

Daniel Series Part 15

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 12 February 2012

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] I'm currently reading Stephen Hawking's A Brief History of Time. It's one of those books I've always meant to read but didn't quite get round to. It's amazing, though it may seem, it's now coming up to 25 years since it was first published. Well, the book, for all that it's intended to be a popular treatment, I suppose, of its subject matter, was still just, for me at any rate, a little intimidating. And as I have tiptoed into the task, I was intrigued to read Hawking's proud boast in the foreword that he has sold more books on physics than Madonna has on sex.

Now, I did wonder what this rather gratuitous statistic is meant to prove. Does the coherence and reliability of the content grow in direct proportion to the number of books sold? Well, I rather think not. Now, where am I going with this reference to A Brief History of Time?

Well, this morning we want to think about Daniel's vision, recorded in chapter 7 of the book that bears his name, a vision that we could describe as a brief history of time. Now, in fairness, Daniel's vision does not take us right back to the Big Bang or the beginning, however you wish to describe it, but it does span a pretty significant chunk of time from approximately 6,000 B.C. with the Babylonian Empire at its zenith. Indeed, that's the time that we find Daniel in, through to the present, and indeed into the future, a future that is, we are assured, drawing or being drawn to a very definite climax. So, what can we say concerning Daniel's vision? Before we embark on this, a couple of presuppositions to clarify before we begin. First of all, we are working on the understanding that this vision is granted by God to Daniel, granted with the purpose of revealing to Daniel the course of human history in very broad brushstrokes. And given its source, it is true and trustworthy.

If not always clear as to its meaning and as a comfort for us, it is interesting to note that Daniel himself, not in this chapter, but in a subsequent chapter, is quite willing to recognize that he did not understand the vision that he had received. So, we ought not to feel too upset or humbled if we also have some difficulties. This vision provides Daniel with what we could describe as three complementary perspectives on human history. And we want to think about these three complementary perspectives as a kind of overview of the chapter, of the vision very particularly.

First of all, we're going to notice that he has granted what we might call a horizontal perspective, or what we see, what we observe in this world that we live in, a horizontal perspective.

[3 : 5 2] But the vision grants to Daniel also a vertical perspective, or we might say what God sees. What is God's perspective on what is going on in this world that we live in?

But I think the vision also grants a third perspective that I'm describing as an ultimate perspective. Or in other words, we could say, where are we going? The vision does grant insight into that, if you wish, future or ultimate perspective. Where are we going? Where is all this heading?

So, three perspectives. They complement each other. They're related to one another, but they're distinct perspectives. A horizontal perspective, what we see. A vertical perspective, what God sees. But also, an ultimate perspective, where are we going? First of all, then, a horizontal perspective, or what we see.

Now, the horizontal perspective is provided in the first part of the vision, as it begins there in verse 2. Daniel said, In my vision at night I looked, and there before me were four great winds of heaven churning up the great sea. Churning up the great sea. And then it goes on to describe what has been and what will be going on on the stage of human history. It's described at the beginning of the chapter, and then from verse 16 we have the interpretation of it, or at least in a measure an interpretation of this first part of the vision. What is the picture that is painted? What is it that we see as we look at the course of human history? Well, the great sea that is mentioned there in verse 2 at the very beginning of the vision represents the world. A sea that is turbulent and stormy, representing a world that is in a constant state of flux and movement and conflict. And this is the world that serves as a stage for the rise and fall of empires and kingdoms, represented in the vision by four great beasts.

Indeed, that is what Daniel is explicitly told in the explanation or the interpretation of the vision. There in verse 17, the four great beasts are four kingdoms that will rise from the earth.

[6 : 30] But what are the kingdoms represented by the beasts? And what of the fourth beast, different from all the former beasts? And what of the ten horns? And what of the little horn? Well, these questions have been a source of frenzied speculation over many generations, and often generating considerably more heat than light.

And so we do well to tread carefully. That said, we are able to come to tentative conclusions, certainly concerning the four beasts, if not with definitive confidence as we move on to the matter of the horns and the little horn. Now, as we seek to understand what is being said and what these beasts represent or seek to identify the kingdoms that they are speaking of, it is helpful to notice that there does seem to be a clear connection between this vision and Nebuchadnezzar's dream that we considered a few weeks ago that's recorded for us in chapter 2 of the book. And recognizing and accepting that there is a connection, that the four kingdoms symbolized by the four beasts. So I make that clear at this point, that I am making that connection, that Nebuchadnezzar's dream and the kingdoms that are identified there are paralleled by the beasts in this vision and the kingdoms that they represent. So having made that point, or having established that groundwork, I suppose, we can think about the beasts that we have read of there in chapter 7. First of all, we have read of the lion with the wings of an eagle. And this beast would seem to correspond with the head of gold of the statue in Nebuchadnezzar's dream, which, for those of us who were here and can remember, was identified very explicitly as being a reference to

Babylon. It's also interesting to notice that here in chapter 7, when the vision goes on to give a little bit more detail concerning the lion with the wings, there would seem to be quite clear allusions to Nebuchadnezzar's insanity and restoration. Notice there in verse 4, the first was like a lion, and 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 man, and the heart of a man was given to it. So the first beast, the lion, with the wings of an eagle, would seem to symbolize and represent Babylon.

