

The Everlasting Kingdom

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Date: 25 April 2021

Preacher: Jonathan de Groot

[0 : 0 0] Well, I wonder if you can remember at school being involved in a school musical, a play, a show or a performance. Whenever the drama teacher came and was looking for volunteers, I always volunteered willingly.

I was really enthusiastic. She was less so about having my help in any school performance. And I never wanted a lead role. I just wanted maybe a few lines, a piece of the action.

That was all. Not too much to ask for. But it never happened. I did always get a role, though, of one sort or another. And it was never a role that was in front of the curtain.

It was always a role that was behind the curtain on the stage. And whether it was moving the set between scenes or it was switching on and off the lights or it was opening and closing the curtains, that was my role. Never on stage, always behind stage.

And our teacher assured us, and I believed her, that this was also a significant part in the school performance. And she was right, of course, because while all the cast are on stage, the backstage crew direct the performance.

[1 : 1 3] And the success of the show is really dependent on what those who are behind the stage are doing by way of direction on the stage. It is what makes the show a success or a failure, as we discovered when Keith tripped over a cable and it all went dark.

Anyway, what we see as we come to this second half of the book of Daniel in the Old Testament is where real power lies. The curtain, as it were, is drawn back so that we can see what is going on behind the stage of world history.

We catch sight of the throne room of the universe to see who really is in control of this universe. And so as you listen to that reading from Daniel chapter 7, you will notice that this is a different kind of literature.

And it's called apocalyptic. And the purpose of apocalyptic literature is to make things clear. It is to reveal. And so we're being taken here in this chapter behind the scenes with a series of visions.

And in chapter 7 to 12 of Daniel, there are four visions. And so we're going to look at the first vision today in Daniel chapter 7. And it's all very visual.

[2 : 3 3] It's like a 4D multimedia high definition presentation that Daniel gets sight of. And that's why we find Daniel repeatedly saying, either I saw or I looked or I watched.

So just look down at your Bible there. Verse 2, I looked. Verse 4, I watched. Verse 6, I looked. Verse 7, I looked. Verse 9, I looked.

Verse 11, I continued to watch. Then I kept looking. Verse 13, I looked. Then verse 21, as I watched. So Daniel is looking.

It's a vision. And so it's visual. And what Daniel saw was disturbing. We see that in verse 15. And it was also troubling. We see that in verse 28.

And Daniel struggled to make sense of it all. And so it's no surprise if we struggle to make sense of it. But while some of the details can be slightly confusing, the big picture of the vision is clear.

[3 : 39] Because the message of the book of Daniel is God rules. And so Daniel 7 shows us God's rule by giving us this panoramic view of world history.

And if we get that, it will help us fit all the pieces together. Daniel chapter 7, along with Daniel chapter 2, are really parallel chapters in the book.

Because they both reveal how all the kingdoms of this world will be replaced by the everlasting kingdom of God. And that's what this is a vision of.

So Daniel chapter 7, if you like, is really a backstage pass. And it's allowing us to see God's rule of the world. And so if you're here listening, whatever you stand in relation to God, whether you would call yourself a believer or an unbeliever, what we get here is a vision that explains world history to us.

And therefore it explains our place within it. And so three points this afternoon just to help us think it through. The first is, there's a vision of the kingdoms of this world.

[4 : 50] In verse 1 to 8. And then the explanation or interpretation. Secondly, there's a vision of the kingdom of God. Verse 9 to 18. And then an interpretation. And then thirdly, it's a vision to help us live.

So a vision of the kingdoms of this world. A vision of the kingdom of God. And a vision to help us live. So first of all, a vision of the kingdoms of this world.

So this beastly vision, there in verse 2 to 8, is interpreted as the kingdoms of this world. There in verse 16 to 17. So the vision begins with the four winds of heaven churning up these great four beasts from the sea.

And when you read in the Bible about the sea, the sea is a symbol of disorder, of chaos, and of havoc, of rebellion against God. And so the beasts come, and they come to wreak havoc.

And they're menacing and terrifying creatures. And so the first, verse 4, was like a lion with the wings of an eagle and the feet and mind of a human.

[5 : 56] The second, verse 5, was like a bear with three ribs between its teeth, indicating, suggesting it devours people. The third, verse 6, was like a leopard with the wings of a bird.

It had four heads, and it had authority to rule. And so they're all fierce, and they're all fast, and they're all deadly. And then there's a fourth beast, who's slightly different in its appearance.

