

The Cloud Rider

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Date: 09 November 2025

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[0:00] We're going to read together from Daniel chapter 7, verses 1 to 18. And then, as I looked, its wings were plucked off, and it was lifted up from the ground and made to stand on two feet like a man.

And the mind of a man was given to it. And behold, another beast, a second one like a bear. It was raised up on one side. It had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth, and it was told, Arise, devour much flesh.

After this, I looked, and behold, another like a leopard with four wings of a bird on its back. And the beast had four heads, and dominion was given to it. And after this, I saw in the night visions, and behold, a fourth beast, terrifying and dreadful, and it's seethingly strong.

It had great iron teeth. It devoured and broke in pieces and stamped what was left with its feet. It was different from all the beasts that were before it, and it had ten horns. I considered the horns, and behold, there came among them another horn, a little one, before which three of the first horns were plucked up by the roots.

And behold, in this horn were eyes like the eyes of a man. And a mouth speaking great things. As I looked, thrones were placed, and the ancient of days took his seat.

[1:37] His clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head was like pure wool. His throne was fiery flames. Its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and came out from before him.

A thousand thousand served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court sat in judgment, and the books were opened. I looked, then, because of the sound of the great words that the horn was speaking.

And as I looked, the beast was killed, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire. And as for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away. But their lives were prolonged for a season and a time.

I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man. And he came to the ancient of days, and was presented before him.

And 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 one that shall not be destroyed.

[2:41] As for me, Daniel, my spirit within me was anxious, and the visions of my head alarmed me. I approached one of those who stood there and asked him the truth concerning all this. So he told me, and he made known to me the interpretation of the things.

These four great beasts are four kings who shall arise out of the earth. But the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever, forever and ever.

This is God's holy word. Let's pray together. Lord, as we come to your word, we ask that you would open our hearts, and you would open our minds.

And we know that we need your scripture. We know also that as we read this, this is a tough passage to understand. Lots of images and visions, Lord, prophecy. And so we really need your help today, Lord, as modern people.

And so we ask for that in Jesus' name. Amen. Now, the problem today is that I have been a bit too efficient in the first half of the service. And so with the nation, in two minutes we're going to stand and remember the wars of our history, especially the world wars and those who have sacrificed their lives.

[3:50] And it's a good opportunity as a church to pray during that season. If you're new to the city or new to the U.K. at all, this might be new for you today. But it's an opportunity for us to pray and for God to bring peace to the land.

And at the same time to remember and honor all those who have come before us with sacrifice to bring peace. And so we'll do that. That's in two minutes. So I'm going to start the sermon. And then in two minutes we'll press pause, okay?

So I know that's a little weird. But we've been working our way through Daniel. And we've seen for six chapters lots of adventure stories. The lion's den, the fiery furnace, stories that are really familiar to people.

Even that maybe you haven't been growing up in the church, you know some of those stories. Today, as you've seen in our reading, Daniel 7, we come to a very different, moves from adventure stories to prophecy.

That's what we just read. Prophecy comes with visions, dreams. It's not obvious to a modern reader at all what these things are about. It's very strange. As many scholars have said, this is part of our strange Bible.

[4:57] And that's not a negative thing. But just to recognize that as modern people, we come to an ancient text. And so we don't expect to understand everything at first. You know, Daniel even says that.

Verse 15, he says, when I got this vision, I was very anxious. It's down in verse 28, past where we read, he says, it made me pale. And you say, me too. You know, it made me pale.

As I read it, I try to think about it and try to understand what these images are. And so before we stand in just a moment, I'll say that as strange as it is, it's not so strange for ancient people.

So these images of lions and eagles and beasts representing empires, which is what it's about. That was very common in the ancient world. And the sea for ancient people represented chaos.

And the four winds of the earth meant the whole globe. So a lot of ancient readers would come to this and understand these symbols a little better. But we do this too, right? So if I were to put on the screen today an image of a unicorn, the right, the correct unicorn, you would think Scotland.

[5:56] And if I put the correct lion, you would think England. And if I put an eagle with red, white, and blue behind it, you would think America. That's what we say, right?

