

Lessons from Daniel 7

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Nations use images of animals as their representatives, conveying a message about how they see themselves. Some have chosen an eagle, others a lion, and still others a bear or an antelope. Sometimes humans are given animal names. This can be negative or positive. To be called “dog,” “fox,” “wolf,” or “ass” is typically negative. Animal names are sometimes also used as nicknames for loved ones.

In Daniel 7 we also encounter various animals. However, these animals are either indefinable or strange mixtures of beasts. All of them are ferocious. This chapter takes us to the prophetic part of the book, although the narrative section of Daniel, chapters 1–6, also contains some prophecies.

I. Structure of the Chapter

Daniel 7 closely resembles Daniel 2. Both chapters report a vision that is followed by an interpretation. In both of them, four elements appear, which obviously follow each other chronologically, reaching the eschatological climax—the final establishment of the kingdom of God on earth.

A. Outline of Daniel 7

Daniel 7 consists of two large parts—the vision and the interpretation plus prologue and epilogue:

- *Prologue* (vv. 1–2a)
- *The vision* (vv. 2b–14)
 - Four empires and the little horn (earthly scene, vv. 4–8)
 - Heavenly judgment and the eternal kingdom of God (heavenly scene, vv. 9–14)
- *The interpretation* (vv. 15–27)
 - Daniel’s first reaction (vv. 15–16)
 - First short interpretation (vv. 17–18)
 - Daniel’s second reaction (vv. 19–22)
 - Second and more extensive interpretation (vv. 23–27)
- *Epilogue* (v. 28)

B. Emphases

In the vision proper, each of the animals, as well as the little horn, is characterized by one verse each. However, in the interpretational part, the first three animals appear very briefly and in one single verse only. Extensively described are:

- The little horn (vv. 20–22, 24–26)
- The judgment, including the saints receiving the kingdom (vv. 18, 22, 26–27)
- The saints (vv. 18, 21–22, 25, 27).

This is of great importance, revealing the major message of the chapter: (1) the little horn attacks the saints, the people of God, (2) the judgment of God takes place in favor of His saints, and (3) the kingdom is given to the saints.

II. The Discussion of the Chapter

A. The Prologue

vv. 1–2a Daniel’s vision occurs during the first empire of the book, the Babylonian Empire, but under its last king. The visions of Daniel 8–9 follow the vision of Daniel 7. Daniel will receive them later.

B. The Four Animals and the Little Horn

- vv. 2–3 The four animals represent four world empires that begin with the first in the time of Daniel (v. 17). The sea represents the peoples on earth (Rev 17:15) from which the empires arise. The winds may stand for political events that bring about revolutions, wars, and other problems (Rev 7:1). In number and character these empires remind us of those in Daniel 2.
- v. 4 The lion with eagle wings as king of land animals and king of birds is the same as the golden head in Daniel 2—Nebuchadnezzar and the Neo-Babylonian Empire. The imagery is found in Babylonian art. However, under Nebuchadnezzar’s successors the empire began to lose some of its lion-like characteristics such as boldness and strength.
- v. 5 The bear raised up on one side represents the empire of the Medes and Persians (see Daniel 8:3, 20). The three ribs could stand for Lydia, Babylon, and Egypt, which were devoured by the new empire.
- v. 6 The leopard with four wings and four heads is a very fast animal. The Greeks under Alexander the Great conquered the Persian Empire with unprecedented speed. But Alexander’s kingdom was divided in four, and later three, parts after his premature death (see Dan 8:8, 21–22).
- vv. 7, 19, 23 The fourth animal is indefinable. It corresponds to the fourth empire of Daniel 2 (see Dan 2:40). In both cases iron is mentioned. It is the Roman Empire.
- vv. 7, 24 The ten horns are smaller kingdoms, which conquered Rome and came forth from it. Historically, Rome was captured by the Germanic tribes of Western Europe. Some have identified them as the Alemanni, the Anglo-Saxons, the Burgundians, the Franks, the Herulians, the Lombards, the Ostrogoths, the Sueves, the Vandals, and the Visigoths.

C The Little Horn and the Saints

1. Characteristics of the Little Horn

- vv. 8, 11, 20–21, 24–26
- (a) It comes forth from the fourth beast
 - (b) In the beginning it is small.
 - (c) It grows and surpasses the other horns.
 - (d) Three horns are plucked out before it.
 - (e) It is different from the other horns.
 - (f) It has human-like eyes.
 - (g) With its mouth it speaks great things and blasphemes God.
 - (h) It changes times and the law of God
 - (i) The saints are attacked by it and defeated.
 - (j) They are in its hand for three and one half times.
 - (k) The little horn will be judged by God.
 - (l) It will be destroyed.

