



The Trinity Pulpit



Dreams About the End

Daniel 7:13-18

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It was Yogi Berra who said “the future is not what it used to be.” That is true, is it not? The future is not what it used to be. The way we view the future is much different than the generations before us. There have been many generations that viewed the future with hope – that was the American Dream. Engrained in American Culture, during what we refer to as the American Century, there is the sense that every generation should have a better, easier, and more satisfying life. Most of us grew up influenced by this concept that our lives are supposed to be better than our parents, and most parents would admit that this is one of their goals. We want to produce a better future for our children and grandchildren. In fact, political races are won and lost on the concept of who has the answer for a better future. Who can produce in us a sense of confidence in the future? This was not always the case. It is somewhat of a new phenomenon. Only a few centuries ago people did not expect their lives to be much different than their parents and grandparents. Life was life and the future was just what came after today.

That the future is not what it used to be can also apply to the way we view the future today. There are many who view the future as something that is really not worth one’s consideration. We like Jesus’ words “Do not worry about tomorrow for each day has enough trouble of its own.” We like the parable when Jesus tells us of the man who planned for his future but did not prepare his soul. Those who take these instructions to the extreme say we should not worry about the future: “Live today for tomorrow we die.”

Others of us live in the future and fail to live in the present. We are always thinking of the next step, the next goal, the next move, the

next moment, the next ... and the result is that our lives go flying by without us ever living in the moment. When we come to the end of life we are regretful, because we have spent our lives worrying too much about tomorrow that we failed to live in the day. We like Jesus’ instructions that no one builds a building without first sitting down and considering the cost. One needs to plan for the future.

What are some things we can determine about the future from our passage in Daniel, and how does it impact the way we live?

In Daniel 7, we find one of Daniel’s dreams about the future. The dream leaves Daniel shaken and troubled yet encouraged. Daniel dreams of four beasts. The first was like a lion that had wings like an eagle and stood like a man. The second beast is described as a bear, and it is pictured eating flesh until it is full. The third beast looked like a leopard; it also had wings like that of a bird. It had four heads and it was given authority to rule. The final beast is different than the others. It had large iron teeth, and it crushed and devoured its victims. It had ten horns and then one horn that not only had the eyes of a man but a boastful mouth. This beast would wage war against the Ancient of Days and the saints of God.

However, the beasts were not all that Daniel saw in his dream. There was also a vision of God. Daniel describes God with the term *Ancient of Days*, meaning “the one who has always been”. Daniel’s picture of God is impressive. God’s clothing is white as snow and his hair was as white as wool. This is a picture of purity and complete moral integrity. His white hair is a picture of wisdom,

judgment, and God's eternal nature. God's throne is described as being ablaze and flaming with fire. A river of fire was flowing out from before him. The mention of fire speaks of God's wrath and judgment upon that which was wicked. In addition, there were thousands upon thousands – uncountable people – who stood before him. The court was seated and the books were open. Daniel's dream is that of God's courtroom. The setting is a reckoning. The books are being opened to reveal who deserves judgment. The conclusion of the books is that the fourth beast as well as the others deserved judgment and destruction. Daniel watched until the beast was destroyed.

In addition to this part of Daniel's vision, Daniel sees another figure. It is one who looked like the Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was given all 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.

How are we to interpret Daniel's dream? Daniel, too, was disturbed by this vision, and he inquired of God for understanding. This was his understanding: the four beasts were kingdoms of this earth that had risen to power and then diminished. Most scholars agree that the kingdoms being described are as follows:

1. The lion is Babylon. The symbol is that of lion and eagle which were symbols of the Babylonian empire.
2. The bear was Medio-Persia which followed Babylon in power. The bear is an apt symbol for this kingdom in that it was never finished or satisfied with conquest. The three ribs can depict its insatiable desire for conquest or it can signify its three most important conquests – Babylon, Lydia, and Egypt.
3. The third beast is Greece. The picture of the third beast is one with lightening speed. Greece was an empire that arose quickly and gained power with great speed. In only ten short years Alexander had conquered the entire MedioPersian Empire to the borders of India. The four heads remind us that the Grecian Empire was divided into four empires.