We do this too. We have beasts that, animals that image for us nations. All right, so in the light of that, as we honor the history of our nation here and across the world, the words that have brought peace to the land, take a moment of silence.

Now let's stand together and I'll conclude us in prayer after two minutes. Sovereign Lord, in a world that we know today is still torn apart by war and violence and great evil, we confess this morning in this moment of silence that true peace can only come from you.

And so we pray, Lord, for the day when the cloud rider, Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, will come and the lion will lay down with the lamb, the swords will be beat into plowshares.

And until then, we ask, O God, that you would bring peace and justice to the many wars that are raging today in our world. And so we pray that in Christ's name. Amen. You can be seated.

[7 : 10] Amen. Okay. I know you've forgotten the introduction already. So chapter 1 to 6, Daniel was the prophet, the wise man who was speaking to kings and speaking to them about their problem of pride, Nebuchadnezzar and Darius and Belshazzar.

Daniel 7 to 12 is a transition to prophecy and vision. And it's the same messages, actually. So over the next several weeks, as we look at these prophecies, it's the same message as to Nebuchadnezzar and others, but it's to a different audience.

And so we read down to verse 18, and in verse 18, we realize who Daniel, who this dream, this dream given by God through Daniel is for. And it says at the very end of our reading, it is for the saints to know that they too will inherit the kingdom.

And so here's the difference. In chapter 1 to 6, Daniel is the prophet in exile as a minority, in a minority position as a believer in Babylon, and telling the great kings, you need to humble yourself.

You're dusting the scales. Now he turns in the prophecies to Christians, to believers, to talk to us and to say the exact same thing, but for a different reason.

[8 : 25] So let's explore that. This is called apocalyptic literature, what we've just read. It was very common in the ancient world. And all apocalyptic literature does is it takes sometimes terrifying images, scary images, visions, shocking images that we're being invited to imagine, and tries to actually speak to the heart of the believer, the Christian, the saint of the Old Testament and New Testament, by giving these images in the midst of oppression.

So apocalyptic literature comes in the Bible every time the people of God are under the yoke of great oppression, great evil, minority position. And so that's what it's for. It's meant to be for our hearts.

So let me just, we'll be very brief today, and let me take the three most important images that were given and say something about what they mean and what they mean to our hearts today, and then we'll close.

And so those three images will be the four beasts, and the little horn, and the son of man, or the cloud rider. So those three things, and let's think about it.

By the way, Stephen Miller, one of the commentators on the book of Daniel, he says this is the single most important chapter in the book, and he says this is one of the three to four most important chapters in the Old Testament.

[9 : 42] So let's take 20 minutes, all right? The four beasts first. Now, if you've been around for the Daniel series, you'll know that this is part of the Aramaic section of Daniel.

So most of Daniel is in Hebrew except for Daniel 2 to 7. And in the Aramaic section, each chapter corresponds to another Aramaic chapter. And so now we're on the very last one, and it corresponds to chapter 2.

These are the outside edges of the Aramaic section. Chapter 2, do you remember that Nebuchadnezzar had a dream, and the dream was of this great statue, and the statue had four metals involved in elements, gold, silver, bronze, iron, and clay.

And Daniel said, Nebuchadnezzar, each of those represents a kingdom. The gold is Babylon, the silver, Medo-Persia, and so on and so forth. But the big point of that dream was Daniel the prophet saying to Nebuchadnezzar, where ultimately when you build your life, your own personal kingdom, without God in view, without God at the center, you need to remember, Nebuchadnezzar, in every single human, because this is in all of us, you've got feet of clay.

That image had feet of clay. And that means that your kingdom is going to come and go. You are dust in the scales. Humble yourself. Put God at the center of your life. Realize who the real king of heaven is.

[11:00] And that's been really the same message in almost every chapter. This chapter, chapter 7, corresponds to that dream. So the four beasts, just like the four stones in the statue.

Four kingdoms. It's the same exact thing. And yet, in Daniel 7, this is the first place that we're no longer in chronological order. So up through chapter 6, we were working our way through Daniel's history.

But in chapter 7, we go backwards in time. So the dream of Daniel 7 happened before Daniel 5, Belshazzar's feast. So we've already entered into the Persian kingdom, but this dream comes from the Babylonian kingdom.

