, but it lacks the speed and grace of a lion. The beast of Revelation 13 which gathers into its power the characteristics of all previous beasts is said to have the feet like a bear.

The bear Daniel saw was apparently lying down. It is described as raised up on one side with three ribs clenched between its teeth. The bear was told to “arise, devour much flesh.” The bear being raised up on one side may typify the one-sided union of the Medes and Persians. Even

though the Persian empire wasn't as old as the Median empire, it was more powerful and eventually absorbed the kingdom of the Medes.

We're not specifically told the reason for the ribs in the bear's mouth. The bear is a symbol of government and military conquest. The ribs most likely represent people subdued by this kingdom. The command to arise and devour much flesh is an accurate picture of the Medo-Persian Empire that lasted for more than 200 years – until the time of Alexander the Great.

Then, Daniel sees a third beast, representing the empire of Greece. This beast looks like a leopard, but a grotesque one. It has four wings on its back and it also has four heads! It was given dominion over the earth for a period of time. Again, the leopard is less majestic than a lion, but it is faster, and much feared as an animal of prey.

The impression of speed is enhanced by the four wings on the back of the leopard. The lightning character of Alexander's conquests was unprecedented in human history. He conquered the whole area from Macedonia to Africa and eastward to India! It's also interesting that the number of wings, four, corresponds with the number of heads of this beast, four. The four heads may symbolize the intelligence of this kingdom, and that this empire would have four governmental divisions, each with its own administration. These descriptions agree precisely with the details of Greece under Alexander the Great.

And finally, Daniel sees a fourth beast. Notice, he doesn't say it looks like a lion, or a bear, or a leopard; just that its terrible to behold. What, or better, who, this beast represents is critical to the correct understanding of the entire book of Daniel and especially chapter seven. Conservative scholars, with few exceptions, identify the fourth beast as Rome. This fourth empire would last, in some form, until the end of human history as we currently know it.

This fourth beast is said to be “dreadful and terrible; exceedingly strong.” It has huge iron teeth for devouring and breaking. It tramples the residue that remains after the breaking. While Alexander was known for the speed of his conquest, the Romans were known for their slower, methodical destruction. They destroyed enemy civilizations and peoples. They killed thousands and sent many thousands more into slavery for the purpose of expanding the empire.

This fourth beast is different from the previous beasts. One distinguishing feature is, it has ten horns! One challenge in the interpretation of this beast is that the feature of 10 horns has no direct connection to Rome; or to Greece, for that matter. And the later discussion in this chapter doesn't clear up the issue. It's possible that this identifying characteristic represents 10 kingdoms

that will exist simultaneously prior to the consummation of Christ's kingdom.

As Daniel's vision unfolds, he sees another horn, a little one, arising from among the ten. This horn is unique; it conquers three of the ten existing horns by plucking them out by the roots. This horn has eyes like a man, and a mouth speaking pompous words. Those human characteristics seem to imply that this horn indeed represents a man. There is also a "little horn" that appears in chapter eight, but it becomes obvious that the little horn in our text is different from the one in chapter eight. We'll talk more about that later.

Now, the scene shifts from the kingdoms of this world to...

The Kingdom of Christ

As Daniel's vision continues, he sees thrones "put in place" and the Ancient of Days seated. The KJV says "the thrones were cast down." Unfortunately, it's easy to reach the wrong conclusion with that wording.

Remember, the Scriptures are not written from a western perspective, but from an eastern one. Even today, if you go to the Middle East or Near East and visit an Arab sheik, or shah, or ayatollah, he will be seated on cushions or pillows. These pillows (plural) would be "thrown down" or "put in place" to indicate his position and his authority. What's most likely being pictured here is the placing of pillows for the Ancient of Days to take His throne.

What we're seeing here is the opening scene of the coronation of Christ the King! In Revelation chapters four and five the apostle John also has a vision of this coronation. So, both Daniel and John had similar visions.

Now look at the amazing descriptions of this scene. *Ancient of Days* is a wonderful title for the Eternal God! His garments are white like snow, signifying His absolute purity. The hair of his head is like pure wool, perhaps indicating His absolute wisdom and justice. His throne is ablaze with glory and His wheels are like a burning fire. The wheels probably imply that the throne and God can go in any direction; that He can do anything He pleases (compare Ezekiel 1:13-21). As His radiant glory issues forth in a stream from His throne an innumerable multitude of heavenly beings surround Him in glorious worship.

And now, Daniel gives us a clue to the time period he's observing in verse ten. "*The court was seated, And the books were opened.*" The court seems to be a heavenly venue in which God renders judgment on rulers and their nations based on their deeds. We have a similar scene in

Revelation chapter 20; “*And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works.*”

In verses eleven and twelve, the little horn is judged. The last ruler of “the times of the Gentiles” is destroyed along with his empire. This scene corresponds with neither the Greek empire nor the Roman Empire. This must be the time of the future final judgment of the nations. This event will be catastrophic in nature and will introduce a radical change in world history.