And Daniel says, verse 7, It was terrifying and frightening and very powerful. It had large iron teeth. It crushed and devoured its victims and trampled underfoot whatever was left.

It was different from all the former beasts. And it had ten horns. And so this beast is clearly on a different level. And it is totally destructive.

And it's striking because it has ten horns. But from among them, a little horn came up and uprooted three of the other horns.

[6 : 57] And the little horn looked more human-like. And so there's a progression in these beasts that they look more and more human as the vision goes through them.

So verse 8, Daniel said, Okay, so that is the first part of the vision.

And it's a gruesome vision of these four beasts. And then it changes. And then we get the central focus of the whole vision there in verse 9 to 14.

And we'll come to that central focus in a moment. But let's get to the interpretation of the beasts, which comes later in the chapter, verse 15 to 17. So these four beasts represent human powers, human kingdoms, human governments.

Governments in rebellion and in opposition to God. So they're the kingdoms of this world. And in the vision, they go from bad to worse. Now, the exact interpretation of these beasts is debated.

[8 : 24] But given the parallels with Daniel chapter 2, it's thought that they correspond to the four kingdoms and Nebuchadnezzar's dream of this giant statue.

So it would be Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. But Daniel isn't told specifically. And the vision seems to be deliberately vague.

And so we're probably meant to take it that the beasts, while they are identifiable with human kingdoms, they're actually representative of all human kingdoms.

All kingdoms of this world right up to the end of time. And so what we should see here is really the big picture. And not miss the wood for the trees.

Because when we read the story of the Bible from Genesis to the first book to Revelation, the last book, what we see is a clash of kingdoms from beginning to end. It's a conflict.

[9 : 23] And it rages right from the very creation to the end of time as we know it. And it's a clash between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world that are in opposition to God.

In fact, in the last book of the Bible, in Revelation chapter 13, we're told of a beast that comes out of the sea with ten horns and seven heads. And if you look at Revelation 13, verse 1 and 2, it resembled a leopard.

It had the feet of a bear and a mouth like a lion. And so it sounds like a combination of the beasts that we find here in Daniel chapter 7. And so while these beasts can refer to specific times, the point is that they represent the kingdoms of this world.

They represent human powers and human authorities that stand against God. And so this vision reveals how the kingdoms of this world will come and they will go and they will wreak havoc until the end of the world as we know it.

And it's probably no coincidence that this world's kingdoms are still actually represented by fierce beasts. And so you get the American eagle or the Chinese dragon or the Russian bear or even the British lion.

[10 : 46] Because there is always a lust for power and might and strength in every human government. And we just need to look back at history or look at the world today to see just how bestial and how evil the kingdoms of this world can be.

Just think of Hitler and Nazi Germany or Stalin and his evil regime in the Soviet Union. Pol Pot with the Khmer Rouge and the Cambodian genocide.

Idi Amin's evil rule in Uganda. Saddam Hussein's brutality in Iraq or Kim Jong-un's dictatorship in North Korea.

Evil in our world shows no signs of abating as human authorities come and they cause terrible suffering. And so all over the world at the hands of these human powers, God's people suffer and die in this great clash of kingdoms that has lasted the length of time.

But what captures Daniel's attention here is the fourth beast and this little horn coming out of its head. So verse 19 and 20, see what he says.

[12 : 01] Then I wanted to know the meaning of the fourth beast, which was different from all the others and most terrifying with its iron teeth and bronze claws.

The beast that crushed and devoured its victims and trampled underfoot whatever was left. I also wanted to know about the ten horns on its head and about the other horn that came up before which three of them fell.

The horn that looked more imposing than the others and that had eyes and a mouth that spoke boastfully. So this little horn that he sees in the vision is particularly powerful and it fights against the holy people, that is God's people or the saints, and it defeats them.

So who or what is this little horn? Well, some identify it with the ruler Antiochus Epiphanes. We'll come back to him next week in chapter 8, so don't worry about him just now.

There are similarities with his reign to what we read here, but the little horn doesn't refer exclusively to him. Because in the interpretation, the little horn appears at the end of time, when God's people will eventually possess his everlasting kingdom.

[13 : 16] And that's there in verse 22 to 26. And so the vision is revealing the future. Not just the future for Daniel, but also the future for us.

And it's speaking of the end when the beast with the little horn is especially violent towards God's people. And so the New Testament helps us understand the identity of this little horn.