And so why is the author going, why is Daniel going backwards? And it's to say that the dream of Nebuchadnezzar was given to him, but the same message in chapter 7 is there.

It's the same dream, really, but it's given to believers. So that's why the chronology is not in order. It's selective. It's very highly selective, because it's trying to make a point that the whole back half of the book is now being addressed to the church, the church of the Old Testament and the church of the New Testament.

[12:07] So what's the message? These four beasts, verse 1 to 8. This is predictive prophecy. It really is. And it's prophecy that's meant to speak to our hearts. And we have in verse 1 these four winds, the four corners of the earth coming together, meaning this is a global picture.

And we've got a sea, and seas in the ancient mind are very chaotic, scary places. And so what it's saying is that these four beasts, which are representative of four great empires, are part of the chaotic rise and fall of kingdoms.

That, you know, the next political leader is coming, the next nation is coming. It's a chaotic mess in world history. And that's very true in the ancient Near East and in the story of Daniel. And typically, these four kingdoms are read as predictive prophecy, as Babylon, we know that, the first beast, and then Medo-Persia, we've seen these two kingdoms in this book.

And then the third beast representative of probably Greece, Alexander the Great's kingdom. And then the fourth beast, very probably Rome. And so if you look at just a couple of the details, the first beast is a lion with wings like eagles.

And Jeremiah 4, Jeremiah 50 calls Babylon the great lion, and sometimes calls Babylon an eagle throughout, that's even in the Old Testament. So these are just symbols of Babylon. And the wings are plucked off in order that the beast would become humanized.

[13:32] That's very probably referencing the story of Nebuchadnezzar that's already taken place, where he was dehumanized, became beastly. His wings, he thought he was a great god, a lion, but he was plucked, and he became humble to humans.

So this is obviously Babylon. And then the second is a bear. One side lifted higher than the other, and that's probably because we read last week that the Medo-Persian kingdom took over this land, and that's two sides of one kingdom, but the Persians were far stronger than the Medes.

A great bear, but one side upright, because it was much stronger. Three ribs in its mouth. Persia had conquered three kingdoms that all came to battle against Babylon with them.

Those are listed in other parts of the Bible. I won't get into all the details today, don't worry. But we will coming back in Daniel 8 to 12. A leopard. Why a leopard?

Because it's probably referencing the swiftness of Greece. Alexander the Great conquered the entire known world in four years. And then his kingdom split into four under four leaders.

[14:32] And in this prophecy, the third beast split. It has four heads, probably referencing a predictive prophecy of Alexander the Great's kingdom becoming four different kingdoms. And then lastly, nearly most people recognize that the third beast is this monster.

It's not an animal at all. It's just this monstrous thing. It's hideous. It's terrifying. It's listed in Revelation 13 as this composite beast. Same exact images from Daniel 7.

And in Revelation 13, it's referencing Rome. And I think here it's also referencing Rome. The kingdom of iron. And in Nebuchadnezzar's dream, it was all about iron. Rome has been known as the kingdom of iron.

And here there's iron teeth in the mouth of this monstrous beast. I think that's the old school grill. I think we call that a grill, iron teeth. But Rome had it.

Let me just say this, because we don't have a lot of time today. But to say this is predictive prophecy. And in a later sermon, we'll look at predictive prophecy a little bit more.

[15:36] But I want to say to anybody in the room who's not a believer, who's coming today, curious about the faith or exploring, that this will seem very strange. I know that. But I do challenge you to go look at the predictive prophecy in the Bible and how many times very specific language has been very specifically fulfilled in world history, especially in Jesus.

And it makes a very compelling case that the Bible is an authentic authority that comes from God. Humans couldn't do that. But because it comes from God, the Bible can do that. This does happen.

But what does this mean for us? Let's take this to heart. Instead of looking at every one of the images very specifically, instead, let's take the broad notion of the beasts altogether.

These are empires. These are kings. What is Daniel saying and God saying through this dream to the saints, to God's people? And I think one or two things, and this is a number one, people of God.

