

Inception

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[0 : 0 0] I think there's a lot these days about future thinking. I've seen quite a few adverts recently, posters, for clairvoyance, people who will promise you that they can look into the future, and they will tell you what's going to happen to you.

And I think a lot of people are interested in that kind of thing. There's a lot of future thinking at the moment as well, because there's an election coming up, so political parties are trying to say, here's what we're going to do, trust in us and vote for us in the here and now.

But of course it's very difficult, isn't it, to predict exactly what's going to happen, and what they say is what they're going to be able to deliver. Generally speaking, I don't know how conscious you are of thinking ahead.

Do you worry about the future? Is it something that is very pressing for you right now, because of an obvious worry in your life? Sometimes we're not even conscious of it, and we live with a vague sense of anticipation or unease, because we know that things in the future that are coming are not things that we want to have to deal with.

But it's inevitable, isn't it? It's inevitable that this is just a fact of our experience and what we go through in life. The problem is that we just can't be certain about the future.

[1 : 1 9] You know, you can't say today that the plans that you have will work out. None of us can say, the Bible teaches us this, what a day or an hour will hold for us.

It's just a fact of life. Sometimes it's a fact of life that we try and look away from. And understandably so, it can be frightening. This chapter, as I said, is huge, isn't it, in scope, the amount of detail, the amount of things it covers.

But it is a wonderful chapter, and it's a chapter that encourages us to future thinking. It's a chapter about vision. It's a vision that was given to a particular person, Daniel, at a particular time, for a particular people, but that doesn't mean it's not for you.

It's a chapter that speaks to every single one of us this morning. It's a really important chapter. And sometimes people will say, you know, when you get to the second half of Daniel, the first half is accessible, it's about stories.

We know the stories well. When you get to the second half, oh, we don't really know that because it's a bit strange. And you kind of go the other way and you skip to the Gospels or something like that and you're daily reading.

[2 : 3 1] Please don't think like that, because this chapter, though on the surface, maybe seems difficult. Like I said, it's, in many ways, the heart of the book, and it speaks really clearly when we spend a bit of time in it to you and to me.

So it's an important chapter about vision, about the future that touches on our lives today. So I just want to look at three ways in which that happens.

Like I said, there's so much in the chapter, I can't cover all of it by any means, but I want to look at the initial vision that he has and then the heavenly vision and then the vision as it touches on our lives today.

So first of all, the initial vision that Daniel sees. Daniel, verses one to eight, primarily, although he kind of comes back to it and we kind of go in and out of this vision of these strange, incredible, terrifying beasts.

This initial vision is of these four creatures, you'd call them. The first three are more obviously describing animals.

[3 : 36] The last one is almost uncategorizable, that's a word. And just what on earth is going on in this first section? You may be wondering what's the purpose of this?

What's the message of this? The chapter itself, as it goes through, does kind of explain itself. We get revelation as we go through the chapter about what some of these symbols mean.

And remember that this is a type of writing in the Bible, particularly here in Daniel, that is symbolic. So you don't take everything here as literal. Be careful when you read a passage like this, but do read it.

Some people will kind of like, I say, shy away and decide, well, this isn't for me, it's too confusing, it's too complicated. Sometimes it helps just to think through first of all, okay, well, this is a type of writing that I need to be a bit more careful with.

But the vision, the picture language, the symbols point towards a very real human history. And that's what it's describing. That's what's kind of elucidated a little bit later on in the chapter, isn't it?

[4 : 42] And it's nothing new in some senses, because actually, many people would say that the four animals, creatures that are spoken of here, correspond to four great periods of world history and the empires, great world powers that they represent.

But actually, if you think about it, that takes us back to Daniel chapter two, doesn't it, when he sees the vision of the statue, the dream that Nebuchadnezzar has. And Daniel has to go and interpret for him the fact that this great vision that he sees of this huge statue made up of four component parts correspond to four world empires, four world powers.

So it's really a vision, a picture, God showing this insight into world history. And of course, you know, as he's able to do that, that teaches us that God knows the end from the beginning.

He's the God who's over world history. Now, that vision has a very particular relevance to Nebuchadnezzar because his kingdom, his power, is the first one mentioned there. I don't want to spend a lot of time going into the exact details of everything in this chapter, as I've said, there just isn't time.

It's also, I think we can take some principles from this, but sometimes I think we can look for two specific detail who exactly is being spoken of here at what particular point in world history.

[6 : 11] There's more you could read up about that. But just to say that this describes, in these visions of the different beasts, four different world powers.