The next beast that we encounter in the chapter is the bear. And the bear would correspond, if we follow this connection or parallel with Nebuchadnezzar's dream and his statue, the bear would correspond to the chest and arms of silver of that statue, and symbolizes the empire that conquered and displaced Babylon as the dominant world power, the Medo-Persian empire. So that would be the second beast, or that would be the kingdom represented by the second beast. We then find in the vision that there is a third beast identified, a leopard with four wings, and that leopard would correspond to the belly and thighs of bronze of Nebuchadnezzar's statue, and would seem to symbolize the rise of the Greek empire under Alexander the Great. And the winged leopard as a symbol of that empire would seem to be a very apt symbol, given what we know from not only biblical but from other sources. We know in great detail the astonishing pace with which Alexander extended his kingdom. I think I mentioned a few weeks ago in connection with Alexander how when he had reached the very frontiers of his expansion, he sat down and wept, for there were no more kingdoms to conquer. And he was still a young man. And so a leopard with four wings would seem to correspond with that empire, and very particularly Alexander at the head of it.

But then we have in Daniel's dream, in Daniel's vision, a fourth beast. And this beast is rather intriguingly described as different from the others. And following the parallel with Nebuchadnezzar's statue would correspond to the legs and feet of iron of that statue, which we suggested previously would correspond to the Roman Empire. It's at this point where different interpreters begin to come to different conclusions. But we are comfortable with the suggestion that is indeed the Roman Empire that is symbolized by this fourth beast. And indeed, the Roman Empire was an empire that could be said to have, in the language of verse 23, as the vision is explained, it could rightly be described as an empire that devoured the whole earth, trampling it down and crushing it. Perhaps this reference to the whole earth, with the exception of the savages in Caledonia, that even the Romans were unable to tame.

[12 : 24] The big picture then, as we identify the kingdoms represented by these beasts, the big picture from this horizontal perspective, what we are able to see, what we, those who came before us, indeed those who will follow us as we look around this world that we live in. The horizontal picture is one of the rise and fall of empires, empires that are established by violent conquest and almost invariably cling to power on the back of tyranny and oppression and brute force. And really that big picture holds, even if we might differ on identifying what the kingdoms are, the identity of the kingdoms. I'm not saying that's unimportant, but I'm simply making the point that even if there can be differences of opinion as to what kingdoms are being spoken of in human history, the big truth, the big picture that has been painted remains the same. Kingdoms rise and kingdoms fall. And the great sea that is this world of ours is one characterized by conflict and violence, by movement and by change, often rapid and brutal.

And of course this pattern that is being laid out by the vision, is it a pattern that ends with Rome? If Rome is this fourth beast, is that when it all comes to a conclusion? Well, the implication of the vision is that this is a recurring pattern that we observe and should expect as history runs its course.

And this would seem to be the significance of the ten horns that Daniel is told there in verse 24, as the vision is interpreted for him, Daniel is told the ten horns are ten kings who will come from this kingdom. If Rome is indeed the fourth beast, then here Daniel is being told of subsequent kingdoms that it would emerge from or follow on from the Roman Empire. And I don't think it's the case that we are intended to identify these ten kingdoms as particular kingdoms, that we could identify and say, well, the first one is this kingdom and the second one is the other. Many have sought to do that, sometimes in quite fabulous ways. I don't think that's the intention. Ten, it would seem reasonable to understand as a number symbolizing totality. And so the vision is speaking of all the kingdoms that would follow the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, indeed, to this very day.

But what of the eleventh horn? What of the little horn? What or who does this horn represent? Well, this horn is presented in the vision as being marked by human features. Notice there at the end of verse 8 we read, this horn had eyes like the eyes of a man and a mouth that spoke boastfully.

In the interpretation of the vision, he is presented as one who is a distinct individual. who acts in a particular way. Then in verse 25, just to notice what we find there. He will speak, the reference being to this little horn, he will speak against the Most High and oppress his saints and try to change the set times and the laws. The saints will be handed over to him for a time, times and half a time.

[16 : 09] A distinct individual, a tyrant, marked by his blasphemous rants, his violent persecution of the saints, and his acclaim to divine prerogatives. This reference to him changing the set times and the laws is to be understood in that way. This is one who set himself up as God. Those who would have read this book would have had a very clear notion that it was God's prerogative to set the laws and set the times.

