

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Daniel: Seafaring”

Dr. Jay Howell

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Next week we wrap up our time in the Book of Daniel, so a word on what’s coming next. You may notice that today things kind of shift in Daniel to some strange visions. Well, we’re going to stay in that vein as we keep going in the summer. Starting a look at part of the Book of Revelation, a section known as the Trumpet judgments. Some may remember that about two years ago we spent time in a different section of the book, but we’re going to keep coming back to Revelation every so often, because for some it can seem like the boogeyman at the end of the Bible, and it doesn’t feel right for a book to feel like it’s off limits. That’ll start in two weeks.

But today we come to a part of Daniel marking a shift in the book and, for some, represents the “heart” of the book. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

7 In the first year of King Belshazzar of Babylon, Daniel had a dream and visions of his head as he lay in bed. Then he wrote down the dream: ² I, Daniel, saw in my vision by night the four winds of heaven stirring up the great sea, ³ and four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another. ⁴ The first was like a lion and had eagles’ wings. Then, as I watched, its wings were plucked off, and it was lifted up from the ground and made to stand on two feet like a human being; and a human mind was given to it. ⁵ Another beast appeared, a second one, that looked like a bear. It was raised up on one side, had three tusks in its mouth among its teeth and was told, ‘Arise, devour many bodies!’ ⁶ After this, as I watched, another appeared, like a leopard. The beast had four wings of a bird on its back and four heads; and dominion was given to it. ⁷ After this I saw in the visions by night a fourth beast, terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong. It had great iron teeth and was devouring, breaking in pieces, and stamping what was left with its feet. It was different from all the beasts that preceded it, and it had ten horns. ⁸ I was considering the horns, when another horn appeared, a little one coming up among them; to make room for it, three of the earlier horns were plucked up by the roots. There were eyes like human eyes in this horn, and a mouth speaking arrogantly.

⁹ As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One took his throne; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, and its wheels were burning fire. ¹⁰ A stream of fire issued and flowed out from his presence. A thousand thousand served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him. The court sat in judgment, and the books were opened. ¹¹ I watched then because of the noise of the arrogant words that the horn was speaking. And as I watched, the beast was put to death, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire. ¹² As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time. ¹³ As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. ¹⁴ To him was given dominion and glory

and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.

¹⁵ As for me, Daniel, my spirit was troubled within me, and the visions of my head terrified me. ¹⁶ I approached one of the attendants to ask him the truth concerning all this. So he said that he would disclose to me the interpretation of the matter: ¹⁷ ‘As for these four great beasts, four kings shall arise out of the earth. ¹⁸ But the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever—forever and ever.’

¹⁹ Then I desired to know the truth concerning the fourth beast, which was different from all the rest, exceedingly terrifying, with its teeth of iron and claws of bronze, and which devoured and broke in pieces, and stamped what was left with its feet; ²⁰ and concerning the ten horns that were on its head, and concerning the other horn that came up, and to make room for which three of them fell out—the horn that had eyes and a mouth that spoke arrogantly, and that seemed greater than the others. ²¹ As I looked, this horn made war with the holy ones and was prevailing over them, ²² until the Ancient One came; then judgement was given for the holy ones of the Most High, and the time arrived when the holy ones gained possession of the kingdom. Daniel 7:1-22.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? O Ancient of Days, we confess that so much around us feels unsettling and disorienting, so we praise you for your faithfulness to us and for your power and order over even the chaos that we see. Help us keep our eyes upon you, and may you be our center and calm in the midst of the storm. In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.

The fate of the submersible vessel called *Titan* has, I dare say, mesmerized a fair part of the country, the world even, this past week. If you’re not familiar, a group of “extreme tourists” went to visit the wreckage of the luxury liner the *Titanic*, now buried more than two miles deep in the North Atlantic, which means you have to be in a vessel that can withstand the exponential pressure of the water. That was the purpose of this submersible *Titan*.

Unfortunately, last week, the *Titan* experienced some kind of critical failure, imploding early into the dive. But along with all of the reporting about it, about the search, about the conditions, I think it has reminded us of something I think we all know on some level, but perhaps something we forget: that the sea, for all the ways that it might fascinate us, is unforgiving and often dangerous, and that water, while essential and replenishing for life, can just as quickly snuff it out.

