

Daniel 7:1-18, Matthew 26:63b-64

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[0 : 00] Thank you very much for your welcome. My wife Carolyn has flu, she's very sad not to be with me today but I'm delighted to be back here with you.

We listen this morning, if you'd like to turn back to that first reading that we heard in Daniel chapter 7, I think it's page 744 in the Church Bibles, Daniel chapter 7 and we listen this morning to one of the most extraordinary dreams in human history.

It's a dream which is at the same time terrifying and it really is terrifying but also deeply comforting. And you may be saying, as this was read, as Ruben read this, you may be thinking this is a very puzzling dream, I wonder if I can understand this.

And I just want to say at the beginning, the key to understanding this dream is not being very clever, I'm sure some of you are very clever, others of us may be less clever.

[1 : 09] But how clever you are is not the key to understanding this dream. I'll tell you the key right up front and it's this. If you are finding the world a painful, a sad, a difficult place to live in and you sometimes feel that you're being chewed up, all chewed up inside, it's as though there's some kind of monster chewing you up. It may be somewhere in your workplace and it's really, really difficult there.

Or a head teacher or a supervisor or someone with power over you in your family and they're treating you badly. Or it may be inward struggles with temptation and testing in your state of mind and heart.

Or just all the troubles and miseries of living in a broken world and it really gets to you. And you come to church, as a friend of mine says many people do, quietly desperate.

And you may be smiling outside, but inwardly you are desperate for some good news. If that's you, Daniel 7 is the most marvellous part of the Bible to listen to.

If your answer to the question, how are you, is, well I'm fine, then Daniel 7 may not make much sense. But listen in because there'll be times when you're not fine. Store it up in your mental and your emotional treasure box.

[2 : 33] The book of Daniel, chapter 1, gives the background. Daniel and his friends are some of a number of people who were taken forcibly out of their land, the land with Jerusalem as its capital, the promised land of God, to Babylon as exiles.

And they're out of their land, they're away from their land. And chapters 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7, this is, I don't know whether this will interest you, but most of the Old Testament is written in Hebrew.

But Daniel chapters 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 is written in a slightly later language called Aramaic. We don't know quite why they're written in that language. But chapters 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 are the really well-known ones with the exciting stories that get into children's storybook Bibles.

The Fiery Furnace, Daniel and the Lion's Den, those kinds of things. And a number of the children showed they were very familiar with them earlier and that was great.

Daniel 7 is the last of that section, but it's also the beginning of some strange visions that fill the rest of the book. And so Daniel chapter 7 is a kind of linchpin, it's a kind of hinge chapter.

[3 : 53] It's a really, really important chapter in the book of Daniel. Plus, it's quoted a lot in the New Testament. About five and a half centuries before Jesus came and Daniel has this dream to beat all his other dreams.

It's a dream in three parts. So first of all, if you've got your Bible open, verses 1 through to 8, there are beasts. Daniel is by the sea.

He has this dream. Most of our dreams are just fuzzy-wuzzy things. You wake up and someone says, what's it about? And I say, well, I don't know what it's about. But Daniel knows this is a God-given dream.

And he says, verse 2, I was by the great sea, which sometimes just means the Mediterranean Sea in Bible, Old Testament Bible language.

But here it has the sense of the Bible place of terror and chaos and darkness at the bottom of the sea, the place of the dead. And it's not like being at the seaside for a holiday.

[5 : 02] This is a frightening place. And the four winds of heaven stirred up, which is a way of saying there is the mother and father of a storm. And it's a terrifying picture in Daniel's dream.

And then it gets worse because these four great beasts, these monsters, come out of the sea. And the first one is like a lion, the king of the jungle.

Just in the previous chapter, Daniel's been in the lion's den. But this lion-like creature has wings like an eagle's wings. So the eagle, which is the kind of king of the birds of prey, and the lion, which is the king of the jungle.

This is a kind of predator's predator. This is a terrifying creature. It's a sort of hybrid. It's a distortion of the created order. You can see a lion in the zoo.