But this is the cycle of history. And the cycle of history is that nations and empires and kingdoms tend to eventually become beastly. They tend that way.

[16:41] They come and go, and eventually they become beastly. And God's people tend throughout world history over and over again to become a minority people wherever they are in this world.

And I think God is coming to say to us, you don't have cultural power. We don't have cultural power. Don't expect to. This is the cycle of world history.

It is the nature of the kingdoms. When kings, men take charge of lands, they tend to move more and more towards power, hunger, and beastliness. And to suppress God's people as a minority in any kingdom.

And that means that, I think, secondly, he's calling us to say, believers in the minority as we are. The world is not a nice place in many ways, and we know that. And it never will be.

There's so much good, but yet so much hurt and so much pain and so much bad government across the world. And it's always going to be that way until, and we're coming to the until in a moment.

[17:43] And that means we cannot depend upon the next great leader to bring utopia, and we cannot get too much stock into the next political office. And instead, you know, when I was reading Calvin on this passage, and he said, what I learned from this is the world is a troubled sea.

And that's exactly right. More Christian martyrs, two-thirds, the suggestions are two-thirds of all Christian martyrs have become martyrs in the 20th century, in all of world history.

The modern nations created the bloodiest hundred years we've ever had, right? The cycle of the beast continues. And lastly, on this point, that means that as we can't get our hearts pulled in too much by caring about who the next leader is going to be, I think what this dream is saying is get a bigger picture.

God is saying, it is my plan that you believers would enter into a space without cultural power. And think about Daniel. You know, Daniel was there, and he could say, I know I don't have very much cultural power, but I will serve Babylon because God has put me here.

And, you know, then they were wiped out. And then he said, now Persia's here, and I'm going to serve Persia. And God has called us here, and God has put us here. It's the same message that's always been in the book of Daniel.

[18:59] And he's saying you've got to have a big perspective, a biblical view of history, that even if it feels like everything's lost and we're losing, God is doing something in the cycle of history. Secondly, the little horn, the second image.

So in verse 7 and 8, we learn about this little horn. So in the fourth beast, Rome, there's ten horns. And that ten horns probably means something like a cycle of evil kings.

It can mean lots of different things. But in the midst of it, there's a little horn. And though it's little, it has the most power and is the most oppressive. Verse 25 says the little horn wears out the saints, crushes the saints.

So a lot of people have come to this and made charts. You know, you come to a little horn and you start building your end of times charts and things like that. Don't ever do that. That's not a good move.

We don't know exactly what the little horn is. We don't. That's not the point. The point is probably, I think, there's been lots of little horns throughout world history. The New Testament calls it antichrist, those who especially want to stand against the God of the gospel.

[20:01] And there are Old Testament little horns and New Testament little horns, and there will be more, I think. One of those that's very probably being thought of here as predictive prophecy is a guy named Antiochus Epiphanes.

Antiochus Epiphanes followed Alexander the Great, and he took over the area that we know as Israel, Jerusalem. And he, in the late 2nd century, went into the temple in Jerusalem, and he turned it into a temple of Zeus.

And he brought in pigs to worship to desecrate the space because that was non-kosher for Judaism. And he made worshipping the God of the Old Testament, the God of the Bible, illegal for three years.

And in verse 25, it refers to the little horn coming and really wearing out God's people for a time, a time, and a half a time. Three periods. And so most biblical scholars think that that's at least one reference to Antiochus Epiphanes who would come.

But there's been many other little horns throughout world history. Now, what's the point? Well, here's the point. Verse 9, all of a sudden, in the midst of this little horn language, this great oppressor, it says, And behold, meanwhile, I saw the Ancient of Days.

[21:14] And the Ancient of Days is silver-haired, and he sits on a chariot of fire with wheels, and he moves on the clouds of heaven. And this is an image of the judgment seat of the living God.

And it's sort of like it interrupts the dream and says, yeah, the little horn's really bad, and there's going to be lots of them. And God's people will be a minority in lots of places for many centuries, but you've got to get a bigger picture and a bigger vision.

Open, pull the curtain back. See the invisible realm. In other words, we're being asked as Christians to deny our practical materialism and our practical atheism where we don't really believe there's an invisible realm.

