

Gods and Monsters

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[0 : 00] A reading today is from Daniel chapter 7, which is on page 893 of the church Bible.

Page 893, and it's Daniel, Daniel's dream of four beasts. In the first year of Belshazzar, king of Babylon, Daniel had a dream, and visions passed through his mind as he was lying in bed.

He wrote down the substance of his dream. Daniel said, In my vision at night I looked, and there before me were the four winds of heaven churning up the great sea.

Four great beasts, each different from the others, came up out of the sea. The first was like a lion, and it had the wings of an eagle.

I watched until its wings were torn off, and it was lifted from the ground so that it stood on two feet like a human being, and the mind of a human was given to it.

[1 : 24] And there before me was a second beast, which looked like a bear. It was raised up on one of its sides, and it had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth.

It was told, Get up, and eat your fill of flesh. After that, I looked, and there before me was another beast, one that looked like a leopard.

And on its back it had four wings, like those of a bird. And this beast had four heads, and it was given authority to rule. After that, in my vision at night, I looked, and there before me was a fourth beast, 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 of the former beasts, and it had ten horns.

While I was thinking about the horns, there before me was another horn, a little one, which came up among them, and three of the first horns were uprooted before it.

[2 : 40] This horn had eyes, like the eyes of a human being, and a mouth that spoke boastfully. 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. 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 they were allowed to live for a period of time.

[3 : 47] 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.

I, Daniel, was troubled in spirit, and the visions that passed through my mind disturbed me. I approached one of those standing there and asked him the meaning of all this.

So he told me, gave me the interpretation of these things. The four great beasts are four kings that will rise from the earth, but the holy people of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it forever.

Yes, forever and ever. 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.

[5 : 09] 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. 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 favor of the holy people of the Most High, and the time came when they possessed the kingdom.

He gave me this explanation. The fourth beast is a fourth kingdom that will appear on earth. It will be different from all the other kingdoms and will devour the whole earth, trampling it down and crushing it.

The ten horns are ten kings who will come from this kingdom. After them, another king will arise, different from the earlier ones. He will subdue three kings, and he will speak against the Most High and oppress his holy people and try to change the set times and the laws.

The holy people will be delivered into his hands for three times and half a time. But the court will sit and his power will be taken away and completely destroyed forever.

[6 : 45] 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. This is the end of the matter.

I, Daniel, was deeply troubled by my thoughts. My face turned pale. But I kept the matter to myself. Amen.

Good morning, St Silas. As James said, my name's Martin Ayres. I'm the senior pastor here. It's great to see you. You can find an outline of the talk inside the notice sheet if you'd find that helpful. And we're in Daniel chapter 7 together.

We're going to look at that together. Thanks, Malcolm, for reading that for us. And it would be a help to me if you could keep it open. Page 893 in the Church Bibles as we look at that together. Let's pray and ask for God's help.

[7 : 58] The words of the Lord are flawless, like silver purified in a crucible, like gold refined seven times. So, gracious God and heavenly Father, as we come to your precious word, we pray that you will be at work in us, that you will give us the joy of hearing your voice, the comfort of your sovereignty, the challenge of your correction and holiness, the assurance of your grace.

We ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. So, we're thinking this morning about the end of the world.

The end of the world is a fascinating subject for lots of people.

During COP26 here in Glasgow, just in November, there was a lot of talk about how this was humanity's last chance to save the planet. Is it the end of the world? And then there's this newly released movie, Don't Look Up, where the plot follows a small group of scientists who've seen a comet that's going to crash into the world and humanity will become extinct and they go around trying to tell people about this and nobody listens.

And there's the TV series Lost in Space, set 25 years from now with a group of colonists who have to leave Earth to find another planet for us to live on. How are things going to end?

We're intrigued about what the future holds. And in the Bible, there are portions of God's word devoted to revealing to us the things we need to know about unseen realities, whether that's unseen realities in the present, what's going on now in the spiritual realm, or unseen realities about the future and what will happen.

[9 : 38] Now, as we move into the second half of this book, Daniel, that we're in a series in as a church, the style of writing changes into what's called apocalyptic writing. The word apocalyptic just means revelation.