You can see an eagle. But you can't see anything like this. It's a something distorted and wrong. And then it's made to stand on two feet like a man.

[6 : 05] And the mind of a man is given to it. So this strange creature looks and sounds sort of human. But actually, it's beastly and ugly and a predator.

There's something very frightening about this lion. But then before Daniel has time to get used to this beast, verse 5, there's another beast.

And this one is like a bear. I don't know if you've been walking in, say, Canada or somewhere in the forest where they say, watch out for the bear. And I vaguely remember this one bear you're meant to make a lot of noise and frighten it.

There's another bear you're meant to get out of the way. And I can never remember which is which. And I always think if I met a bear, I'd have to say, excuse me, are you a grizzly bear? Or, you know, what sort of bear are you? But it may then be too late.

But this is a really frightening bear. And as you see this bear, it's raised up on one side. Nobody's quite sure what one side means. It may mean it just gets up on its hind legs and stands up, as bears sometimes do, rather than being on all fours.

[7 : 14] But look at it. It's got three ribs in its mouth between its teeth because it's been eating. And it's told, arise, devour much flesh. So you've got this lion-eagle thing, which is a predator.

Then you've got this bear, which is kind of insatiable. It just keeps eating, eating, eating, eating. And you discover later that all these monsters are kind of pictures of human power when it gets spoiled in the world.

This is the world we live in. And this is not a teddy bear or a Paddington bear. And this is a bear that in its misuse of power, whether it's the unwanted bodies of old men and women or the unwanted bodies of unborn boys and girls or the unwanted bodies of undesirable people, of another race and massacres and genocides, all that sort of thing that goes on in the world, this bear is the sort of picture of that kind of terrifying misuse of power.

And then because before Daniel has time to get used to this in verse 6, there's another beast. And this one's like a leopard, so it's fast. And it has four wings of a bird on its back.

I don't know quite what that means. It may mean it can kind of jump or fly in any direction. But there's something very fast and frightening about it. And it's got four heads.

[8 : 42] And that usually means four heads, one looking in each direction. So you can't hide from it. It can see everywhere. It's inescapable. It's a kind of picture of power that you can't escape from.

I think in Hatfield House, there's a famous portrait of Queen Elizabeth I in which her dress is covered with eyes. And it was a propaganda portrait that was sent round, copies of it round the country.

It was a sort of way of saying, with my spy network, I can see you wherever you are. And this leopard is like that, only much worse with four heads. And you can't escape this frightening power. Well, these first three beasts are bad, but the fourth one in verse 7 is worse still. After this, I saw in the night visions. So you've got to kind of restart to the dream.

And behold, a fourth beast. Look, terrifying, dreadful, exceedingly strong. It's not like anything. At least the others, it was sort of like something you might see in a zoo.

[9 : 44] But this one isn't like anything. Utterly terrifying. Its teeth are made of iron. And so there's nothing can stop it eating.

And it devours and it breaks in pieces and it stamps what's left with its feet. And it's different from the others. And it's got ten horns. Not the usual two horns, but five lots of two.

Ten horns. Very, very strong and aggressive. And it's a terrifying thing. And it's hard really for us in fairly civilised England to get the feeling for this.

But I was reading some years ago of a New Zealand fishing boat trying to get some sort of toothfish in the waters of Antarctica. And instead they fished up a colossal squid.

It was 12 metres long. It weighed half a ton. Its eyes were the size of plates. And on the end of its tentacles it had 25 razor sharp hooks. If you made calamari rings from its tentacles, they would be the size of tractor tyres.

[10:49] Now imagine being in the sea and coming face to face with something like that. That's the sort of terror that this fourth beast conjures up. You're meant to be, and I'm sure Daniel in his dream was, shivering with fear.

It's really, really frightening. And then there's some strange development. You've got these ten horns. And then there's a little horn, another horn. And it kind of uproots three of the first horns. And in this horn there are eyes like the eyes of a man and a mouth speaking great things, which means boastful things. So it's very full of itself.