Now, the point about this particular description is, as I said, that it describes it in terms of these animal qualities. Now, the reason it does that, I think, is because we get a distinct sense as we read through it of the ferocity of these creatures.

These aren't soft, cuddly animals that are being described here, are they? We have the first one, like a lion with the wings of an eagle. The second one, like a bear.

It has this terrible description of, it has three ribs in its mouth between its teeth. These are violent descriptions. We have the third one, like a leopard on its back.

It had wings, like those of a bird, perhaps signifying the speed at which it moved, the way in which the kingdom was able to rapidly expand. Explanations like this can be taken out.

[7 : 21] And the fourth one, terrifying and frightening and very powerful in verse seven, isn't kind of aligned to just one animal, is it? We get this amazing description.

It was just described as a beast, large iron teeth. It crushed and devoured its victims and trampled underfoot whatever was left. So this is speaking about a very powerful, rapidly expanding, cruel empire.

Many people would link this to the Roman Empire. And all of the devastation and the power which it inflicted upon many different areas of the world. Now there have been many world empires, many terrible world empires since, of course.

And that maybe is suggested by what is described in the verses following this main section, where it talks about these different horns that come out of the first beast.

Now again, you're thinking, earth horns, what's it talking about? But often in a passage like this, when it refers to horns, it's simply a kind of symbol of a power, of a power of a particular person or a particular group and all that they're able to do.

[8 : 37] And so we get this general picture of these empires that unfold across the course of world history. And then particularly this last horn that comes, you see in verse 8 there.

And there is a particular emphasis in this chapter on this figure that emerges. Verse 8, well I was thinking about the horns there before me was another horn, a little one, which came up among them.

Three of the first horns were uprooted before it. This horn had eyes like the eyes of a man and the mouth that spoke boastfully.

So this is one that we're going to come back to that particularly troubles Daniel and it goes on to have particular significance in the rest of the chapter. Like I said, we'll come back to it.

But again, if you think about this, you have this image of this horn or this figure of power. The fact that it's then described in human terms because it has eyes and it has a mouth that spoke boastfully leads us to think that this might be pointing forward to a particular figure of power, a particular person of great influence.

[9 : 47] And as we get further on, I think into like verse 25, it demonstrates the particular direction that this figure will take and it's focused very much against God and against his people.

And we do get the sense as the chapter goes on of the unfolding power of these nations, of these empires and of the vehemence of their antagonism towards God and towards his people.

So it's a big picture. It's one that you need to think about, but don't be completely put off from thinking about it. It's a picture that describes great powerful empires.

But remember always, and this is something we'll look at in just a minute, that this is all underneath the vision that God is giving to Daniel. So this isn't something, this isn't vaguely speculative.

This is the Lord showing this vision to Daniel, demonstrating his awareness, his control and his oversight over all of these things.

[10 : 56] And so just in looking at that very briefly to note, to apply to ourselves now, that we shouldn't be surprised when the world looks like it's going pear-shaped.

When we sometimes look towards the heavens and say, Lord, what is going on? When we think even that the world is out of control, when we see man's inhumanity to man, terrible regimes, terrible cruelty, terrible brutality, we shouldn't be surprised by that.

The Bible is realistic and it points forward to this. It doesn't welcome it, but it's a realistic outcome, you could say, of the human condition.

What is going on here as these various power bases supplant one another, is the human struggle to be the pinnacle, isn't it, to be preeminent.

As rulers and kings, you read throughout the history of the Old Testament, various kings come after one another, and that's been the case ever since. The dawn of time in many ways, that power corrupts, power makes men and women do terrible things to each other, and often commit acts of spectacular brutality for the sake of gaining further power.

[12 : 27] So this is a realistic and in some ways quite a distressing picture, that the initial part of the vision portrays to us. But there's another vision, or there's another aspect to the vision, and you have to see this, and you have to remember this as you think about world history, and as you think about what is happening in the here and now, perhaps when you look across the world and you see chaos and the threat of war and instability, and we think it's all just going to fall apart, you have to remember this.

Because the perspective shifts, the second phase as it were, is this wonderful vision we get into the heavenly realm.

So look at verse 9. Daniel says, as I looked, thrones were set in place. What we have, first of all, described here is the ancient of days.

We have this wonderful description of the Lord of hosts of God surrounded by his glory and his power, taking his place over all the powers and the dominions of the world.

The Lord of hosts says in verse 90, ancient of days took his seat. And we, in this short vision here, we get some insight into the character, the nature of God.

[13 : 52] So this morning are you wondering what God is like? This passage helps us. Do you find it easy to forget what God is like when you're surrounded by worry, by all the chaos of the world, and maybe all your fears for the future?