And he's saying, see the Ancient of Days. The silver hair is not an image of frailty. It's an image of strength. He is before all time and beyond all time. He is the Ancient of Days. It reminds me of that image of Tom Bombadil in The Fellowship of the Ring.

Now, if you've only watched the movies of The Lord of the Rings, you don't know about Tom Bombadil because that was one of the great cinematic mistakes of all of movie history, to miss Tom Bombadil in The Fellowship of the Ring.

[22 : 16] But the hobbits, they're trying to defeat Sauron, and this guy is destroying the world. And Tom is this elderly man who is just ho-hum about it.

And he's just kind of apart from all that's happening, all the problems. And he has wisdom and counsel, and he brings peace to their hearts. But he sort of tells them, I am before all this, and I'll be after all this, and it's all going to be okay.

And boy, Tom's great, but he's not the Ancient of Days. The Ancient of Days, he is God before all time, beyond all time, immortal, invisible, God only wise. And it's calling us here to see that you really do as a believer, especially when you're feeling at the most down about the state of your life or the state of culture, to pull back the curtain and say, the Ancient of Days is doing well.

He's on his throne. He's got it. We're okay. That's the vision. It's to the saints in that way. There's a little literary sandwich that takes place here.

And you've got the introduction of the little horn, verse 8. You've got the Ancient of Days, verse 9 and 10. You've got the destruction of all the beasts, verse 11 and 12, in the little horn.

[23 : 27] And then you've got the Son of Man, and it's all in poetry. And you see that the destruction of the little horn and the beast are in a literary sandwich between the Ancient of Days and the Son of Man.

And that's telling you something. It's telling you that the little horn is little. Why does it call it the little horn? You know, he's sandwiched. His destruction is sandwiched between the Ancient of Days and the Son of Man and saying, you know, he's basically Lord Farquaad.

He thinks he's very great, but the little horn is going to come and be—the Ancient of Days is ruling the land. And we're okay. That's the point of the vision here.

It's so easy to feel overwhelmed by cultural losses. It's so easy to feel like when you're the only one who believes in the supernatural realm and the place you work or wherever God has put you in our city, that things are not going well.

And this is saying, get beyond your practical materialism. Get perspective. Pull the curtain back. The invisible realm. God is doing what He wants to do. And He has actually put us into the situation we're in for a reason, that we would give ourselves away, that the city would be better for us having been here.

[24 : 38] And for us to feel the minority report, to be changed by it, to be changed in the call that we have to actually give our lives away.

And we may not always feel the victories. Thirdly, finally, the cloud rider, the Son of Man. The Ancient of Days, the little horn, and then it's followed by this image of the Son of Man.

So you see it down in verse 13. I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one, a cloud rider, as I've titled it, like a son of man. And he came to the Ancient of Days.

Now, Daniel has a vision, and he sees not just the Ancient of Days, but one like a son of man riding on the clouds. He sees two enthroned in heaven.

This is the beginning, one of the many places in the Old Testament, to begin developing a doctrine of the Trinity. The Trinity is in the Old Testament as much as the New. And here we see not one, but two.

[25 : 39] And we could talk about other places where we see three. I won't develop that today. But here's the beginning point of that. But instead, here's the Son of Man. And the word for man in Hebrew and in Aramaic is the same.

And it's a word we all know. And it's the word Adam, Adam. So this says, here comes one like a son of Adam to take the throne next to the Ancient of Days.

So no matter what you date this book like, you know, there are those who come and date this in the 6th century, which I think is correct. There are some who come later and say, well, these prophecies seem so precise that it must be after.

After some of them took place, like Greece came and Rome came. But even if you take that view, which I think is very wrong, you have to say that this vision comes before the 1st century A.D.

And what we have here is one like a son of Adam taking the throne. What does that mean? One that looked to Daniel like a human taking the throne. One that looks in the Old Testament like a human taking the throne next to the Ancient of Days.

[26 : 41] Now, that means that here what we have is a contrast being given between a great human ruler, a king, a truly human ruler, and the humans who have tried to rule the world but have always become beasts.