Just a couple of weeks ago, we were down in Georgia with Frances’s family, and her folks have a small pool in their backyard. We’re trying to get the boys up to speed on their swimming, especially Jack, which means, we’re taking off the floaties and practicing swimming. So we’d have them both in the shallow end where they could stand, but without floaties on. Jack would push himself a little bit out into deeper water and then swim back to the side. And as he was

getting better at it, the four of us, Frances, myself, and her parents, would cheer him on and encourage him and all that.

Well, Harry, not to be outdone by his big brother, wanted to follow suit. So as we're looking at Jack and cheering him on when he gets to the other side, Harry pushes himself on out into deeper water too, but he's not quite there with his swimming. So we're cheering on Jack on one side of this small pool, only to turn to find little Harry flailing under the water. We're talking a matter of seconds, here. But we get him, pull him up, and of course he's scared and crying, and now we're all scared too, four adults out there watching two little kids, and that's how quickly it can happen.

This is nothing new. You don't need an ancient history degree to know that humanity has long been fearful of the sea, of the water, and at the same time drawn to it, and it was only for the truly intrepid explorers to go into uncharted waters, far from shore. For everyone else, we'll just stick close to shore, maybe put a line out to catch something if we can.

You see this in the Bible. Right at the very beginning, Genesis 1, anyone remember what was there? It wasn't nothing. It was: "a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep." Compounded on that was that the people of Israel throughout most of its history, despite not being too far from the ocean, really weren't a seafaring people. Aside from isolated instances of stories like Jonah—you know, Jonah and the Whale—Israel tended to be landlubbers—and perhaps they prove the point, the reason Jonah went into the ocean is because he was running away.

Really, the most regular exposure in the Bible to water or seafaring is in Jesus' early ministry with his disciples on the Sea of Galilee. You may remember the stories of the disciples, some of whom were experienced fishermen, straining at the oars and Jesus calming the waves. Powerful stories, but let's remember, this is happening on the Sea of Galilee, which is really not a sea at all. It's a lake. And think Lake Tahoe, not Lake Superior. Not to say the wind doesn't pick up, because it can and does there. Not to say the waves can't pick up either. And if you're in a rickety boat, waves and wind of any kind can be dangerous and terrifying. But we're not talking thirty-foot swells and rogue waves here.

For that, you'd have to go to the Mediterranean Sea, the "great sea" as it was known. And for your standard Israelite, no matter the century, few things would conjure up fear like the sea in all its churning wrath, because for them that wasn't just a body of water. It was the void. It was chaos. It was all-consuming and unforgiving.

And so when Daniel has a vision of a churning sea and what comes out of it, he is rightly terrified.

We picked up right where we left off last week from Daniel and the lion's den, but did anyone notice that there seemed to be a shift in what Daniel was talking about? One verse we're talking about Daniel's deliverance from death, and then the next, at the beginning of chapter 7: "In the first year of King Belshazzar of Babylon, Daniel had a dream and visions of his head as he lay in bed. Then he wrote down the dream: I, Daniel, saw in my vision by night the four winds of heaven stirring up the great sea, and four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another."

You might be thinking, well where on earth did that come from? For one, it's like we're backtracking, because it talks about King Belshazzar, who was the Babylonian king *before* the whole thing with the lion's den happened. So where is this coming from?

Well, the Book of Daniel is pretty much split in two. The first six chapters are court stories, of Daniel and his friends seeking to be faithful in exile. But then the last six chapters are a series of visions, and things get weird fast. Bible scholars have a big word for this sort of thing, not just in Daniel but elsewhere, especially Revelation in the New Testament, and that word is: apocalyptic.

We'll talk about this a lot more when we get to that Revelation series, but when we hear "apocalyptic," we usually think "end of the world" sort of stuff, and yeah that can be a part of it. But we miss the deeper point if we think it's all about predicting the future. The deeper point is that it is revealing something, often in cryptic terms and terrifying imagery, not just for understanding or predicting the future, but maybe more importantly for guiding our understanding of the present and galvanizing a response of faith among the people of God.

That's what "apocalyptic" means, and Daniel 7-12 is apocalyptic, a vision revealed to Daniel.

And what does he see? A churning sea, and out of it four beasts. Did you catch the descriptions? It wasn't just lions and tigers and bears, oh my. They were weird. A lion with eagles' wings. Then, a bear, but with tusks. Then like a leopard, but with four wings and four heads. Finally the best for last. The fourth beast, "terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong," Daniel says, with iron teeth and ten horns, then another little horn pops up with eyeballs and a mouth of its own, "speaking arrogantly."