Well, remind yourself again in a passage like this, because look at what it says about God. It says he's pure and perfect, describes the references to him as being white, his perfection, his clothing was as white as snow, the hair of his head was white like wool.

It speaks of his power and his majesty. Often when you get descriptions in the Old Testament of the power and the presence of God, you get associated with fire.

You remember when Moses saw the presence of the Lord, when he did the burning bush, which was in some miraculous way, burning this bush but not consuming it because God was there. There are other descriptions that we could go to, but we get that reference here.

His throne was flaming with fire and its wheels were all ablaze. Amazing. Again, symbolic language, but describing, drawing us towards what God is like in all his awesomeness and his purity and his power.

[15 : 10] It's important for us to see that, isn't it? It's important for us to see this picture of the ancient of days, the eternal one, sitting on his throne. We've seen his purity and his power, but also he's worshiped.

See that there in verse 10 after it's described, the river of fire flowing from before him. It says thousands upon thousands attended him. Ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him.

Does that remind you of anywhere else? If you were to go to Revelation chapter 7, you would get a similar picture in many ways. A vision of the great multitude before the throne of God, worshipping him, gladly in his presence.

So there is this spectacular vision of the majesty and the power of God, but crucially, in the face of these great empires, see what it says at the end of this little section, the last couple of lines of verse 10.

It says the court was seated and the books were opened. So that says that God is on the throne and that God is the judge and that God is the one who records all of history and who knows all that has happened and who presides over it and who will one day settle things, who will one day judge the world and all the nations of the world and all the people of all the nations of the world.

[16 : 41] The court is seated and there's another reference to that later in the chapter which we'll come back to. The court is seated. This is not all these things that have been described to Daniel in the first part of the vision. This is not out of God's control, not out of his knowledge.

It's something that is he is over. Now that should give us peace. That should give us gladness. It should also give us a sense of awe because it means then that there's no way that we can kind of either elude God's judgment.

It means that we can't set ourselves up against God's judgment. We can't decide to opt out of being before this great figure, the ancient of days. You don't get to say, I'll just not bother with that.

I don't like the sound of that, not for me. What the Bible says is that you... This is your God. This is the God of the whole earth and you will, as all nations will, you will stand before him.

Now that's good news if you know him, if you're a Christian. You need to make sure that you're one of his. That's the immediate reference for us here.

[17 : 56] We have the ancient of days, but we also have another description. We have this description in a few verses down of another figure, another person who's described here.

You see that in verse 13. So again, the vision moves on. The vision moves on and Daniel sees another person. Verse 13, In my vision at night, I looked in there before me, was one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven.

Who's this? He approached the ancient of days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power. All peoples, nations and men 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. That's a pretty majestic description, isn't it?

This phrase, one like a son of man, I mean it literally just means a person, a human. One like a son of man. Lots of people, when they read this, the way they explain it is just to say, this is somebody almost like a representative of humanity.

[19 : 12] Somebody who stands for those who will, as it goes on to explain, inherit the world, the saints. This is like a representative figure.

I'm not so sure about that. I think what this does is it shows us this picture of one, an amazing description of one who is given this great responsibility.

The focus very much in this passage is on the role of the person. It doesn't spell out for us exactly who this person is. But the role of this person and the fact that Jesus Christ, when he speaks in the New Testament, when he speaks primarily of himself, or speaks of himself often as the son of man, Jesus takes that name and he takes the actions of what this person does and applies it to himself.

Then this becomes a wonderful picture for us, pointing us forward out of the pages of Daniel, further into the future and all that God has in store and all that God promises to do, and to the person of Jesus and how he would be the one who fulfills the position of the Redeemer, of the one who comes to usher in the new kingdom as the one who comes to rule over that kingdom.

It's a wonderful picture that points us towards Jesus. In Matthew chapter 8, he refers to himself, just to quote a couple of verses, he says to himself, the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.

[20 : 45] There are quite a few references where he speaks of himself as the Son of Man. But there's also, and I just want to mention this, tying into the particular role that is given to this figure here.

See what he does? It says he was given authority, glory and sovereign power. It speaks of the fact that all nations will bow down before this figure.

It says all nations will worship him. And it speaks of the fact that his dominion, his kingdom, is an everlasting dominion. Jesus, listen to these words of Jesus from Matthew 24.

He speaks a lot to us about who Jesus is. Matthew 24, he says, and in these chapters in Matthew, Jesus is deliberately speaking a lot about the future and about his own role in the future.

At that time, the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory.