2. Interpretation

- (a) Out of the pagan Roman empire arose papal Rome.
- (b) In the beginning this church was small and persecuted.
- (c) Today it is by far the largest denomination. In the Medieval Ages the pope was not only the religious ruler but also quite often the top political ruler in Europe. The power of the Roman Catholic Church was also extended to other continents.
- (d) Herulians, Vandals, and Ostrogoths were tribes that supported Arian Christianity—that is, they denied the doctrine of the Trinity. As such they were rivals of the bishop of Rome who was about to become the pope. In 493 AD, the Herulians were defeated by the Ostrogoths who then ruled in Rome. The Vandals were defeated by general Belisarius in 534 AD, and the Ostrogoths had to withdraw from Rome 538 AD due to Belisarius and were eradicated later.
- (e) The papacy is a religious-political power, not just a political entity.
- (f) The eyes point to insight, intelligence, and foresight.
- (g) Blasphemy of God happens, for example, through doctrines that limit the work of Christ, such as the veneration of Mary as the mother of God, the veneration of saints, the ministry of earthly priests, etc. Some papal claims sound like blasphemy:

The Pope is crowned with a threefold crown as the king of heaven, earth, and the underworld. . . . The Pope is like God on earth. . . . The Pope has such great authority and power that he even can change, explain or interpret divine laws. (L. Ferraris, “Papa II” in *Prompta Bibliotheca*, vol. VI, p. 25–29)
- (h) The context requires understanding the law as the law of God. The second of the Ten Commandments was eliminated (prohibition of venerating images) and the fourth commandment, the Sabbath commandment, was changed into Sunday observance.
- (i) The saints are the people of God in general, not special pious people who should be venerated and can intervene for those living on earth (Exod 19:6; Phil 1:1). The persecution of the saints happened, for instance, through having them tried and executed as witches and heretics (see the Waldenses and Huguenots).
- (j) The three and one half times refers to three and one half years or 1,260 days. According to the year-day principle (e.g., Ezek 4:6; Num 14:34) these periods amount to 1,260 years (cf. Rev 12:6, 14; 11:2–3; 13:5—in symbolic prophecy the time element should also be symbolic, especially if the prophecy covers hundreds or thousands of years). They start in AD 538, when the decree of emperor Justinian of Eastern Rome (AD 533), which demanded to exalt the bishop of Rome as head of all holy churches and head of all holy priests of God, could slowly become a reality. They ended in 1798 BC, when through the French general Berthier the Pope was taken prisoner and was brought to France where he died in exile. This brought to an end the political power of the Papacy.
- (k) The heavenly judgment began some time after AD 1798. It is a judgment in favor of the saints.
- (l) The destruction of the little horn is still future.

D. The Judgment Scene

1. Information about the Judgment in Daniel 7

- vv. 8–14, 22, 26
- The Ancient of Days is God the Father who functions as judge. The symbols describing Him point to His purity, experience, wisdom, and omnipotence.
 - This judgment is not a secret judgment. Heavenly beings take part in it.
 - Records are being consulted.
 - The judgment affects the little horn and the other animals.
 - At the same time, God vindicates the persecuted saints.
 - This judgment happens after AD 1798 and before the Second Coming. Then the saints will finally receive the kingdom.
 - In this judgment the Son of Man appears—Jesus Christ. Believers are not directly involved.

2. The End Time

It is in this time of judgment prior to the coming of God's kingdom of glory that we live now. It is the end time!

E. The Kingdoms of God

1. Information about God's Kingdom to Come in Daniel 7

- vv.14–27
- It is ruled by the Son of Man, Jesus Christ.
 - On His side are the saints.
 - This kingdom lasts forever and will not be replaced by another kingdom.
 - All opponents and enemies will be gone.
 - In this kingdom all people will love God and obey and serve Him. Rebellion will be no more.

We are looking forward to the time of the final establishment of God's glorious kingdom on earth.

III. Application

- God's people are not protected against all suffering, hardship, and persecution. To be a Christian does not mean being freed from all that is negative. Christians encounter pain and sorrow too. We should not live with unsubstantiated illusions. Otherwise we may throw away faith in God when distress and grief reach us.
- However, there is one person who notices everything, who is present with us and carries us: Jesus Christ (Heb 4:14–16). So Christians are not alone when they suffer. The one who supports them has Himself experienced most bitter pain and unprecedented suffering.
- In spite of all evil, Christians know about victory. They expect the kingdom of God, which is free from everything negative, disturbing, and distressing. Therefore, they live goal-oriented lives. Christians are people with a realistic hope and deep joy. While they live here and now and see problems with the environment, the economy, warfare, and many other things, they step in and try to make a difference, knowing that the glory of God's kingdom is just around the corner.