Okay, so commonly misunderstood. People think apocalyptic, they think doom. But actually, apocalyptic just means revealed, revelation. And in apocalyptic writing, it's as though the curtain gets drawn back on things we can't normally see, using vivid imagery to help us feel impressions of how things will happen.

Now, we're in a visual age, aren't we? People say. So for the next few weeks and this morning, we're in the Instagram of the Bible. If the Bible had an Instagram account, it would be the second half of Daniel and Revelation as well, with these powerful, evocative pictures images so that we can feel appropriate emotions about what's being revealed.

And it's helpful to remember, these images are true, and they're accurate, but they're not precise.

So we're not meant to get bogged down in the details and chase up every little bit and think, oh, well, I wonder what that bit means, what that bit means.

Daniel seems unembarrassed to use these images to symbolize different things at different points in the chapters, but they're there to give us an impression, like when you see an impressionist painting, and it's true and accurate, but it's not precise.

[11:10] We also should not think that this chapter is a different world to the first half of Daniel, chapters 1 to 6. You know, sometimes when people read Daniel for the first time, they think, well, there were all these events in chapters 1 to 6, and then there's all this weird stuff in chapters 7 to 12.

It's like a different book. But the language that the chapter, the book is written in doesn't let us do that. Already we see at the beginning of this chapter that it's set in a certain time, that Daniel had a dream, it says in verse 1, during the reign of Belshazzar.

So this happened before the events that we heard about in chapter 5 of Daniel, and in languages, chapter 1 of Daniel and chapters 8 to 12 are written in Hebrew, which is the language that most of the Bible is written in, the language of God's people of the Old Covenant.

So chapter 1 and chapters 8 to 12 are in Hebrew. Chapters 2 to 7 are written in the vernacular of the day, the vernacular, the language that most people of the nations understood, like the English of today.

Chapters 2 to 7 were written in Aramaic together. And I've just put on the sheets the structure. You can see how carefully written chapters 2 to 7 are in Daniel.

[12:26] You can see that. So chapter 7 clearly belongs with chapters 2 to 6. In the middle, you can see chapters 4 and 5. They were the stories of those two kings who were both humbled.

One of them was saved, one of them was judged, Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar. If we move out a chapter from there, chapters 3 and 6 are clearly carefully connected to one another.

In both those chapters, God's people were challenged to be faithful. They were in great danger, fiery furnace, lion's den, and they were rescued by God, leading to an edict from the king.

And four times in the central chapters, we get the same sentence repeated. The Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men, and He gives them to whomever He wishes.

So that gave us the kind of understanding of what the whole book is about, that despite what we can see, God reigns. The God of the Bible is on His throne. The Lord reigns.

[13:24] Now if we move further out to chapters 2 and 7, chapter 7 that we're in this morning, in chapter 2, there was this dream that the king had, Nebuchadnezzar, and in the dream, he saw a great statue made of four different things, gold, silver, bronze, and then iron and clay.

And it corresponded, in Daniel's interpretation, to four kingdoms. And in our chapter this morning, we learn more about those four kingdoms and what they mean for God's people. So through chapter 7 and this vision of the four kingdoms, God is preparing Daniel and us as God's people to know what to expect at the end of the world and while we wait for it.

Our first point this morning, there will be monsters ruling the world. Be troubled. Verse 1. Let's have a look again at verse 1. In the first year of Belshazzar, king of Babylon, Daniel had a dream and visions passed through his mind as he was lying on his bed.

He wrote down the substance of his dream. And first, he sees this chaotic sea storm, wind coming from all over the world into this, to rip up the Mediterranean Sea, the Great Sea.

Now the sea is a picture of chaos and danger. And in verse 3, we see that four great beasts, each different from the others, come out of the sea.

[14:46] Now that image on the screen is from a Spider-Man film, Far From Home, that it just reminded me of with a picture where a monster came out of the sea in this movie. But you see, the Bible picture here is much more frightening.

It's not a kind of 12-rated Marvel Universe dream. It's an 18-rated horror movie dream that Daniel has. He's terrified by what he sees of these monsters, these beasts, coming out of this chaotic sea. The first beast is a hybrid of a lion with the wings of an eagle. And then its wings are ripped off. It's grotesque. And it's lifted up to stand on two feet.