You see? Saying every time a human gets absolute power in this world, becomes a great king, they tend toward beastliness. But there is one king who is like a human who is not a beast at all, a true human, truly human, who will take the throne.

That's the vision. Now, Jesus Christ in the Gospels, as we conclude, never calls himself Christ. So we say Jesus Christ, Christos, that word means Messiah, anointed one.

Jesus never uses that word for himself in the Gospels, though it's very true. Instead, over 50 times across the four Gospels, Jesus only chooses one designation, one title for himself, over 50 times, and it is the word, the Son of Man.

Jesus quotes Daniel 7 over 50 times, the Gospels do, to designate who Jesus is. This is his favorite thing to say about himself. And it is the very phrase that got him killed.

[27 : 56] So in Matthew chapter 26, he was dragged, Jesus Christ was dragged before Caiaphas, the high priest, and Caiaphas wanted to execute Jesus illegally for blasphemy. And here's what Caiaphas said, Are you the Son of God?

And Jesus said, You have said it, but from this moment you will see the Son of Man seated on the throne and coming with the clouds.

What is he quoting from? Daniel 7. Jesus said, I am the Son of Man of Daniel 7. And what he was saying to Caiaphas is, The moment you condemn me unto death is the moment you enthrone me in the heavens.

The moment you cast me down, The moment the beast, Who is the little horn in that moment? It is Caiaphas. The moment the little horn, the beast, Tries to cast down the true man, The true human, The Son of Man, Is the very moment his victory becomes so sure.

And we're being taught here that, You know, The beastly kingdoms of this world seek power by killing. Jesus Christ came and he conquered the ultimate beast. Friends, we've got, We've been, The whole book of Daniel has been saying, We've got beastliness in us.

[29 : 08] We've got self-centeredness. We've got pride. If we, Any of us, Are given absolute power, We would tend that way. And this passage is coming to prophesy to us that Jesus Christ, Unlike the beast, Jesus Christ was condemned by the ultimate beast so that he might destroy it.

Jesus Christ was judged by the beast so that he might overcome it. The beast in us, The beast in history, The beast in all world governments, That he took our place at the cross, Dying for our beastliness, To overcome it, To forgive it, To set it on a new path, To reinstate true, Full humanity.

You see, He's saying that when you come along with me, You're united to me, I will teach you what it means to be fully human. To deny the beastliness that's at the core of our self-centeredness.

And at the self-centeredness of all of our, Ultimately, Our governments. And that's in all of us. And Jesus comes to show us what the fullness of humanity means through grace.

This passage, I'll finish with this, Is really an invitation to see that union with Christ is the heartbeat of salvation. So it's saying that as Jesus, The true human, Goes to the cross because of our beastliness, When you follow him, When you say yes to him, When you give your life away to him, When you put him at the center of your life, You are united to the fullness of what humanity is.

[30 : 29] And then you can start walking in that direction. You can start denying the beastliness that's at your heart because you've received forgiveness and grace. And we know that's at the heartbeat of this passage. Because in verse 18, The very last verse we read, It says that, The saints, The believers of the Most High, The King, Will receive the kingdom too, And possess the kingdom forever and forever and forever.

Three sequences. Everlasting. Meaning that when he comes, The Son of Man, When he's enthroned, You get everything he got. You follow him, You get everything he gets.

You too will inherit the land. You too. So when you're walking through a midst of a time without cultural power, And you're really feeling that, It's saying, Look, Don't you remember, Jesus Christ is going to renew the world, And you're going to inherit the land with him?

You're a part of that. Pull back the curtain. See the invisible realm. No. The promise is, God is up to something. The cycle of history, It will cease. It will fall.

Christ will win. He already has. C.S. Lewis, If you read history, You will find that Christians, Therefore, Who did the most for the present world, The present city, Were precisely those who thought the most about the next.

[31 : 46] Let us pray. Father, We pray that we would become those people Who think so much about the kingdom to come That we become like Daniel in the present land. And true servants, All because we're being reshaped by Jesus, The true human.

And so, Lord, We confess our beastliness, Our sinfulness, Our self-centeredness. We seek renewal this morning. And we pray that as we sing, In Jesus' name, Amen.