And you discover later that these are a sort of picture of four kings or kingdoms or dynasties or something like that. And nobody knows, presumably in Daniel's day, there were some particular kings or kingdoms.

And, you know, you can do PhDs on this, as to which they were, and you'll be none the wiser at the end. But you'll have a PhD, so that'll be good. But that's not really the point.

[11:56] So the book of Revelation at the end of the Bible, in chapter 13, has a similar-ish sort of vision. And the point of it is this. Human power, because of our greed and our selfishness and our sinfulness, human power is always a distorted and a sub-human and a beastly thing.

It looks human, it sounds human, but it's beastly. I suppose that's why in Christian fantasy, like the Narnia stories or the Lord of the Rings or the Wingfeather Saga, which my wife and I are reading at the moment, I suppose it's why the forces of evil tend to be portrayed as sort of human-ish creatures, like wargs and goblins and orcs, or the fangs of dang.

And they're sort of human-ish, but they're obviously not. They're beastly, and there's something ugly about that. Now, the Bible is utterly realistic about the world we live in and what a frightening world it is.

I don't know which countries you're in touch with. I've been in touch with friends in Nigeria, where the Christians are being persecuted every week, every month.

It doesn't usually get to our media. A friend of mine, his nephew and wife, were kidnapped. Some of the members of the church were kidnapped recently. A friend in Ethiopia. And yet you will be in touch with plenty of other parts of the world where it's very obvious that human power is used in a subhuman way, a beastly way.

[13:33] And if I may just pause there after that first part of the dream, we mustn't be seduced by human messianic figures. We love a great, handsome, good-looking leader who sounds impressive.

We must never be seduced by that. All human power is subhuman in some way. Even the very best of our leaders are less than they ought to be.

And we're not to be surprised by that. And if I can say this, we're not to be fooled by the sort of myth of progress, that things are getting better and better and better.

Because in Daniel's dream, they don't get better and better and better. They get worse and worse. And it's really frightening. And the Bible is utterly realistic that the world is a frightening place.

There are beasts. But then, in the second part of the dream, from verses 9 through 12, they will be punished. And there's an extraordinary scene, equally frightening in a way, but frightening in a much better way.

[14:40] There's a change in the music. And it's almost as though there's a split stage in Daniel's dream with a one-way mirror between them. So Daniel can see both parts of the stage.

On one part, he sees the beasts rampaging around and the horn speaking boastful things. And then the beasts can't see this. But in the other part of the stage, thrones are placed, verse 9.

I'm threatened by anyone. They're placed, these thrones. They can't be moved. And the Ancient of Days, unconstrained by time, not old and withered, as I'm becoming, but outside of time, beyond

time.

The beasts come and go. But here is one who is God eternal. And his clothing is white, and the hair of his head is like pure wool.

Not just as a sign of being eternal, but a sign of purity. Utterly uncorrupted by evil. And his throne, there are fiery flames, and it's got wheels.

[15 : 43] It's a movable throne, a chariot throne. You meet it in the prophet Ezekiel as well. It's unconstrained by space. It's a throne that can go anywhere. And it's utterly terrifying to evildoers, because there's this stream of fire coming from it, burning holiness like lava from a volcano.

And this huge army, thousands and thousands and ten thousands of ten thousands. You're not meant to do mathematics on that. It's just a lot, a big lot.

An unbeatable army backing up this throne. And then books are opened, verse 10. There's no secrecy. All the things that people have done and said that they thought were hidden, that other people would never know, the books are opened and everything is seen and heard and brought out into the open.

And it's a terrifying scene, but it's also a wonderful scene. And the little horn doesn't seem to have any idea about it, because in verse 11, the little horn is still speaking.

How great I am, how important I am, how powerful I am, etc. And you want to say to the horn, behind you, it's like a pantomime almost, except it's far more serious than that.