4. The fourth beast is not like the others. Its appearance and domination is even greater than the others. The fourth beast is the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire was different from the others in the way it governed and the way it dominated the world scene. It is pictured as an empire that devoured and crushed everything it met. The fourth beast is also the beast that is seen to be the one that rivals the kingdom of God. From the fourth beast is a small horn or king that had the eyes of a man – a human leader – and also a boastful mouth. The boastful mouth would defy God and God's people. We are told that for a while the saints of God would be handed over but that would not last. The day would come when even this great, boastful beast would be judged and meet its destruction.

Instead of these great kingdoms there was the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God would be the lasting kingdom and not one of these of the earth that would rise and fall. Daniel is told that it would be people of God who would ultimately be given all power and authority, and all others would worship God. Daniel's dream reminds us that every other kingdom of earth will fall; the one lasting kingdom is the kingdom of God. When we realize this, the future is not what it used to be.

How can we interpret this dream for our living? For our consideration today, I want to look at this dream with some broad strokes and to consider the big picture of what this strange dream says to us. I want to share three thoughts of what this dream reminds us about the future; then, I want to make one comment about what that means for our living.

First, I think this dream reminds us that God is in our future. Remember that Daniel lived in the captivity of Babylon which is the first beast he saw in the dream. Daniel knew what it meant to live in a time when God and God's people seemed to be losing and not winning. God's people had been defeated and taken captive; they were not in control of their own lives; they were simply an afterthought in the great world of the Babylonian Empire. According to Jeremiah, some wept for the way things used to be – they sat down by the river of Babylon and wept when they thought of Zion. Others were convinced that things were going to get better soon – it would not be long before they

would return to Judah. However, Jeremiah reminded the people in captivity that they had better accept the fact they were going to live in Babylon; they should build houses, plant gardens, and have children, for they were going to be in Babylon for 70 years.

Can you imagine Daniel's dream and him realizing that not only Babylon but three other kingdoms would rise, and with each one trouble would come for God's people? The fourth was to be the worst of the four and that, like him, the saints of God would be handed over to this great beast. Yet, Daniel's dream reminds us that after all is said and done God is in our future.

I want us to be reminded today that God is in our future. No matter what we are passing through and no matter how dark the future may look, we must remember that God is in our future. For the one who places his or her faith in Jesus Christ, God is always the last word. Throughout the Bible we are reminded that when it seems God has lost, forgotten us, or is incapable of making a difference, those are moments that last a little while. In exile, Daniel is being reminded that Babylon will not last forever. Jeremiah reminds the exiles that the day will come when God will restore his people. Here in Daniel's dream the saints of God are handed over for a time, times and half a time. Some scholars say this means an indefinite time but not permanently. Others say it should be interpreted 3½ years according to passages in Revelation and Hebrew phrases. Either way, the point is this: it is not forever; it is not permanent.

Our current situation, whatever it might be, is not permanent. However you and I picture our future, if God is not in it then we have a skewed picture of the future. I wonder how you picture your future. What does it look like? What kind of person are you? Is there fear and worry in your picture of the future? Does the uncertainty of the future cause you anxiety? Daniel is troubled by his dream of the future; even so, Daniel is reminded that God is in our future.

The second thought I want you to consider is this: although God is in our future, trouble is part of the future. Daniel is troubled by what he saw in his dream. Although he knows that God wins and that the kingdom of God is the everlasting king-

dom, we are told that Daniel turned pale and was troubled by his thoughts. Daniel had seen terrible things. He had seen four kingdoms rise and fall, but with them they brought trouble not only to God's people but to God's world. Daniel had seen the persecution of the saints in Rome. He had caught a glimpse of the trouble that this world and its kingdoms can bring to God's people.

