

# FOUR BEASTS FROM THE SEA

*SERIES: FORTIFIED FOR FAITHFULNESS*

**By Steve Zeisler**

Imagine me as a prophet:

I had a dream in the night, and visions passed through my mind. A great bull, sleek and fat, vain and self-satisfied, filled the landscape. And there arose a ravenous bear, which struck down the bull, and those who loved the bull wept bitterly. However, after a time the bull asserted itself again and once more filled the landscape. I was told the exact time of the bull's return, but I am forbidden to make it known.

Most of us would love to know the future, especially the economic future. It would be nice if in fact I could tell you the exact date of the bull market's return. But I'm not a prophet.

In this message, however, we're going to consider the visions of one who was indeed a prophet of God, Daniel. Chapter 7 begins, "In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon, Daniel had a dream, and visions passed through his mind as he was lying on his bed. He wrote down the substance of his dream." This is the beginning of the second half of the book of Daniel, the last six chapters. The second half is very different from the first. In the first six chapters Daniel interpreted the dreams of others, telling them what God was doing in their lives. But in this half he will have his own frightening, overwhelming dreams and encounters with God. We're beginning a section that will not only feel different but will also have a different message.

## **The Lord of history**

It will be helpful if you read chapter 7 with a couple of things in mind. First, read it imaginatively. There are a number of times in this chapter when it says Daniel looked intently at, or paid close attention to, what was happening. That's what we should do as well. Don't jump too quickly to the categories in the book of Revelation, the Olivet Discourse, or other prophetic Scriptures, correlating what you read here with what is being declared there. If you've done much prophetic study, you may have an entire scheme in mind into which these visions fit. I suggest you avoid quickly making those connections, and instead listen carefully and look at what you see drawn before you. Consider Daniel's reaction in the final verse of chapter 7: "I, Daniel, was deeply troubled by my thoughts, and my face turned pale...."

Second, think Biblically about history. The Scriptures are clear that God himself is the sovereign Lord of history. Events happen at his command, as he has determined beforehand. He ends what is wicked and establishes what is right on his own timetable. That of course applies to future events.

If those of us who live in comfortable cultures like ours are not careful, we can lose our taste for thinking about God as being actively involved, hands-on in his concern for history and its unfolding. It's easier to think of God as the Gnostics did, as the Lord of ideas, as the God who wants us to feel different, rather than as the active hero who is shaping the world for his own purposes. We can have a faith that is like the themes of Hollywood musicals: "I

simply remember my favorite things, and then I don't feel so bad." "Tomorrow is just a day away." The clouds will clear. I'll "whistle while I work," and all of my struggles will slough off from my shoulders. It is wrong-headed to focus only on feeling better even if nothing ever changes. It's going to be hard to read this chapter in Daniel and know that it's about an activist God in history, if we imagine that he cares only about our feelings. He knows and understands this world, and he will do terrible things and wonderful things to establish righteousness.

Verses 1-28:

**In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon, Daniel had a dream, and visions passed through his mind as he was lying on his bed. He wrote down the substance of his dream.**

**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 first was like a lion, and it 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.**

**"And there before me was a second beast, which looked like a bear. It was raised up on one of its sides, and it had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth. It was told, 'Get up and eat your fill of flesh!'**

**"After that, I looked, and there before me was another beast, one that looked like a leopard. And on its back it had four wings like those of a bird. This beast had four heads, and it was given authority to rule.**

**"After that, in my vision at night I looked, and there before me was a fourth beast--terrifying and frightening and very powerful. It had large iron teeth; it crushed and devoured its victims and trampled underfoot whatever was left. It was different from all the former beasts, and it had ten horns.**

**"While I was thinking about the horns, there before me was another horn, a little one, which came up among them; and three of the first horns were uprooted before it. This horn had eyes like the eyes of a man and a mouth that spoke boastfully.**

**"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.**

**“Then I continued to watch because of the boastful words the horn was speaking. I kept looking until the beast was slain and its body destroyed and thrown into the blazing fire. (The other beasts had been stripped of their authority, but were allowed to live for a period of time.)**

**“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.**

**“I, Daniel, was troubled in spirit, and the visions that passed through my mind disturbed me. I approached one of those standing there and asked him the true meaning of all this.**

**“So he told me and gave me the interpretation of these things: ‘The four great beasts are four kingdoms that will rise from the earth. But the saints of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it forever--yes, for ever and ever.’**

**“Then I wanted to know the true meaning of the fourth beast, which was different from all the others and most terrifying, with its iron teeth and bronze claws --the beast that crushed and devoured its victims and trampled underfoot whatever was left. I also wanted to know about the ten horns on its head and about the other horn that came up, before which three of them fell--the horn that looked more imposing than the others and that had eyes and a mouth that spoke boastfully. As I watched, this horn was waging war against the saints and defeating them, until the Ancient of Days came and pronounced judgment in favor of the saints of the Most High, and the time came when they possessed the kingdom.**