(If we have any Revelation scholars, you might recognize some of the imagery here, because it bears a striking resemblance to a figure in Revelation known as the "beast from the sea," commonly referred to as the Antichrist, except it's like the four beasts have been combined into one. It's like in that old kids show Power Rangers. Anyone remember that one? Each Power

Ranger has their machine, but then to fight the big bad guy, they all have to combine to make “Megazord.” That’s kind of what happens in Revelation.)

Point is, this is no sweet dream. Over and over, Daniel notes how terrified he is, and yet also captivated. He can’t look away. He wants to know more, even. He’s later told that the four beasts are four kings, ruling four empires. Some theorize that perhaps this is meant to point to the sequence of empires from Babylon to Persia to Alexander the Great and the Greeks—some also throw Rome in there too. But the point is that these beasts, these kings, arise out of the sea, the chaos, the churn of everything, consuming everything.

For little old Israel, that’s what it had to have felt like. In this stretch of its history, it’d feel like as a people you were at the whims of whatever empire was rampaging through your homeland: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome. And there you are, caught and trampled underfoot. It’s terrifying. Like a rickety boat caught in the swells.

I’ve never been much for the open sea, myself. My coastal family taught me to sail, which is to say, I learned how to operate a dingy in the intracoastal waterway, but like Israel, never been a “pirate’s life for me,” so to speak.

But years ago I found myself on a small sailboat going through a small stretch of the Caribbean Sea between Colombia and Panama. Part of a longer story as to how I got there, but in any case, there I was. About a thirty foot sailboat. Really the first time I had been on a boat out in the open ocean. Well I had been on a much larger ship a time or two, but you know, that’s different. In a boat this size, you *feel* every single swell.

Now I’ve never really been one to get motion sickness much. But this was different. When the handful of other passengers and I went below deck, something changed. All of sudden, my stomach felt uneasy, and then I realized, oh, this is what seasickness is, and it was worse below deck because whatever rise and fall with the churn of the sea I was feeling, the boat went up and down with it. But, my eyes were telling me, everything is stationary; nothing is moving. Why? Well because we were below deck; all I could see was the little table and little places to sit, and they didn’t look like they were moving at all. Something deeply unsettling and disturbing about that feeling: everything looking like it’s supposed to be in place, but in your mind knowing that it’s not.

That’s how it feels sometimes, doesn’t it? Everything looks like it should be in place, but inside you know it’s all churning up and down, and it makes you sick, unsettled, even afraid.

And so the captain tells us, if you’re feeling sick, go above deck. I think he’d just rather we get sick up there rather than in his cabin. But also, he told us, it’s better above deck. Was it the fresh sea air? Sure maybe part of it. But the bigger reason was because above deck, you could

see the horizon. You could see the sun or the moon. Some fixed point that would orient you when the ship was moving up and down. See our brains subconsciously prepare us for moving up and down just by the little signals we pick up by having a fixed point, that everything else moves in relation to. And having that makes the churn of the ocean a bit less unsettling.

You may have noticed already that there's a crucial part of this vision that I haven't brought up yet. After seeing these four beasts rise from the sea, he sees something else. In v. 9, "As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One [or 'Ancient of Days'] took his throne." And then a few verses later in v. 13, "As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being [or 'one like a son of man'] coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed."

As this vision described, this eternal "Ancient of Days," God in this description, rules in judgment over the beasts that rise from the sea, entrusting and empowering all rule not to any of them but to this "one like a son of man" descending from the clouds.

Incidentally that title "Son of Man," as some of you have no doubt already recognized, is the most common way Christ refers to himself.

It's easy to hear this vision of beasts and kings and empire and the churn of the sea and be terrified. Daniel's terrified. It's also easy to hear this vision and be captivated by them. Daniel does that too. But the substance here is not of beasts and kings and how many horns they have, but that there is one who holds dominion over even the churn of the sea, the churn of empire, the churn of every chaos we can possibly know. The Ancient of Days. The Son of Man.

And the "fixed point" of this vision in all of its swirling and churning is not the terror of the teeth of iron and the claws of bronze, but rather the everlasting kingdom of the one who comes.

Friends, things may be swirling and churning for you right now. Doesn't have to be the rise and fall of empires and geopolitics. Could just be your life as you know it. Everything looks like it should all be in place, but inside you know it isn't. Could be disorienting, could be terrifying, could even make you sick.

Friends, if that is what you feel, get above deck. Find that fixed point. Look for the one who has taken his throne and who rules, look for the one who comes with the clouds of heaven, whose kingdom is everlasting. For in him lies our hope, no matter what else rises and falls.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.