Leupold, a prominent amillennial commentator writes about this kingdom: “Did Jesus' coming to the earth in the first century destroy the Roman Empire? We could only say yes if we interpreted the destruction of the fourth kingdom in a non-literal way. I choose not to do this because the destruction of the previous kingdoms was literal. It seems that we should also expect that the destruction of the fourth kingdom by the fifth kingdom will be literal. Therefore, the second coming of Christ must be the initiation of the fifth kingdom and the final destruction of the fourth kingdom. If this is so, then the prophetic picture that Daniel saw did not include the present age in which we live. This conclusion has seemed reasonable to some [amillennials] as well as to [premillennials].” End of quote.

As Daniel continues watching the scene shifts back to earth again. He writes “I beheld then, from *the time of the great words* which the horn spoke.” As he listens to the arrogant words of the horn, he sees the beast, represented by the horn, killed; he sees its body destroyed and given to the burning flame. This scene parallels the one in chapter two where “the stone cut out of the mountain, without hands,” comes and smashes to bits the huge image in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream. Both show the cataclysmic, final end of the kingdoms of this world. According to Revelation chapters 19 and 20, this ushers in the thousand-year reign of Christ.

Which brings us to another scene in Daniel’s vision. As he watches he sees “*one like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of Heaven! And they brought Him near before Him. 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.*”

What a glorious picture! First, I firmly believe this figure, one like the Son of Man, is none other than Jesus Christ. Nor do I believe it's mere coincidence that this designation was the one Jesus used most often of Himself. By using this title, Son of Man, He was saying to the nation of Israel, "I am the one of whom Daniel spoke." In Matthew 16:27 and 28 Jesus says, "*For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works. Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.*" There are numerous other occasions where Jesus uses this title, Son of Man, for Himself.

And notice, He comes with the clouds of heaven. Remember God's presence in the Old Testament was often indicated by a cloud. A cloud came between the nation of Israel and the Egyptians during the crossing of the Red Sea. There was a cloud on Mount Sinai at the giving of the Law. There was a cloud over the Tabernacle that indicated God's presence. There was a cloud that overshadowed the three disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration. The disciples who watched Jesus ascend after his resurrection saw him go in a cloud. They were promised by the angelic attendants that He would come again the same way.

And the apostle Paul assures us in First Thessalonians 4: 16 and 17; "*For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus, we shall always be with the Lord.*" Similar statements are made in Revelation 1:7, Matthew 24:30, and others.

A similar coronation scene appears in Revelation chapter 11. Let me read a couple verses from there; this is marvelous! "*Then the seventh angel sounded: And there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!" And the twenty-four elders who sat before God on their thrones fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying: "We give You thanks, O Lord God Almighty, The One who is and who was and who is to come, Because You have taken Your great power and reigned. The nations were angry, and Your wrath has come, And the time of the dead, that they should be judged, And that You should reward Your servants the prophets and the saints, And those who fear Your name, small and great, And should destroy those who destroy the earth."* Then the temple of God was opened in heaven, and the ark of His covenant was seen in His temple. And there were lightnings, noises, thunderings, an earthquake, and great hail."

I want to remind you of something critical to our understanding of prophetic Scriptures like the one we're looking at. As you read the Old Testament prophets you observe that they didn't have a clear view of what we call today "the church age." In other words, and you can see this as you read the prophets, they often didn't separate the details of Christ's first advent with the details of His second advent.

A clear example of this is Isaiah 61:1 and 2, which Jesus read in the synagogue in Nazareth in Luke 4:18 and 19. If you compare what Jesus read with what Isaiah wrote, you see that Jesus stopped reading in the middle of a sentence. Why did He do that? Let's look at this. "*The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me, Because the LORD has anointed Me To preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives, And the opening of the prison to those who are bound; To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD...*" That's where Jesus stopped reading.

But Isaiah goes on; *To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD and the day of vengeance of our God; To comfort all who mourn...*" That's for a future time, not for Christ's first coming; so, Jesus stopped reading right there! In a similar way, Daniel takes human history up to the first coming of Christ and then jumps to the end of the age. I admit this explanation is not without problems; but very importantly, it allows for an accurate and detailed interpretation that is genuinely predictive.

If Daniel chapter seven, that we're studying, ended with verse fourteen, it seems we could understand it with the aid of the book of Revelation and other prophetic texts. But we don't need to rely solely on that method because the remainder of the chapter gives us a divinely inspired interpretation. I so much appreciate the words of John Walvoord on this. He writes, "It should be borne in mind that when a symbol is interpreted, while the symbol is obviously parabolic and figurative, the interpretation should be taken literally. Accordingly, the explanation can be taken as a factual exegesis of the truth involved in the vision." End of quote.

In light of the vision, Daniel says he was grieved in his spirit in the midst of his body and the visions he saw troubled him. In other words, his distress affected his entire being. This is interesting when you recall that, previously, God had given Daniel understanding and skill in all dreams and visions, Daniel 1:17. Now, he is both confused and alarmed! Up to this point, Daniel has been an observer of all that is happening; but now he becomes an active participant. He asks one of the heavenly bystanders for help in understanding the meaning of the things he has seen.

And the angel obliges. Notice the specific language: “*So, he told me and made known to me the interpretation of these things.*” He’s going to clear up Daniel’s confusion.