And so the one Daniel calls the little horn fits with the one Paul calls the man of lawlessness. In his second letter to the Thessalonians, the man of lawlessness is the one who will oppose God and exalt himself.

And John calls him the Antichrist in 1 John chapter 2. The one who is coming and who indeed has come. And so this fourth beast, symbolizing the kingdoms of this world, prowls across the stage of world history until the end when the little horn is manifest as Antichrist.

And so Daniel's vision here is shocking, isn't it? And we should be disturbed like Daniel when we read it and when we see it.

[14 : 32] Because this vision reveals the reality of beastly opposition to God and to God's people. And it comes from the kingdoms of this world and it will keep coming until the very end when Jesus returns.

And so the message is if you are one of God's people, if you've ever been one of God's people throughout the history of the world, then expect suffering.

You must expect to suffer. And don't be surprised when suffering comes. But thankfully, that is only half of Daniel's vision.

Because we don't just need to see the evil power of the kingdoms of this world. We need to see something else. We also need to see the even more powerful kingdom of God that will replace all the kingdoms of this world.

And so that takes us to our second point. The first is it's a vision of the kingdoms of this world. The second is it's a vision of the kingdom of God. There in verse 9 to 18.

[15 : 40] And the focus is on verse 9 to 14 of chapter 7. This is the heart. This is the heart. Not just of Daniel's vision. But this is the heart of the book of Daniel.

Because what we see here is the curtain, the stage curtain of world history opened up or drawn back. And we catch sight of the throne room of the universe.

Where God is directing and ruling and judging. And it's a great sight for Daniel to see. And so while the kingdoms of this world strut their stuff on the stage of human history, what we're seeing is the reality behind the scenes.

Is that God is building his everlasting kingdom. And nothing and no one, no authority, no power, however strong, can stand in his way.

And so Daniel gets to see the reality of the rule of God. And his attention is drawn to these two awesome figures. The Ancient of Days and one like a son of man.

[16 : 47] So first of all, the Ancient of Days, verse 9 and 10. Let me read. As I looked, thrones were set in place and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow.

The hair of his head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire and its wheels were all ablaze. A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him.

Thousands upon thousands attended him. Ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court was seated and the books were opened.

Now that is a sharp contrast between the human chaos earlier, symbolized in the beasts, and this heavenly calm.

And Daniel watched as the thrones were set in place in this heavenly courtroom. And the Ancient of Days, God himself, takes his seat on his throne for judgment with ultimate power and ultimate authority.

[17 : 50] And we see this in the description, verse 9. His clothing was as white as snow. The hair of his head was white like wool. Indicating his righteousness and his blazing purity.

And then his throne was flaming with fire and its wheels were all ablaze. Indicating his fiery judgment and fearsome power to destroy his enemies.

And so the Ancient of Days, God is the ultimate judge. And the great thing is he has the ultimate power to enforce his judgments. And so the books were opened, indicating that judgment was about to begin in this vision.

And so we see that in verse 11 to 12. Then I continued to watch because of the boastful words the horn was speaking. I kept looking until the beast was slain and its body destroyed and thrown into the blazing fire.

The other beasts had been stripped of their authority but were allowed to live for a period of time. So despite the Ancient of Days, seated on his throne, here's the little horn.

[19 : 03] And it has the sheer audacity to continue boasting. And it's like a pantomime villain that won't shut up. Oblivious to what is going on behind it.

But it is swiftly taken out by the Ancient of Days. There's no great battle scene. This isn't Godzilla versus Kong. This is far more like Godzilla versus Paddington Bear.

In other words, there is no contest. Because the beast is easily killed, its body destroyed, and it's thrown into the blazing fire. Game over.

God annihilates his opposition, the fiercest opposition, in one fell swoop. And in his judgment, God strips all the other beasts of their authority.

But he does still allow them to continue for a season. And so this vision helps Daniel see beyond the chaos of this world.

[20 : 05] Because this world is full of chaos, let's be honest. And it's caused by the kingdoms of this world and their opposition to God. And so we see that power doesn't reside in Babylon or Persia or Greece or Rome.

Or in any succeeding kingdom. Because God, the Ancient of Days, is seated on his throne. And he rules and he judges.

And like Daniel, perhaps we need to be reminded of this too. Because while kingdoms of this world do continue to boast of their power and their might, and why they don't need God, the real seats of power aren't in Washington, Beijing, Mussels.