And so one who would come, who would take that upon himself, is one who is taking upon himself divine prerogatives. This is the eleventh horn. Now, much of what is said of this little horn would seem to coincide with the description provided by the Apostle Paul in the second letter to the Thessalonians. The one described as the man of lawlessness or the lawless one. The description of this eleventh horn, of the little horn, also would seem to coincide with the character described by John in his letters, where he speaks of this character as the Antichrist. And the similarities are such, though this morning we're not going to enter into a careful comparison, but the similarities are such as to suggest that the little horn may well be representing this dark and satanic figure identified in the New Testament as the Antichrist. Now, even in the making of that statement, questions immediately surface. Has this character yet appeared on the stage of human history?

Is he one distinct historical figure, whether he's appeared or as yet has not appeared? And for the moment, I shall leave those questions unanswered. You can deem that cowardice or prudence.

You can read it as you wish. What I would say is that human history is littered with a multiplicity of little horns. Men, and they are invariably men, with comically inflated egos, a disturbing taste for blood and violence, a visceral hatred of God's people, and a ludicrous God complex. This is something we can see. We can observe. Human history has many such personalities. In every age, there are those who rise up and who tick many of the boxes of this eleventh horn, this little horn, this man of lawlessness, this Antichrist. This is perhaps what John recognizes when he speaks of the Antichrist in the following way, and I quote from the first letter of John in chapter 2 and verse 18.

Dear children, this is the last hour, and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many Antichrists have come. And the same John when he speaks of the spirit of Antichrist as that spirit which is already in the world. And that language, I think, is helpful in at least giving us some, what shall we say, structure with which to understand and place these things. So, this is, to get back to Daniel's vision, this is the horizontal perspective of the vision granted to Daniel. What we see, a world that is turbulent marked by conflict and empire building, a world where kingdoms come and go, a world where those who seek to be faithful to God often find themselves the objects of opposition and violent persecution, a world where power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely, and indeed drives many of those who hold such power to the brink of insanity and certainly to fabulous delusions of grandeur. It's not a pretty picture, but would you not agree, one that has the ring of truth about it?

[20 : 57] But Daniel's vision has a second perspective, what we've called a vertical perspective, what God sees, or more accurately, what God does. The question could be asked in the light of what we've considered thus far, well, where is God in all of this? Where is God in the midst of the seeming chaos? Where is God in the midst of the very real suffering? Where is God as tyrants, including elected ones, strut their stuff?

Where is God as kingdoms come and as kingdoms go and as Christians are persecuted and as blood is shed? Where is God? And the vision provided to Daniel provides, in a measure, answers to these questions.

I'm not suggesting that the answers are provided in such a way as to satisfy all the questions that we might have legitimate questions, but in a measure, these questions are answered. And we can summarize God's involvement, as it's described in the vision, in two affirmations that are based on what is revealed in Daniel's vision. And the two things we can say is that God governs and that God judges. Or to put it in other words, God is in control, God always does the right thing. Even as Daniel is granted the horizontal perspective, there is the evident presence of an invisible hand. Notice there in verse 2 what we read, in my vision at night I looked and there before me were the four winds of heaven churning up the great sea. Even before the great sea is mentioned, there is this prior reference to the four winds of heaven.

And we know that the word heaven performs a very important function in the book of Daniel. Remember at the very beginning when we were trying to identify the big theme of Daniel, and what was it? Heaven rules. So these four winds of heaven identify at the very beginning of the vision that though this great sea, this world that we live in, is turbulent and violent, that it is one who is moving the sea, that our winds that are being sent to churn up the sea in the manner described.

As we move on and look at the beasts that are referred to there at the beginning of chapter 7, it's interesting to notice how even these beasts in all their violence and in all their proud boasting are described as those that are lifted up or raised up or given authority. We don't have time to look at the specific references, but it's interesting to see that even the lions and the bears and the leopards exercise authority not on the basis of their own capacity to seize that authority, but it is granted to them. It is God who establishes all authority, and it is God who grants even the tyrants. Difficult though that is for us to get our heads round. It is God who grants even the tyrants the power and authority that they wield and that they abuse. Remember that this truth is the one with which the book begins.

[24 : 24] At its very genesis, there in Daniel chapter 1, going back several months when we first looked at this chapter, and what do we read there in Daniel chapter 1? At the very beginning, in the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem and besieged it, and the Lord delivered Jehoiakim, king of Judah, into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar. So at the very beginning of the book, this truth, that it is God who governs is clearly identified and established. God is in control. Do I understand the manner in which He exercises His control? No, I do not. But I do know that He exercises His power and His control in a manner that perfectly reflects and concords with His nature as a God who is good, just, holy, merciful, and kind. God governs, but also God judges.