[17 : 03] You want to say to the little horn, look at the thrones that are placed, look at the Ancient of Days, look at the stream of fire. You're in big trouble. And sure enough, he is and the beast is killed, and the other beasts, their dominions taken away, but their lives are prolonged.

There's a sort of, the world is still a messed up place, but somehow the victory's been won and the judgment has been given. And sometimes that happens in human history, but ultimately it looks to the end of history.

So there are the first two parts of the dream. There are beasts, and the Bible is ruthlessly realistic about what a painful, troubled, distorted world we live in, and we all know that.

And then the Bible says they will be punished. But the third part of the dream, verses 13 and 14, a man will rule the world. I saw in the night visions, and behold, look, with the clouds of heaven, and the clouds, so often in Bible language, the clouds indicate that God is present.

You get that at Mount Sinai, particularly, you get clouds, God is present, and there are clouds of heaven, and there comes one like a son of man. Beast, beast, beast, beast.

[18 : 22] And now there's a human figure, a perfect human figure, who is also divine. He comes with the clouds. Here is one who is perfect God and perfect man, and he comes.

As the second Adam, the last Adam, we've sung of him in a way in Psalm 8, as we've just sung. And he comes to the Ancient of Days. None of the beasts get allowed access to the Ancient of Days.

But this divine human son of man comes to the Ancient of Days, and he's presented to him, and he's given dominion, legitimate power, and he's given glory, visible power, and he's given a kingdom, absolute power, so that the whole world will serve him, and will do so forever.

It's an extraordinary picture, and you're bound to be asking, as Daniel will have asked, who is this divine human figure? And in our second reading, we heard, centuries later, more than 500 years later, a prisoner standing in the dock, and his judges were the leaders of the people of God, and they saw him as a beastly troublemaker.

They wanted him destroyed like the beast. And finally, one of them says, tell us if you're the Christ, the Son of God, and Jesus says to him, you've said so, but I tell you, from now on, you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.

[20 : 01] Jesus knew what he was talking about. They knew what he was talking about. They knew the book of Daniel. They knew Daniel 7. Jesus knows that they know Daniel 7. And Jesus is saying, the Son of Man, this human figure, his favourite title for himself as he walked in Galilee and Jerusalem, his favourite title, the Son of Man, you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power, with the Ancient of Days, he might have said, and coming on the clouds of heaven.

And it's an extraordinary thing for a man to say. And he's saying, if you know the Bible, you'll know that right at the beginning of creation, God created Adam and then Eve, so that Adam, with Eve at his side, would govern the world as the world ought to be governed.

Human being governing the world, a man governing the world, that's how it ought to be. But Adam abdicated. And we all have inherited from Adam our sinful nature, sinful in its origins.

and we're messed up, and therefore, everything we do and every way in which we act as fathers, mothers, children, teachers, managers, whatever it is we do in our week, there's something in us that looks human, but there's something about it that is distorted and beastly.

And now at last, we see this vision of the perfect man, the one like a son of man, this human figure who comes with the clouds of heaven because he is fully divine and fully human.

[21 : 54] And he comes to the ancient of days and he's given, as Jesus himself will later say, all authority in heaven and on earth.

And the question, if you're paying attention to this dream, is, how should I respond to this? And we thought of some of the responses not to be seduced by impressive human leadership, not to be fooled and to think the world's getting better and better, not to be surprised when things go wrong. It's very interesting in our culture, isn't it, that the secular, the secular liberal can never quite cope with human evil. All the secular liberal can do is to say, well, we ought to behave better.

Well, I'm sure we ought to behave better. But to say we ought to behave better doesn't achieve anything except making us feel bad that we don't behave better.

but we're not surprised by human evil and we're not surprised by evil in our own hearts. I don't know about you, there are times in my life and there are still perhaps more and more times in my life when under pressure something of the evil of my own heart comes to the surface and I think, oh no, I've been a follower of Jesus for 50 years, more than 50 years, and have I not learned anything?