[21 : 46] Jesus is pointing his listeners forward to a time, the end times, the time when he will come again. But he's saying, you will see the Son of Man, he's saying you will see me come again in this power with this glory, finally ushering in this kingdom to reign.

And so what this describes in the context of this chapter, remember that it's described these great world powers. Remember maybe the temptation is there for us to think things, these guys are so powerful, things are so out of control.

But this is describing and putting centrally the power of God, you see the ancient of days, the majesty and the power of God, and this figure who Jesus very much picks up on and refers to, who will be the one who triumphs over and who rules over and who reigns over all the kingdoms of the earth.

Jesus in Colossians chapter 2 says, or it's said of Jesus rather in Colossians chapter 2, you know, if you think how did Jesus do this? How does Jesus become this great figure who will rule and who will have such power over the nations?

And so Colossians chapter 2 says, having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

[23 : 12] Triumphing over them by the cross. So when we think forward and we think how is God able to be over all things, well he's the majestic one, he's the powerful one, but what was the thing that he did that displayed his power ultimately?

That's the great paradox of the cross, isn't it? The powers of the world in the time of Jesus thought they had him. The political powers, the religious powers, they ganged up together and they nailed him to a cross and they thought they'd done with him, probably even the spiritual powers, the dark forces in the heavenly realms.

So this is the great moment when Jesus was done for. Jesus was raised again by the power of God, victorious over death and over sin.

The great victor and displaying his power. So we have a risen Redeemer, a powerful risen Redeemer who now the Bible says is at the right hand of the Father in heaven, who's done all that is necessary for us to be brought into fellowship with God, who's doing everything that's necessary for us to be saved and who has every power over every authority in every stage of human history.

And so that vision we have of our God and of our Saviour is one that we need to hold centre stage in our lives when we're faced with all the worries of life, when maybe you're faced with your fear about how to deal with your sin, can God deal with my sin? Yes, He can.

[25 : 00] When you're faced with the genuine worries you may have about the future, all of these things give us perspective on our lives because they show us the great majesty. They show us what God has done and what He will do in human history.

Briefly, and finally the third aspect. This is a vision that very much, I said at the start, it touches on us. It touches on our lives now because it shows us a glory of God.

In some ways we could stop there, couldn't we? We've seen an amazing picture of who God is, what He is like. We've seen how this points us forward to Jesus and all that He has done. But there's more.

Briefly, this last little section. What this also says, or it also says much about the saints, about the followers.

Now remember the context here. Remember that this was written into a particular situation. Daniel and Daniel's people had been exiled. The Jews had been taken from their place.

[26 : 05] They were God's people but they'd been ripped from there and taken to Babylon initially at least. And they had that great sense of displacement. And they had that great sense as well of not knowing the favour of God.

They were not in the promised land. The temple was ruined. There was spiritual discomfort and disquiet amongst them.

And this vision is given to Daniel. And this message is given to these people to remind them of God and who He is. But the wonderful comfort also that they are given as they are pointed forward to the future.

Because also it speaks about how... Let me take you towards the end of the chapter. From about verse 23 onwards, it returns to describing the power of that...

Remember that little horn that was to become that significant figure. Daniel's concerned about this figure and he asks a witness in his vision. He asks another witness, who is this and what's going on here?

[27 : 12] So he gets more of an explanation about the power that this person will exert. And it's scary isn't it? Look at verse 23. That fourth beast is a fourth kingdom that will appear on earth.

It will be different from all the other kingdoms and it will devour the whole earth. It then speaks about how in verse 25, another king will have arisen and he will speak against the most high and he will oppress his saints.

So this is saying that almost like things are going to get worse. That for the saints, for the followers, the believers of God, his people will go through a real time of tribulation. And again, I'm not going to go into all the different particular historical aspects of what that looks like.

But it's saying more trouble is coming as if there wasn't already enough trouble that they felt they were going through. And then it says at the end of verse 25, the saints will be handed over to him for a time, times and half a time.

So it sounds like this figure is going to rule. Some commentators even go so far as to say that this is pointing forward to a time when the church will almost seem like it's just destroyed.

[28 : 20] When there's so much havoc being done on the earth by this figure who sets himself up against the Lord and against his people at it. If you could imagine not being able to meet this morning.

If you could imagine feeling and being an utter outcast. There's this real sense of terror. But then we get to verse 26 and this brings you back again to this phrase, then the court will sit.

Then the court will sit. Simply, this is not outside the control of God. The court will sit in his power. This power of this earthly ruler will be taken away.

Just like that. Completely destroyed forever. This is this, then the sovereignty and power and greatness of the kingdoms under the whole of heaven will be handed over to the saints.