I want us to come to terms with the Biblical teaching of Jesus which says that in this world you will have trouble. The history of God's people in the Bible is that of struggle. The word *Israel* means "God struggles". God's people struggle from beginning to end. Jesus and Paul teach us to persevere, to not become disheartened, and to have faith. We are told, over and over again in Scripture, that trouble is the way of this life; we just don't want to accept it. This is the problem with the so-called prosperity gospel. This gospel is nothing new. There were those in Jeremiah's day who preached that Judah would survive; they preached peace when there was no peace. There are those in our culture who will tell us that God's plan is for us to be wealthy, healthy, and wise, and if you are not these things, then you lack spiritual maturity.

Yet, listen to the words of Jesus. "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). "Then he said to them all: 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me'" (Luke 9:23).

I like what John Ortberg said about our approach to death. He reminds us that when most of us were young we were taught a prayer that went:

Now I lay me down to sleep
I pray the Lord my soul to keep
If I should die before I wake
I pray the Lord my soul to take.

The second verse to this prayer goes:
Our days begin with trouble here
Our life is but a span,
And cruel death is always near,
So frail is a thing is man.

There are very few of us who would recite that to our children today. Ortberg goes on to point out

that we used to tell our children that the stork delivered children, but children were ushered to the death bed of someone they loved to say goodbye. Now we tell our children all the biological information about how babies are born, and then we tell them that grandpa is asleep in a beautiful garden of flowers.

This change in our culture's view of the finality of life is just a reminder of how we seek to avoid the trouble of life. Yet, the Bible is clear that in this life we will have trouble and death is a part of living.

Daniel's dream reminds us that God is in our future but so is trouble. So do not be surprised or disheartened when trouble comes; it is just a part of God's future.

Daniel also reminds us that Jesus is control. Daniel tells us that in his dream he sees the one who is like the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven and this Son of Man is given all power, which is described as authority, glory, and sovereign power. Authority indicates the legitimacy of his power. The beasts have only appeared to be in control because of their conquest and military power; yet, they have come and gone. The Son of Man's glory indicates the awareness by others of who he is. There is in this word the sense that others become aware of Jesus and his power. The dream and interpretation remind us that all will worship Jesus, which will include other rulers and kings. The glory given to Jesus is a reminder that all will bow down and worship him. The sovereign power indicates not only his legitimacy and others' awareness of his identity but also the ability to execute his will. Sovereign power gives Jesus the ability to set things right once and for all without any foe able to stand before him.

Daniel reminds us that Jesus is in control through the power granted to him by God. I think that Daniel's dream is a way of telling us that things are not as they appear. Other kingdoms come and go, but Jesus will have legitimate authority. Others claim to be rulers and in control, but Jesus is

the one with the true glory. Others might have executed power but just for a while; ultimately they all bow down before Jesus.

Let us be reminded that in our future things are not always as they appear. In the nineteenth century the impressionist movement swept the artistic world. Instead of being satisfied with a subject as a static figure that had accepted form and appearance, the impressionists were more concerned with the way something really looked in its natural state. Instead of working in a studio, they went to the countryside and painted subjects in their natural state. They were concerned about how light might cause the subject to look different from one moment or hour to the next or how other elements might change the reality of the subject. They were called impressionists because their critics said their paintings looked more like sketches and unfinished paintings. In some ways they were correct because the impressionists were convinced that things were not static – they were always changing. They might be able to capture something for a moment, but in the next moment, it would appear differently. In this way they considered themselves realists. They were concerned about how things really were.

There are moments when our future looks to be determined and certain. Yet, Daniel's dream is the reminder that things really are always changing. These kingdoms that seemed insurmountable were only rising and falling. My friends, if we could just see our future from God's perspective, we would know that things are not as they appear to us. Jesus is still in control.

Yogi Berra was right. The future is not what it used to be. At least not to those of us who place our faith in Jesus Christ. Our future has been changed and transformed. We might not know what all the future holds but this we do know: God is in our future, trouble is in our future, but we will be prepared to face it, because Jesus is in control. We know that things are never as they appear in this world. Let us dream about the future – a future where God's kingdom comes and shall never end. ❁



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