THE SON OF MAN COMING

Daniel 7:1-28
Key Verse: 7:13

“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.”

In last week’s passage, we studied how Daniel was trained and tested by God at the age of 80. It was for the sake of leading king Darius to repentance and the eventual release of the Jews so that they might return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. From Daniel, we could learn that it is essential to thank God in times of training. We also must know that God is able to shut the mouths of the lions and protect those who are found to be righteous and blameless before him. May God bless us to depend on God in prayer faithfully, and be used by God to lead many to repentance. Today’s passage occurred during the first year of Belshazzar’s reign. It was a time when Daniel’s influence in the Babylonian court was on the wane. But God did not think so. God saw Daniel as the lamp of God in his generation, and he gave to Daniel a vision of things to come. The vision Daniel saw concerned the coming of the Son of Man, the Messiah. But Daniel’s vision did not make him light-hearted or rejoice. May God help us to understand the flow of God’s history through this passage, and to know the shepherd heart of Daniel who mourned for sinful mankind.

I. Daniel’s vision (1-14)

First, The great beasts (1-8). Daniel’s vision occurred in the first year of king Belshazzar’s reign. Soon, the Babylonian empire was going to vanish from the face of the earth, as rapidly as it had risen up under king Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel himself knew that Belshazzar had none of the good qualities of Nebuchadnezzar, and was incapable of maintaining the empire his ancestor had built. In his vision, Daniel saw the four winds of heaven stirring up the waters of the great sea. It was a premonition of the great upheavals that would occur in the societies of men. From time
to time, people indulge in wishful thinking that human society is progressing toward some kind of utopian equilibrium and peace. But the truth is that the history of mankind is and always will be turbulent as the waters on the sea. It is because of the violent and terrifying ambitions of sinful men.

Look at verses 2 and 3. “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 beasts that Daniel saw represented four great kingdoms on earth. Those kingdoms included the Babylonian kingdom of Nebuchadnezzar, the Mede-Persian kingdom, the Macedonian kingdom under Alexander the Great, and perhaps the Roman Empire. Each kingdom was different from the others. But all the kingdoms were represented by beasts: a lion with eagles’ wings, a bear with ribs in its mouth, a leopard with four wings and four heads, a terrifying mechanical beast of iron and bronze. To many, this period of human history leading up to Christ Jesus was a time of great cultural advancement. All the necessary accoutrements of human civilization were developed in this time period. But Daniel’s vision revealed the sad truth that this cultural advancement took place even as the kingdoms and societies of men became more and more violent, bizarre and destructive. Nebuchadnezzar was restored in his humanity only after 30 years of patient shepherding by Daniel, and severe training from God (4, 4:36,37). But it would not get better after him. As human power and authority were concentrated more and more, those who wielded that power and those over whom that power was wielded would lose the image of God more and more.

The fourth great beast was the most terrifying, frightening and powerful of the beasts/kingdoms. It had iron teeth, with which it crushed and devoured its victims, and it trampled underfoot whatever was left. Whereas Daniel could understand the nature of the other beasts, terrible as they might be, this beast was so foreign to Daniel that he could not give it a name, and was terribly troubled by its appearance and actions. This beast had ten horns, among which another horn came up. This horn waged war directly against the saints of the Most High, and would have defeated them if not for God the Father’s intervention (21). The horn spoke boastfully, right up until the time the judgment of God was handed
down. He spoke against God, oppressed the saints and tried to change the set times and the laws (25). This beast and the horns that followed represent the inevitable flow of human history under the influence of the devil (2 Th. 2:1-13). In short, evil human beings will conspire to use the available power of human civilization and technological advancement for the sake of utterly rebelling against the Creator God, in order to establish a kingdom that is solely focused on man’s glory. As their power increases, human beings will grow bolder, until in their arrogance they seek to wipe out faith in God from the world entirely. Ironically, in order to build up this kingdom for the glory of man, they will rely more and more on impersonal technology. In short, the kingdom they set up will crush and devour men, even as it claims to promote man’s power and glory. This is the character of Satan’s kingdom. God gave Daniel a vision of what mankind will become when Satan is in total control of his thoughts and desires. If we shudder to think of what we would be like had the Lord Jesus not come and intervened in our lives, turning us back to God the Father, we cannot begin to understand the horror that Daniel felt at the vision he saw of a mankind utterly lost to Satan.

Second, The Ancient of Days (9-12). Look at verses 9 and 10. “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.’” In these verses, Daniel describes the court of the Most High God. Daniel speaks of God as the Ancient of Days. Modern man worships youth. We spend countless fortunes on medicines and surgery and diets to preserve our youthful appearance and carefree, youthful spirit. Even the modern church has fallen for this idolatry. It is the image of mankind fully under the power of sin and death, and engaged in a fierce battle to deny our mortality or the judgment of God. But the God of heaven is not enamoured of the power of youth. His power source is different – it is the power of holiness and purity. He is ancient and he is eternal. While the storms of human ambition and violence rage, God the Father and his kingdom are flowing steadily on, like the sea currents below the stormy sea. And while the nations clamor after youth that will inevitably decay
and perish, the fire of his love and truth flowing from before his throne is ever renewing God's holiness and purity. We must catch this vision of God's purity, holiness, truth and love. We must not be deceived by the passing beauty of youth. We must take hold of the eternal qualities of God the Father, and grow in them through faithful prayer and obedience. We must join in the ranks of those who attend his throne and stand before him in worship and praise.