Isn't that remarkable? Will be handed over to the saints. The people of the Most High, his kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom and all rulers will worship and obey him.

[29 : 25] Now that sets things back in their rightful place because it's right that all peoples and all kingdoms worship the Most High. He is the one who's worthy of all praise.

We can set up the most fantastic kingdom in this earth and it won't come anywhere near to the glory of God. All it will do is take away from his glory and his rightful place is the one that we praise.

And so this is putting God back at the center of worship but also that remarkable thing. The greatness of the kingdoms under the whole of heaven will be handed over to the saints.

Now, very briefly, what light does the New Testament shed on this? When Jesus came, we speak about the fact that he ushered in a new kingdom.

You go to a chapter like Matthew 20, Matthew 5, it describes as it were life in the kingdom. Life of those who follow the rule of Jesus.

[30 : 24] But we know also that when Jesus comes again, finally his kingdom will begin. His rule and all evil and all rebellion to God will be dealt with and done away with.

And it speaks of how the saints will go to be with him. Christians, you if you're a believer, will know the security and the peace of being in his kingdom forever.

Worshiping him, knowing him, seeing him face to face, seeing the Lamb. But a couple of verses, the New Testament speaks a lot about that being an inheritance for you.

And I want you to think about that this morning. I want you to think about it particularly if you have trouble, particularly if you're tempted to fail, that the world is out of control. Matthew 25, again, remember Jesus speaks a lot about the future in this little phase.

He says, then the king will say to those on his right. Now this is speaking about the time when he will judge. Then the king will say to those on his right, come, take your inheritance.

[31 : 29] The kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. That's a promise for you if you're one of his people. He will say to you, come, take your inheritance.

Some passages give us even more of a kind of window into what this will look like. But I'm not going to go into it. Just to say in 2 Timothy, it speaks of how the saints, if they endure, will reign with Christ.

You'll reign with Christ. Now that means that those who are oppressed, you may feel oppressed, remember now in your workplace or in your situation, amongst your family, amongst your friends. And we know of people throughout the world who are really oppressed and who are in danger of their lives.

And be aware that it may get worse for us. It may get worse for us. But those who are oppressed will reign with Christ.

Those who feel the outcast because of the fact that they confess his name will receive a great inheritance. And that's a promise for you this morning from the Lord.

[32 : 35] And that's the hope that you have. And that's the perspective that this big, complicated chapter wants you to have. Things aren't out of control that you're not forgotten about, that you're not nobody.

In the scope of world history, you may be nobody. But to God, you're one of his saints. And you will inherit the earth. And you have a kingdom to look forward to.

Just to finish, time has gone. That means then that you know joy as a Christian because you need to remind yourself of this. And sometimes we really do, don't we?

Because life is very difficult for a variety of reasons. And we're often very tempted to forget the big picture. Remind yourself again that the Lord is on his throne, that the court will sit, and that you will receive your inheritance.

But I also want to make sure that you know that when the Son of Man comes again, in all his glory, to judge the world, that that will be good for you.

[33 : 42] And that you're one of his. Jesus, again, let me go back to Matthew. Because he was speaking about the future a lot, because he was speaking about some things that were to come, he spoke, he speaks a lot in chapters 24, 25, with warning.

He speaks a lot about being careful to be prepared. He says, you have to be prepared. In Matthew 25, verse 31, he says, When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory.

All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. That's the image that Jesus uses.

Simply those who will be his, who say now, Jesus, I need you, be my Lord. And those who say, I will not say that.

Or who put it off until it's too late. He tells parables about these people, who just put it off, and who don't prepare themselves. And then in chapter 24, Jesus says, Therefore keep watch.

[34 : 56] This is about being realistic, isn't it? Keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. You do not know on what day your Lord will come. Can I encourage you with this chapter this morning?

It's a beautiful, a big vision. It's a vision that gives you encouragement if you're a believer. But it's one that asks you to think about the future and to be sure that you're ready.

Amen. Let's pray. Lord, we praise you for your word again. We just thank you for all that it teaches us. And we pray that you'd help us.

Help us to go away and think about what this means. We pray that your Holy Spirit would help us with this. Help us not to shy away from the consequences of this.

The call that this makes upon us to recognize you as Lord and to give our lives to you. And I do pray this morning that if any of us are cast down, if any of us feel an overburdening sense of worry or fear or anything like this, that we would remember that you are over all things.

[36 : 05] We remember that Jesus will return and we will remember that he is the victorious one and that his kingdom is a great promise for those who love him.

We pray this in his name. Amen.