He tells Daniel that the four beasts represent four kings and their kingdoms that will arise out of the earth. This agrees with King Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of the image in chapter two. We know that those four earthly kingdoms were temporary. I believe that’s why the angel uses the word, “but.” He says, “***But the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom, and possess the kingdom forever, even forever and ever.***” In contrast to the fleeting kingdoms of the world, even though they lasted hundreds of years, the kingdom of Christ will be everlasting!

The angel’s summary answer to Daniel’s question is in verses 17 and 18. But Daniel has additional questions about the fourth beast, or fourth kingdom; the last earthly kingdom.

Daniel rehearses the appearance and characteristics of this fourth beast and his kingdom from verses 7 and 8. He sees this beast as exceedingly dreadful; more aggressive than the previous kingdoms and making war against the saints and being victorious over them. He also adds additional details; the beast had claws of bronze, indicating its fierce strength. Further, the little horn was more prominent, or stronger than the other horns.

This beast is killing the saints – UNTIL – the Ancient of Days came; until judgment was given to the saints of the Most High; and the time came for the saints to possess the kingdom. So, clearly, the kingdom of Christ comes at the end of all the other world kingdoms.

We may wonder why all this attention given to the fourth beast.

The reason for the attention given to the fourth beast is that this “fourth kingdom” will be in existence, in some form, just prior to the coming of Christ’s kingdom. And, as we said earlier, that fourth kingdom clearly is Rome. You may say, “well, Rome passed off the scene of world history a long time ago.” Yes, that’s true. But it’s also true that many of the foundations of western civilization come out of the Roman Empire. Our calendar, many of our laws, and even parts of the English language have their roots in the Roman Empire.

So, according to verse 7 there must be some kind of revival of this fourth empire; Rome. This revived fourth kingdom will be more destructive than the other kingdoms that existed before it. It will devour the whole earth and trample it and break it in pieces.

And our text points out that this revived empire will be represented by ten horns that arise out of it. The final form of the Roman Empire will be a ten-king confederacy occupying substantially the territory once dominated by Rome. In Revelation 13 and following John reveals

a king/kingdom that will die and then be revived again. The characteristics of the kingdom are very similar to what Daniel sees in his vision here in chapter seven.

There have been many attempts to identify this ten-nation confederacy. In the past, some suggested the 10-nation European Common Market. But the Common Market has been superseded by the European Union, or EU, and has 28 member nations.

The text doesn't tell us how this issue is going to be resolved. It just clearly states that there will be 10 rulers/kings/nations in this final world kingdom. After the ten are in power another leader – the little horn - will arise as a successor. He is mentioned in verses 8, 20, and 24. He will be unique, different from the previous leaders and he will displace three of the existing kingdoms. He will speak blasphemous words against God, and he will persecute the saints of God. He also has plans to change long-established laws and practices to suit his goals and so he can be worshipped. He will upset the established moral and religious order. I believe that this little horn is none other than the Antichrist.

John talks about the antichrist in his epistles and in the Revelation. In First John 2:18 he writes *“Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the [final] Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour.”* Where did John get an idea about the Antichrist? He read Daniel's prophecies.

The apostle Paul referenced a similar idea in Second Thessalonians 2:3 and 4. *“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, 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.”* That can only be a reference to the Antichrist.

The angel goes on to inform Daniel that the saints will be given into the hand of this ruthless tyrant for a time, times, and dividing of time. Most conservative scholars, and even some liberal ones, agree that this signifies a period of three and a half years. Daniel restates this length of time differently in chapter twelve as *“...one thousand two hundred and ninety days.”*

I believe this refers to the final period of the Great Tribulation. Jesus had something to say about these end-time events in the Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24. *“For then shall be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved: but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened.”* We'll learn more about this when we get into Daniel chapter nine.

So, there will be a time of tremendous destruction and bloodshed unleashed by the final kingdom, the final ruler, in the final days leading up to the establishing of the everlasting kingdom of the Most High God. John speaks of the same events in Revelation chapter thirteen. But, praise God, we can rejoice in the final outcome!

“But the court shall be seated, and they shall take away his [the Antichrist’s] dominion, to consume and destroy it forever. 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.”

After all that he’d seen and heard, Daniel was greatly troubled; so troubled that it changed his physical appearance. Daniel’s testimony reminds me of the words of the apostle John in Revelation chapter ten; listen. *“Then the voice which I heard from heaven spoke to me again and said, “Go, take the little book which is open in the hand of the angel who stands on the sea and on the earth.” So, I went to the angel and said to him, “Give me the little book.” And he said to me, “Take and eat it; and it will make your stomach bitter, but it will be as sweet as honey in your mouth.” Then I took the little book out of the angel’s hand and ate it, and it was as sweet as honey in my mouth. But when I had eaten it, my stomach became bitter.”*

Yes, it’s wonderful to think about the coming kingdom of Christ; but it is sobering to realize how many people will not be ready for it. All who reject His invitation will suffer eternal torment, separated from the glorious presence of the loving, Heavenly Father.

Today, you and I still have the privilege of choosing which kingdom we will embrace; the kingdoms of this world, or the kingdom of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. What will your choice be?