And then it's given the heart of a man. And then the second beast, verse 5, is a bear, so bloodthirsty that it's got these three ribs in its mouth between its teeth. And it's told to go and eat its fill of flesh.

It's very frightening. And then it's the speed of the third beast that terrifies Daniel. Verse 6, After that I looked and there before me was another beast that looked like a leopard with four wings on its back and four heads.

[15 : 56] And it's given authority to rule. And then worst of all, all he can say about the fourth beast is that it's a monster. It's a terrifying monster. Verse 7, 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. Now the way the chapter plays out, later in the chapter, Daniel tells us that he approaches somebody in the dream, a messenger from God, and they explain to him what the dream means.

It's not difficult for us to understand. Verse 17, The four great beasts are four kingdoms that will rise from the earth.

And we can be reasonably confident as to who these beasts first represent in history. So I've put that again on the sheets inside for you to see that Daniel has this dream about 549 BC and the lion represents Babylon that is currently reigning, the current empire.

Why does the terrifying lion suddenly get this human heart and stand like a human? I think it's probably because of what we've read in Daniel so far about the journey that Nebuchadnezzar was on, the emperor of Babylon, that he was this horrible tyrant who did horrific things to God's people in and around Jerusalem.

[17 : 22] And then he himself was converted and started to obey God. He became a disciple instead of a dictator. The bear is then the next empire, the Medo-Persian empire that followed when Belshazzar was slain by Darius.

Then the leopard is for Alexander the Great. He came after Daniel's time and he conquered the region with astonishing speed. He had an empire, Alexander the Great, that stretched from southern Europe down to Egypt and all across into India.

He got into India and historians don't even understand why he got there. It's as though he just was taken aback by how much he could conquer. And then he died when he was 32 years old and his empire was split into four power blocks.

There's the four heads of the leopard. Then the fourth beast, the monster, is initially at least the Roman Empire. But coming from that fourth monster are these ten horns and Daniel asks specifically about that monster because he says it's the most terrifying.

And he's told, verse 23, the fourth beast is a fourth kingdom that will appear on earth. It will be different from all the other kingdoms and will devour the whole earth, trampling it down and crushing it.

[18 : 42] The ten horns are ten kings who will come from this kingdom. After them, another king will arise. different from the earlier ones. He will subdue three kings.

And this last king, that's the little horn that Daniel saw in verse 8. He sees another little horn coming up and taking down three of them. And in verse 25, we're told this about the little horn.

He will speak to the Lord. He will speak to the Lord. He will speak against the Most High and oppress His holy people or His saints. That's His holy people.

And try to change the set times and the laws. The holy people will be delivered into His hands for a time, times, and half a time. Now with the numbers in this kind of writing, they're not literal.

They're symbolic. Just as we think of things in tens today, don't we? We kind of think of, we round things off into tens because we're decimal people. When we see the number ten, we're to think about completeness.

[19 : 44] It's a complete number. So there might be initial kings in mind, these ten horns, but I think this is more than that, speaking for us about any number of powerful rulers that will emerge between Daniel's time and our time and on into the future.

But the numbers in verse 25 that God's people will be oppressed by this little horn for time, times, and half a time, is just there to show us that this is not going to last forever.

It's going to be lasting but limited. It's limited. And what distinguishes the little horn there is not how frightening he is, it's not how frightening he is, it's how opposed to God and God's people he is.

So this little horn represents for us rulers in our times or across history who are especially anti-Christian. They want to wipe out the church.

They oppress Christ people because they hate Jesus. And we see that all over the world today. It's terrible. The persecution of the church today, there's just, I could have shared story after story with you of horrific persecution going on around our world today of Christians.

[20 : 59] So we take a step back and what is God saying to us in Daniel's dream? He's saying that the world is ruled and the world will be ruled by monsters. When you look at it one way, life in this

world is a nightmare.

Human history is littered with the carnage of people in power who are destructive and selfish and callous. And God warns us here this is what it will be like.

That's the big idea. Things are going to be very bad for us living in the world. If you think about today's superpowers, it struck me this week what animals they use as symbols.

They're all predators. Russia, the bear. China, the dragon. America, the eagle. Britain, once an empire, the lion. History is a beastly thing.