**“He gave me this explanation: ‘The fourth beast is a fourth kingdom that will appear on earth. It will be different from all the other kingdoms and will devour the whole earth, trampling it down and crushing it. The ten horns are ten kings who will come from this kingdom. After them another king will arise, different from the earlier ones; he will subdue three kings. 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.**

**““But the court will sit, and his power will be taken away and completely destroyed forever. Then the sovereignty, power and greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be handed over to the saints, the people of the Most High. His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship and obey him.’**

**“This is the end of the matter. I, Daniel, was deeply troubled by my thoughts, and my face turned pale, but I kept the matter to myself.”**

## **Encouragement from the future**

The first year of Belshazzar, king of Babylon, is when this night vision with its terrors, wonders, and drama was given to Daniel. In history it falls between chapters 4 and 5. Shortly after the chaos that ensued following Nebuchadnezzar's death, Belshazzar came to power along with his father Nabonidus.

Nebuchadnezzar had elevated Daniel, believed in Daniel, and was converted as a result of Daniel's life and teaching. In the last years of Nebuchadnezzar's reign, Daniel had influence for the sake of God throughout the Babylonian Empire.

But when Nebuchadnezzar died, everything changed. Civil war, chaos, and assassinations took place. Once Nabonidus and Belshazzar took the throne, the kingdom became so corrupt it couldn't last. Belshazzar was a hollow man of phony authority, and under his leadership the kingdom would quickly fall prey to the Persians. During Belshazzar's leadership Daniel was shunted aside, forgotten. He was in his seventies when these events occurred.

During such a time, why would God give Daniel a vision of future things? Think about the message of the Bible in other places. How are people encouraged in difficulty? In some settings the Scriptures witness to the creation, the power of God who spoke into place the wonders of the heavens and the great things of the earth. Sometimes we are reminded of God's power as the Redeemer who brought his children out of Egypt. But there's another great witness in the Bible to the power of God, the one before us here. It is not the past but the future to which our attention is drawn. That is what God allowed Daniel, in this time of extremity, to see. He saw some very painful things: the nature of kingdoms and their failure, antagonism to the rule of God, suffering on the part of the saints. But he also saw final vindication. He saw One on the throne who would rule everything. He saw the end of the end, in which the saints of the Most High were given honor, and One like a Son of man who was given the kingdom forever. He saw God's promises made good in the future.

The writer of Hebrews says of Jesus, "For the joy set before him [he] endured the cross, scorning its shame..." (12:2). Because Jesus knew the outcome, he was willing to go through the agony, shame, and horror of the cross. He had been promised that the Son of man would not be abandoned to the grave, but would someday be raised in the clouds to his Father and given an eternal kingdom (it may very well have been this very passage that Jesus was thinking of). Death would not win its victory over him. I am convinced that's why we are given such profound announcements of the future. Some have already come to pass exactly as they have been foretold, and that strengthens us to know that the ones that have not yet come to pass certainly will.

Perhaps you are in extremity at this point. It seems the world has tipped over economically recently. Schools are dangerous places for children. Moral decay seems more celebrated all the time. There is a limerick that may have application:

*Humankind had a lovely beginning,  
But we ruined our prospects by sinning.  
We know that the story  
Will end with God's glory,  
But at present the other side's winning.*

When it seemed as if the other side was winning, Daniel was staggered by a vision of events to come. What can we make of some of the specifics of his vision? It says repeatedly that he looked intently; he kept staring at what was in front of him. He tried to understand it, and he asked questions. If Daniel was fascinated by what he saw, we should be as well. So what do we see?

## Beastly kingdoms meet their end

Much in this chapter remains a mystery, but there are some things that we can speak confidently about. To begin with, there were four beasts that arose from a chaotic blowing of winds across the sea, whipping up foam in dark storms. The four beasts came one after the other, and they were kingdoms (the word “king” can be taken to mean kingdom). These kingdoms were successive cultures, authorities, or political entities that would succeed one another, and they are certainly the same ones that Nebuchadnezzar saw in his dream in chapter 2. Nebuchadnezzar saw a statue made of four bands of precious metal: a head of gold, a chest of silver, a midriff of bronze, and legs and feet of iron and clay. The statue represented four kingdoms that would succeed one another, and that is what Daniel sees here in his own prophetic dream.

Henry A. Ironside, in his commentary on Daniel, wrote this about the comparison between chapters 2 and 7:

*In the second chapter, when a Gentile king had a vision of the course of world empires, he saw the image of a man. It was a stately and noble figure that filled him with such admiration that he set up a similar statue to be worshiped as a god. But in this opening chapter of the second division of Daniel, the man of God has a vision of the same empires. He sees them as four ravenous, wild beasts so brutal and monstrous that no actual creatures known to man could adequately describe them.*

We know that the first empire was Babylon, as in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream. Of course there were earlier large empires, Egypt and Assyria and others, but both Nebuchadnezzar’s dream and Daniel’s dream began with the empire that was in existence at the time of the dream. Chapter 8 will tell us that the next two empires were Medo-Persia and Greece.