[23 : 29] And Daniel's dream says, don't be surprised at human evil. But it also says to us, it will be punished and a man will rule the world.

But there's one more thing and I want to draw out this one more thing. We only read up to verse 18 because it's got the key to this one more thing.

In verse 15, Daniel says, his spirit within him was anxious and the visions of his head alarmed him. It's hardly surprising, is it? If you had a dream like that, I think you'd feel like that.

At the end of the chapter, he says, my colour changed, which I think means I went pale. I was kind of shivering with fear. It was a terrifying dream. Worse than the worst nightmare in some ways.

And so he's frightened. And so he approaches, verse 16, one of those who stood there. So obviously there were sort of people around who might be able to help, like you might go to a bystander.

[24 : 28] And I asked him the truth concerning this. So he told me and he made known to me the interpretation. And he said, verse 17, these four great beasts are four kings who will arise out of the earth.

This is something that's happening in human history. But, verse 18, look at verse 18. The saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever, forever, and ever.

The saints of the Most High. And you discover something really important, which is that this man, this divine human figure who comes with the clouds of heaven and is given dominion and glory and power and a kingdom.

You discover that he's not just a solitary individual, he's the representative man who leads a people. And you discover as you read the rest of the Bible that every man, woman, and child who belongs to him will be, in the language of this chapter, the saints of the Most High, the set-apart people. And that, as Jesus himself said, it is my Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. In the Gospels, he says, fear not, little flock.

[25 : 49] You're very weak. I've sent you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. It's a frightening world and plenty of our Christian brothers and sisters know what a frightening world it is. But, it is my Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

And the Bible teaches this astonishing and wonderful truth. Not just that Jesus, the divine human one, will rule the world, but that his people, his unimpressive people, men, women, and children, who feel, if you're anything like me, so ordinary and so weak and sometimes so pathetic and struggling with life, that every one of those will be one of the saints of the Most High, is one of the saints of the Most High, and will, in the language of verse 18, receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever and ever.

So be cheered. That's why I asked if we could have that little question and answer from the Heidelberg Catechism. What comfort is it to you that Christ will come to judge the living and the

dead?

In all my sorrow and persecution, and the people who wrote the Heidelberg Catechism knew all about being persecuted, I lift up my head and I eagerly await as judge from heaven, the one who submitted himself to the judgment of God for my place.

So I look up and I think, coming with the clouds of heaven is this perfect man, the man who is God and he is coming to judge and he promises that when he comes I will rule with him.

[27 : 42] So take heart. If you come to church this morning quietly, desperate, and there's something going on in your life or your health or your family or someone dear to you or your workplace or you're troubled by the troubles of a wider world and you come to church desperate, let Daniel 9 cheer you.

Feel the fear of the beasts and how terrifying that is. It's utterly realistic. As you read that you think it's sort of cartoon language but yes, the world is like that.

But then see the judgment, see the court sitting and the ancient of days, see the judgment given. There are beasts, they will be punished but then see this man ruling the world and ruling the world as your representative covenant head, ruling the world as the one who has given his life to pay the punishment for sinners that he may ransom a people and give them the world to rule.

My friends, I really hope, it's one of the odd things about coming as a visiting preacher that you, apart from one or two friends here, I don't know you and you don't know me but I'd be very surprised if we were to tell our stories, I'd be very surprised if there weren't quite a lot of stories of pain and distress and suffering and anxieties and all manner of different ways in which we feel our own brokenness and the brokenness of a broken world.

I know in the church where my wife and I belong in Cambridge that's certainly true and I'd be very surprised if it weren't true here. If that is you, take heart.

[29 : 36] let the drama of Daniel 7 sink into your mind not just as a funny cartoon story but as something which expresses in this vivid language of the dream something of what the world is and how the world is and that there is a divine human figure to whom all authority is given and who will rule the world.

Let's be quiet for a moment and I'll pray before we sing our final hymn.