It was beastly on the 24th of April 1915 when 600,000 Armenians died in the most extreme cruelty people could dream up in a genocide by the Turks.

[22 : 10] It was beastly for the Koreans in 1919 under Japanese occupation when they were just horrifically tortured. It's beastly for the Rohingyas who fled the genocide in Myanmar a couple of years ago and today 600,000 of them live in the largest refugee camp in the world today in Bangladesh hemmed in by barbed wire unsafe to go home.

And you see Daniel's response to hearing this in verse 28 at the end of the chapter. It's striking, isn't it? He doesn't tell anyone. He's deeply troubled and his face turns pale.

Maybe we expect that if we're feeling anxious we can turn to our Bible and we'll feel more comfortable. Sometimes when you read the Bible it doesn't make you feel comfortable because it's not appropriate.

It's appropriate to feel very troubled. But it's better to know the truth than to be taken by surprise and to think does this kind of does the Christian worldview not cohere with what I'm seeing around me?

Does it not make sense of it? God's word does tell us what the world will be like just as Jesus warned his disciples that they would be persecuted and after warning them in John 15 he says in chapter 16 all this I have told you so that you will not fall away.

[23 : 36] They will put you out of the synagogue. In fact the time is coming when anyone who kills you will think they are offering a service to God. I have told you this so that when their time comes you will remember that I warned you about them.

In other words we shouldn't be taken by surprise. It stops us putting all our hopes in politics doesn't it? In being over optimistic in thinking things can only get better and then flattened and disillusioned when people get into power who we are disappointed by.

And the writer Dale Ralph Davis says about Daniel chapter 7 he says having heard this warning we might still be in pain but we won't be in panic. We might still be fearful but we won't be frantic.

And Daniel's dream has more as we move to the middle of the chapter. So our second point is there is a courtroom where the Lord is enthroned. Be steady. So Daniel's dream moves from the horror scene of monsters coming out of this storm to the stillness of a courtroom.

Verse 9 As I looked thrones were set in place and the ancient of days took his seat. And in verse 9 there is stillness in this courtroom.

[25 : 00] There are books in verse 10 books of evidence and God sits down he takes his seat. He's called the ancient of days not because he's like an old man with a white beard but because he is the one from before time began.

He's the everlasting one. And in verse 10 it's justice on the agenda. The court was seated and the books were opened. So what do we see about this eternal one, this everlasting one who's on the throne?

Verse 9 his clothing was as white as snow and his hair white like wool. In other words, he's perfectly pure. Sheer goodness all the way down.

His throne was flaming with fire and its wheels were all ablaze. So he is the holy one and everything evil just gets consumed by his holiness.

It's a consuming fire. And then verse 10 thousands upon thousands attended him. 10,000 times 10,000 stood before him.

[26 : 10] So you look around you and it's as though the courtroom you can see through the walls and as far as your eye can see there are these kind of warrior angels, more than you can count, all there to attend the everlasting holy God who is on his throne.

And in verse 11 he condemns the worst of the beasts. I continue 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. And then the promise over the page of verse 26 as the interpretation is given and we remember that little horn that represents he depicts the worst opposition to Christ's people in history. In verse 26 it says the court will sit and his power will be taken away and completely destroyed forever. I don't know whether you've been to a theme park in recent years but we took our kids to a theme park where there was an octopus ride and if you picture an octopus in the middle and these kind of eight legs coming off it, all as the octopus turn round all going up and down and at the end of each leg these holders for people to sit in that were spinning around on the end of the legs. So as you approach this ride what you see absolute chaos. This thing is just flying everywhere legs everywhere people everywhere screams everywhere. You look at the front of the queue where people are lining up to go in and you've got a teenager and he's just got two buttons and one presses start chaos and one presses stop and the whole thing finishes.

[28 : 09] And the message of Daniel 7 is the Lord saying to us be steady as you see chaos all around you as you see Russian soldiers at the borders of Ukraine be steady as you remember that God is allowing that freedom now but one day he'll press stop and the whole thing will finish and he'll hold everyone to account he'll open the books and evil will be destroyed forever.