Not Mussels, Brussels. What do you get if you cross Moscow and Brussels? Mussels. So the seats of power aren't in Moscow or Brussels or London or even Edinburgh.

Holy Root. The true seat of power is in the heavenly court. In the throne room of God where the Ancient of Days is seated.

[21 : 19] But there's another figure in this vision. Verse 13 and 14. In my vision at night I looked and there before me was one like a son of man.

Coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power. All nations and peoples of every language worshipped him.

His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away. And his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed. So he's one like a son of man, which means he's a human figure.

But he's also more than that. Because he comes with the clouds of heaven, indicating that he is divine. So the beasts come out of the sea.

But he comes, this one like a son of man, from outside of this world. And yet he's part of it too. And he's identified with the Ancient of Days.

[22 : 17] But he's different too. And so who is he? Well this one like a son of man is Jesus Christ. Son of man is the title that Jesus uses most often in the Gospels to refer to himself.

And so in calling himself the son of man, Jesus was claiming to be this powerful figure that we see in this vision in Daniel chapter 7. So Daniel's son of man is the God man, Jesus Christ.

And in this vision he's given authority, glory and sovereign power forever. And so after the resurrection of Jesus he said, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

And then later Jesus was taken up in the clouds, remember, to the throne of God in his ascension. And that's why this part of Daniel's vision, verse 13 and 14, refers to the ascension of Jesus.

Because he ascended from earth to heaven and was given the kingdom. And that's where Jesus is right now. Where is Jesus today? He is ruling as king.

[23 : 29] And one day he will return and he will destroy all evil powers and bring in this everlasting kingdom that will never be destroyed.

And so what Daniel's vision does here is it opens up the whole of human history for us. And it points us to the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ.

Because the death and resurrection of Jesus, followed by his ascension to heaven, has left us waiting in this in-between time for Jesus' return.

And when he does return, he will bring this everlasting kingdom. And so this vision of Daniel's is a vision that all people in every age need to see.

We need to look behind the curtain to the throne room of the universe where the Ancient of Days brings judgment and the Son of Man is given everlasting dominion.

[24 : 30] And so we need to keep sight of that. So that we're not blinkered and we only see what happens in this world. Or what is on the news. Or what we read on the internet.

That's on the surface. But there is a deeper reality to what is going on in the world stage. And we get sight of that.

We catch a glimpse here in Daniel. And we need to remember that because it's showing us that Jesus is king. He reigns.

He rules. And we need to know it, especially because the kingdoms of this world do still continue to flex their muscles, to exercise their authority and fight against the kingdom of God.

But there is only one winner. That's what this vision is telling us. The result is already in. God's everlasting kingdom will triumph. And this is just as real as the world that we're living in today on the 25th of April 2021 at 4.50pm.

[25 : 40] And so whether you're a Christian believer or an unbeliever or just not sure what you believe, this is the true perspective on reality.

And it helps us make sense of everything else in this world, including our lives. And so let's move on.

Two things we've seen. A vision of the kingdoms of this world. A vision of the kingdom of God. Thirdly, let's see how this is a vision to help us live. Daniel's vision helps us live by pulling back the curtain, by opening it up and showing us that God rules and Jesus is king.

So through the death and resurrection of Jesus, Jesus has won the victory over the power of evil. And then after his resurrection, Jesus ascended into heaven.

And that is where he now reigns as king. And then one day Jesus will return. The final judgment will come. And then the everlasting kingdom will be fully established and rolled out for all eternity.

[26 : 50] And so it's only when we see what Jesus has done when he was on this earth and what Jesus will do in the future, only when we see that will we know how to live.

Because the vision shows us what life will be like for God's people. That's you if you're a Christian. But it also shows us what life will be like for all those who continue to oppose God.

And so we see two things. And the first is God's people are secure, but will suffer. God's people are secure, but will suffer.

That's the application for God's people, whether reading it for the first time as Daniel's original readers throughout history and still today. Because in the interpretation of the vision, there's so much emphasis on God's people possessing the kingdom.

So they're safe and secure, but whilst they will possess the kingdom, there will be suffering on the way to that kingdom. So verse 18 tells us, But the holy people of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it forever.

[28 : 04] Yes, forever and ever. So the holy people of the Most High or the saints, in some translations, it refers to those who believe in God like Daniel, like the faithful Israelites or like Christians today, or all God's people down through the ages.