But the curious element in Daniel’s dream in chapter 7 is the fourth beast. This beast was so remarkable that there was no living creature to which it was analogous. It had bronze claws and large iron teeth, and its countenance was terrifying. It had many horns, including a little horn with a mouth and eyes that destroyed others and blasphemed God. Daniel asked more than once about the fourth kingdom because it was peculiar.

Again, we know from chapter 2 as well as this chapter that it is the fourth kingdom in which the battle will be fully joined between the Son of man, who is the Messiah of God, and the kingdoms of earth, which represent the satanic enemy of God. In Roman times, “the rulers of this age... crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Corinthians 2:8). In some way that hasn’t been explained to us, something analogous to the Roman Empire will be established in the future. In its heyday the imitation king, the horn that looks something like a human, having a mouth and eyes, will exalt itself and wreak destruction on the people of God. Then the final battle will be joined between this imitation king and the Son of man, Messiah the Prince. These are legitimate, although not universally held, inferences from what we see in the beasts, the empires of Daniel 7 (and Daniel 2).

There are some other captivating things to see here. One is the overwhelming difference between the beasts that come out of the sea, and the glory of the Ancient of Days seated on his throne. A succession of human governments--the best humanity can do to establish civilization, technology, economy, and so on--is inevitably beastly. One beast follows another. They don’t know they’re beastly, of course. Each civilization, as it grows impressed with itself, will promote itself as much better than the previous ones. But they become beastly when power becomes an end in itself, righteous people and the needy are left behind, and human selfishness finally asserts its will over every other thing.

In contrast we see this picture: God in his glorious raiment, attended by thousands, worshiped by millions, sitting on a fiery throne with court in session. It is the books that are opened, not the ocean whipped up by chaotic winds, in which no one knows what will happen next. The God of order and authority and righteous judgment opens the books in the court and says what will be. He gives to One who looks like a Son of man, a human figure who rises from the earth in the clouds to the throne, a kingdom that will last forever. The beauty of the heavenly court as Daniel describes it is in direct contrast to the beastly kingdoms of earth.

Human history is cyclical; one beast follows another. So we shouldn't be too impressed with the glories of whatever version of human self-promotion stands out at the moment. Human authority cannot sustain itself over time. The strongest empires eventually pass away and are forgotten.

The succession of beasts is reminiscent of Jesus' words when he said that the events of kingdoms in the future resemble birth pangs (Matthew 24:8; Mark 13:8). Painful contractions occur one after another. Eventually the last contraction brings the time of waiting to an end. Analogously, we see blasphemous, boastful kingdoms raised against God, and they, like labor pains, are similar to the ones that have gone before and the ones that will follow, until at last there is a final blasphemer who will be destroyed, and the kingdom will be given to the One like a Son of man.

What encouragements can we draw from this?

## **God keeps his promises**

We've had our attention focused on God in his courtroom, the Lord with the books of judgment before him, and the fire that consumes that which would destroy the saints. This vision of the future is God's way of saying that he keeps his promises. What word of love has he spoken to us that has not yet been fulfilled completely? What opportunities has he promised? Intimacy with him, friendship with others, the experience of God's love, an eternal home built for us--some of the things God has promised haven't come true for us yet. What are you reaching out for that is in his will for you, but hasn't appeared yet? Well, the Lord of the future is the Lord of all. We see him defeat what is wicked. Our hearts should be encouraged to know that God understands and controls not only the events of governments on a vast scale, but the events of our lives. He knows us, where we live and what we need. He is active in our circumstances, not just our feelings.

In summary, I want to pick up four directives from passages in the New Testament that teach us concerning the end. We are told to act on what we've been taught in four specific ways (among others).

First, stay awake (Mark 13:35-37). The concern Jesus had was that some of us might lose our enthusiasm, give up, stop paying attention to what we once believed and cared about. It might become a distant memory, music that has faded; we might be persuaded by something else and lose our heart for the Lord. We might fall asleep in the arms of this world's advantages, if you will. So we must focus and stay awake.

Second, stand firm (2 Thessalonians 2:15). If this world would lull us to sleep on the one hand, it would terrify us on the other. It would pressure us, threaten us, force us to knuckle under and bow to its word of authority. But we are to stand firm. Don't give in, sell out, or be afraid.

Third, bear witness (John 15:27). The times of ultimate pressure, final hardship, highest level of difficulty, and greatest isolation are opportunities to say what's true, to unmask blasphemous claims to be God as lies, and to speak of Jesus.

Fourth, comfort, or encourage, one another (1 Thessalonians 4:18). Some around us will be spinning out of control, afraid, uncertain, overwhelmed. Because we know the future, we are in a position to comfort them with the message of what God will do that he has not done yet.

*When we've been there ten thousand years,  
Bright shining as the sun,  
We've no less days to sing God's praise  
Than when we first begun. (1)*

Someday when the story is over, when the war is ended and the Son of man has received his kingdom, we will sing his praises forever. What a great time that will be!

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## Notes

1. John Newton, *Amazing Grace*.

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[Back to Index page](#)

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