How important to know that if you live in northern Nigeria and you're looking to serve Christ and Islamists are killing Christians or in Iran or Pakistan when you're invited to church and people are thrown into prison but also for us when we see victims around us of evil and we are perplexed by it we mustn't see human evil and think here is evidence that God can't be all powerful and all good because he tells us in Daniel chapter 7 he is there he is good he is powerful he'll press the stop button one day and he'll open the books in his courtroom and he'll put everything right and I was wondering was it this dream that helped Daniel show the courage we saw him show in chapter 6 the steady faithfulness we saw last week when threatened by a power and thrown into the lion's den he'd had this dream could it help you and me this week to be steady when things down here things under the sky seem out of control and we're told in heaven there is a courtroom where God reigns and then Daniel sees something else so our third point we've seen the monsters we've seen the courtroom thirdly there is a king who will reign forever so in this extraordinary scene that Daniel sees in his dream of the ancient of days that gives him breathtaking reassurance have a look with me at verse 13 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 so the term he is son of man just means a human at the same time he's more than that because he's coming on the clouds and it's God who comes on the clouds of heaven and this man is led into the presence of God this man can go in where there's that flame of fire and where the throne has wheels flaming with fire where there's the river coming out he passes by all those countless warrior angels guarding the throne who is this man and how can he be given this access and then more than that extraordinary the most extraordinary thing happens in verse 14 he the son of man was given authority glory and sovereign power all nations and people of every language worshipped him every person who's ever lived is to bow their knees and pay homage to a man and worship him as we worship the ancient of days he's given he's being handed this authority and not just for a time that's the key distinctive between this man and his kingdom and all the other kingdoms in this chapter not just for a time verse 14 his dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed so when Jesus speaks about himself he calls himself the son of man and it's like a code word for anyone who's read Daniel chapter 7 anyone who knows about Daniel's dream it's like meeting someone today and them saying to you I'm Clark Kent and to some people it's just a name but if you've seen Superman you think this person's claiming something about themselves it's loaded with a different identity and as we see the son of man in the gospels we're to think Daniel chapter 7 and then we see servanthood and humility we see a man who gets weary a man who weeps for Jerusalem a man who gets mocked by soldiers blindfolded and who can't carry his own cross because he's so weak a man of sorrows and that he's also a man with the unparalleled glory of God who can control nature who can pass by his friends in their boat at night walking on the water who Peter James and John see on a mountain and his clothes go blindingly bright and Moses and Elijah join him and there's this moment in John's gospel where they come to arrest Jesus in the garden and they say they want Jesus of Nazareth and Jesus says I am he and John tells us that when Jesus says I am he he's using God's name I am and that when he proclaimed I am in the garden the

soldiers fell back they drew back and fell to the ground it's an extraordinary moment just revealing a glimpse of his authority he's brought before the religious leaders and the high priest asks him if he's the Messiah and he says I am and you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven it's true for all of us we will see him as he is in Daniel 7 and before we see that he has come to go to the cross to die the sin bearing death to bear the fire of God's holiness so that

[34 : 23] God can keep his promise of Daniel 7 to us and this is another remarkable thing about this chapter that you see the Son of Man in the middle of the chapter and then we don't hear about him again and look at the end of the chapter the interpretation in verse 27 where we might have heard of the Son of Man again 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 because he has come first to serve and to win a people bearing their sin he can invite us to reign with him and as we share the Lord's Supper together today we anticipate that gathering with him on the last day behind every little horn of opposition to Christ and his church is Satan the evil spiritual being and one day the lion of Judah will destroy him and everyone who is waiting in hope for his coming will be invited by him come now and take your place at my banqueting table for everything is ready so Daniel's dream warns us that in our times monsters will rule and things for God's people will be very very hard but there is a day coming when the beasts will all be gone and the saints will be all that remain let's pray together ancients of days and heavenly father we praise you that despite all the destructive forces and chaos at work in our world you reign on your throne your throne is holy your courtroom is just we praise you that you have installed your king the lord jesus that you have given him authority the right to be worshipped and that his kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom we pray your kingdom come that you will build jesus kingdom among us today as people turn to him and are saved and that lord jesus you will come soon to bring an end to the reign of the beasts and to rule forever with righteousness and justice help us to keep our eyes fixed on you in the humility you displayed to seek and save us and the glorious majesty that every eye will see so that like daniel we can stand firm and be faithful we pray for your namesake amen before we come to