Verses 9 and 10 of the vision bring this into very sharp relief. In verses 9 and 10, we have recorded the moment in which the curtains of heaven are opened, and Daniel is granted a view of the throne room of God. We can read these verses, as I looked, thrones were set in place, and the ancient of days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow. His hair, 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. What does Daniel see? What is it that we see? Well, we see a God who is on the throne. A throne for a king, for the king, but also a throne for a judge, the judge.

The court was seated, and the books were opened. What is going on? What is it that Daniel is privy to? Well, God is judging, and he is presented as judging there and then. In the here and now, we might say, God is seated today on his throne of judgment. Now, the Bible certainly speaks of a future, definitive, and final day of judgment, but that should not lead us to conclude that his work of judgment is only a future one. No, he judges today. Now, the tyrants of this world think otherwise. They think they are untouchable. Is that not the case? Does Assad in Syria not think that he's untouchable? He has the military under his control. He has power that he wields. He's untouchable, and others can huff and puff, but he is in control, or so he thinks. Nobody is going to judge him, and we could, of course, multiply the examples. The tyrants of the world think they are untouchable, but they are wrong.

They are mistaken. There is in the vision an almost comical, we might say tragicomical, element in verse 11. Then in verse 11, as I read the chapter, my impression is that in verse 11, Daniel is still enthralled by this vision of the throne room, because immediately in what follows, we are back in the throne room with the appearance of one like the Son of Man. So, the vision is still in the throne room of God, and yet, though he remains enthralled by the throne room, there is in his peripheral vision or peripheral hearing. There is the little horn, this little horn that we've already spoken of, and this little horn is vomiting his blasphemies. Then I continue to watch because of the boastful words the horn was speaking, and this little horn is clearly oblivious to the reality of the heavenly throne room. He sees no throne room. He sees no God seated on the throne. He sees no God judging the world. He does not see these things. And even as he voices his boastful blasphemies, he is summarily and justly destroyed and cast into the blazing fire. This is the second perspective, the heavenly perspective, what God sees, or rather what God is doing. What we see is this chaos. We see empires coming and going. We see tyrants who are untouchable, creating havoc and harming people and doing violence, and nobody calls them to account. That's what we see. But we also are granted, by means of Daniel's vision, this other perspective of what God sees, of what God is doing, governing and judging. But there is finally a third perspective, what we described at the beginning as the ultimate perspective, or if you wish, where we are going. You see, the first two perspectives, revealing as they are, and in the case of the heavenly perspective, glorious and overwhelming, they still leave us with a big question. They leave us with this question, but where is all this going? Yes, the world we observe around is, in great measure, as the vision portrays. Yes, certainly as Christians we do, by faith, accept and rest in the assurance that God is governing and that God is judging. But is this some never-ending process? Is there no ultimate purpose or climax to history? Well, there is. And the vision grants that ultimate perspective.

And that ultimate perspective, that ultimate climax, that ultimate purpose, we discover, is all about Jesus. Notice in verse 13 and verse 14, In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the ancient of days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory, and sovereign power. All 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.

[31 : 14] Just as in Nebuchadnezzar's dream, there was described a coming eternal kingdom that would destroy the statue and that would rise up and be an everlasting and eternal kingdom. So, in Daniel's vision, this same kingdom is also revealed. The ancient of days grants authority, glory, and sovereign power to one like a son of man, who takes his place as king over an everlasting dominion that will never pass away.

And who is this one like a son of man? Well, he is the one who left the throne room and was born in a manger. He is the one who became flesh and dwelt among us. He is the one who spoke of himself as the son of man. He is the one who died and rose again. And as he was about to return to the heavenly throne room, was able to say to his disciples as he sent them into the world to build his kingdom, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

But if this eternal kingdom of righteousness and truth that will never be destroyed corresponds to the ultimate perspective, is it as yet a future reality? Well, this kingdom, the kingdom of Jesus, is very much a present reality. The king has come, and the king has established his kingdom.

Today, this eternal kingdom that is not of this world exists, if you wish, alongside the kingdoms of this world. It is often unseen, and many see little reason to acknowledge the king. But there is a day coming when this kingdom will visibly and gloriously be acknowledged as all other kingdoms are brought into the final subjection. And that day has been established, and will be the day that Jesus the king returns to visibly declare and exercise his absolute sovereignty over all. And the Word of God assures us that on that day, every knee shall bow, every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, that Jesus Christ is the king.

I wonder if Hawking's brief history of time with his science fiction-esque vision of time travel and parallel universe concords with reality. Well, I have my doubts. But what of Daniel's vision, Daniel's brief history of time? Does it provide a reliable description of human history? If it does, then we would do well to recognize and serve the king that it speaks of, the man called Jesus, the one to whom has been granted all authority on heaven and on earth. Let us pray.