So we read in verse 27, Then the sovereignty, power and greatness of all the kingdoms under heaven will be handed over to the holy people of the Most High.

His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship and obey him. So that's the safety and security part, if you're one of God's people.

But we're still reminded that God's people will suffer. So verse 21 and 22, As I watched, this horn was waging war against the holy people and defeating them, until the Ancient of Days came and pronounced judgment in favour of the holy people of the Most High.

And the time came when they possessed the kingdom. Then again, verse 25, So did you hear that?

[29 : 26] In this clash of kingdoms, war is being waged against God's people. And so if we believe in God and if we follow Jesus Christ, we're in this war.

Human powers and human authorities will always be hostile towards God's people. The spirit of the Antichrist will prevail in this world against God's people until the final judgment of God falls.

And so just look at Daniel's reaction at the end in verse 28. This is the end of the matter. I, Daniel, was deeply troubled by my thoughts, and my face turned pale, but I kept the matter to myself.

And so if we don't feel the emotion of this vision that Daniel felt, then we've missed the point. Because the vision has an evident application to all Christians throughout time who have ever suffered for following Jesus.

And I know we don't always hear about it, but Christians are persecuted constantly throughout this world by tyrannical human governments who cause much harm to God's people.

[30 : 42] And even if we don't live in those places, if you call yourself a Christian in our society today, then you're still caught up in this war.

The war against sin and the forces of evil always rages. And so there's always a battle going on. And that's why we will experience opposition as we seek to follow Jesus Christ.

The kingdoms of this world are always going to be in conflict with the kingdom of God, even though the kingdom of God has won. And so the values of the kingdoms of this world will always be in opposition to the way that God calls his people to live in this world.

And that's why every morning that we wake up, we enter into the battle zone. It is tough. And we're forced to choose every day where our allegiance lies.

Are we going to submit to the kingdoms of this world in their opposition to God? Or are we going to submit to the kingdom of God? Are we a citizen of it?

[31 : 50] And do we live for it? Is that where our allegiance lies? And that's why we need to see the vision at the heart of the book of Daniel. Seeing what lies behind human history.

And seeing that God's people will suffer. But because the victory is certain and it is coming, it should steady us and it should encourage us to keep living for him.

To keep pressing on. To keep following Jesus Christ. Because we are ultimately secure. So God's people are secure but will suffer.

And then secondly, all opposition to God will be judged. That's what we see here. So Daniel's vision points to the certainty of judgment to come. By giving us this sight of the throne room of the universe.

Where God, the ancient of days, will judge the kingdoms of this world. And he'll bring them to an end. And he will replace them with his own everlasting kingdom where Jesus is king.

[32 : 51] And so even if it seems as if God is absent from the stage of world history, the reality is that God is on his throne of judgment.

And so we can be assured that his blazing judgment will consume all evil and sin and wickedness in this world.

And that's why we shouldn't be naive by having some kind of utopian view of the world with great hopes for human progress. Like Huxley's brave new world.

No, this world is fallen and it's in rebellion against God. And so nothing less than the judgment of God can purge it of all evil. And so it is a great thing that the kingdoms of this world will make way for the perfect kingdom of God.

And isn't that the kind of world that we all really want? And we are promised here that it is coming because God rules and God judges. Now, of course, people laugh at the idea that there is a God.

[33 : 59] Who judges all people. And we are accountable to him. Nobody really wants to take that seriously. And yet we demand justice in our human courts.

Just think of the reaction outside the court this week when Derek Chauvin was found guilty of all charges related to George Floyd's death. And so how much more then do we need justice from the ultimate judge in the supreme court of the universe?

We need it and we want it. And it is coming. Because life is actually unbearable with no prospect of judgment. And so God rules.

And there is one kingdom. And it is an everlasting kingdom. And it is only those who submit to Jesus as king in this life who are part of that everlasting kingdom.

And so it is foolish to oppose God in this life because we must face his fiery judgment. Remember the little horn boasting away before it was destroyed.

[35 : 11] Well, that's a warning. Not to proudly and arrogantly live as if God wasn't there. Boasting away as if we didn't need him. And so if we are one of God's people with Jesus as our king, then we belong to God's kingdom now.

And we will inherit it in the future. Jesus endured the cross and the fiery judgment of God in our place for our sins so that we could possess this kingdom forever.

And that's the motivation we need to keep going whatever happens in this world.