According to Daniel's vision, the Ancient of Days will convene his court and pass judgment on the kingdoms of men. The fourth beast will be slain, and its body destroyed in the fires of God's court (11-12). To human eyes, this salvation will almost be too late. The boastful horn will be fighting and defeating the people of God. The set times and the laws, the very truths of God and God's kingdom will be under attack. It will be unbearable for anyone to hold on to his or her identity in God. But at the very moment when it appears that all is lost, God will come down, his court will pass judgment in favor of those who have remained faithful to him and to their calling in him, and they will enter into the kingdom that has been prepared for them from the beginning. Here we understand the Lord's answer to Habbakuk's complaint. When Habbakuk saw the flow of human history, he challenged God in his prayer, asking: “Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?” (Hab. 1:13b) The Lord told Habbakuk, “See, he is puffed up; his desires are not upright – but the righteous will live by faith.” There is no hope among men to defeat the beast or his horns. There is no righteousness among men that can put an end to the devil's work begun in us from the garden of Eden. All those who depend on the situation for their faith will fall. But all those who remember the promise of God will continue to stand by faith. And God himself will make those who stand by faith from first to last the victors and heirs of the world (22, 26-27; Ro 4:13). May God help us to live by faith in him from first to last!

Third, The Son of Man (13-14). Look at verses 13 and 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 worshiped him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his
kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.” All the while that the
kingdoms of men were becoming more and more corrupt, in the image of
Satan himself, God has been preparing the one to whom all authority in
heaven and on earth would be given; he is Jesus Christ, the Son of God
and the Son of Man. He is fully man, sympathetic to our weakness and
who shares in our struggles. But he is uncorrupted by the world, so that
he never lost the image of God and was without sin. He would not take
anything for himself. Instead, he humbled himself and became obedient,
even to death on a cross. Then God himself exalted him and made him
the one who is above everything in heaven and on earth. His dominion is
an everlasting dominion that will not pass away. His kingdom is one that
will never be destroyed.

When Jesus came to this world, the rulers and leaders of Jerusalem and
Judah despised him because he was a poor country carpenter's son and
preacher. They knew God’s promise to send the Messiah into the world.
But they were looking for another beast, one who would allow them to
be the oppressors instead of the oppressed. They could not accept
humble Jesus as their everlasting king. When he exposed their corrupted
and worldly desires, they determined to get rid of him before they lost
everything. So they conspired with the Romans to have him nailed to the
cross as a political criminal. Pilate wanted to set him free, but he could
not believe that such a weak and helpless person could be that
important. Jesus was despised and rejected by men. But God raised this
Jesus to life, and made him Lord and Christ. This Jesus is the Judge of
all mankind, and the King who reigns forever and ever. He is a true
human being, but he is Almighty God and Sovereign Ruler of heaven and
earth. Our hope and future rests in him, and in him alone. He is our true
righteousness, and the one who enables us to stand by faith from first to
last. Praise be to the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! May we worship him
and serve him only in this wicked and adulterous generation!

II. Daniel’s distress (15-28)

First, Daniel seeks an interpretation (15-18). Daniel saw this vision and
was troubled in spirit and greatly distressed. He could only see the
corruption of mankind and the suffering of ordinary people. He wanted to
know what was the meaning of all this, and how to think about such a terrible suffering for those serving such a just and loving God. So he went to one of the attendants at the court of the Ancient of Days and asked for his help. He told Daniel, “The four great beasts are four kingdoms that will arise from the earth, but the Saints of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it forever—yes, forever and ever.” The angel’s message is short and simple. And it will come to pass without fail. God’s salvation is not a vague or sophisticated hope. God’s salvation is sure and based on the promises of God.

Second, The true meaning of the fourth beast (19-28). Nevertheless, Daniel was not satisfied with the angel’s answer. He was too upset by his vision of the beast and the suffering caused by the boastful horn. He wanted to know more about them, to comfort his grieving soul. But the angel’s explanation to him exactly confirmed what Daniel had seen with his own eyes. The suffering of the saints would be great, and their defeat before the boastful horn would be traumatic and devastating. But it would be only temporary—for “a time, times and a half a time.” And then, when the saints were fully purified, the kingdom would be handed over to them, and they would rule together with the son of man, Jesus, forever and ever.

Daniel’s distress at the suffering and near defeat of God’s children is understandable. Daniel was not just a wise man or Bible scholar. Daniel was a good shepherd and prayer servant for his people. He could bear any kinds of training for himself, even to past the age of 80. He was happy to do so, for the sake of his Lord. But Daniel was burdened in his soul because of the rebellious children of God in Israel. He knew their sins of selfishness and pride. How could they stand firm against such a terrible trial? How could they remain as God’s children and claim their inheritance in him? Daniel foresaw that many would not be able to stand in the time of trial. He cried inwardly and turned pale at the thought of such an intense and unbearable suffering. Jesus said in Mark 13:20, “If the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would survive. But for the sake of elect, whom he has chosen, he has shortened them.” Whether we like it or not, there has been a time of trials and hardships set for us. We should not imagine that we can avoid or ignore this time. Instead, we must be prepared to stand by faith to the end, so that we may claim
what has been promised to us from the beginning. We must learn from the angel to fix our eyes on Jesus, the son of man, who enables us and all those who repent and believe to take a stand on God’s side, and enter his kingdom as heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ. Most of all, we must learn Daniel’s shepherd heart to spare sinners from eternal judgment, and proclaim the message of God’s judgment and salvation to the young people of every nation.

May God raise each of you as compassionate shepherds and Bible teachers for the sake of raising America as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation!