

From *the Stormy Sea to the Clouds of Heaven*



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Daniel 7, 2 Thess. 2:1–12, Rom. 8:1, Mark 13:26, Luke 9:26, 12:8, 1 Tim. 2:5.*

Memory Text: “Then the kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people, the saints of the Most High. His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey Him” (*Daniel 7:27, NKJV*).

The vision of Daniel 7, our topic for this week, parallels the dream in Daniel 2. But Daniel 7 expands on what was revealed in Daniel 2. First, the vision occurs at night and portrays the sea agitated by the four winds. Darkness and water evoke creation, but here creation appears to be somehow distorted or under attack. Second, the animals in the vision are unclean and hybrid, which represents a violation of the created order. Third, the animals are portrayed as exerting dominion; thus, it appears that the dominion God gave to Adam in the garden has been usurped by these powers. Fourth, with the coming of the Son of man, God's dominion is restored to those to whom it properly belongs. What Adam lost in the garden, the Son of man recovers in the heavenly judgment.

The above description gives a panoramic view of the biblical imagery that runs in the background of this highly symbolic vision. Fortunately, some of the crucial details of the vision are explained by the angel, so we can understand the main contours of this amazing prophecy.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 22.

Four Animals

Read Daniel 7. What is the essence of what Daniel is shown, and what is the vision about?

Each animal shown to Daniel corresponds to a section of the statue shown to Nebuchadnezzar, but now more details about each kingdom are given. How interesting that the creatures, symbolizing pagan nations, are all unclean beasts. Also, except for the fourth beast, Daniel describes the animals as resembling some known creatures. So, the animals are not arbitrary symbols, inasmuch as each one bears some characteristics or points to some aspect of the kingdom it represents.

Lion: A lion is a most fitting representation of Babylon. Winged lions decorated palace walls and other works of Babylonian art. The lion depicted in the vision eventually has its wings pulled off, is made to stand upright like a man, and receives a human heart. This process symbolizes the Babylonian Empire under its kings.

Bear: The bear represents the Medo-Persian Empire. The fact that it is raised up on one side indicates the superiority of the Persians over the Medes. The three ribs between its teeth stand for the three main conquests of the Medo-Persian Empire: Lydia, Babylon, and Egypt.

Leopard: The swift leopard represents the Greek Empire established by Alexander the Great. The four wings make this beast even swifter, an apt representation of Alexander, who in a few years brought the entire known world under his dominion.

The dreadful and terrible animal: Whereas the previous entities only resemble the animals mentioned, this one is an entity unto itself. That is, the first ones are depicted as “like” a lion or “like” a bear, but this one is not depicted like anything. This multi-horned beast also appears far more cruel and rapacious than the previous ones. As such, it is a fitting representation of pagan Rome, which conquered, ruled, and trampled the world with its feet.

All these thousands of years of human history have come and gone, just as predicted. How much comfort can you get from knowing that above all the clamor, unrest, and at times utter chaos, God rules? What does this teach us about the trustworthiness of Scripture?

The Little Horn

Read Daniel 7:7, 8, 19–25. Who is the little-horn power that arises directly from, and remains part of, the fourth beast?

Yesterday we learned that the ferocious animal with ten horns ruling the world with utmost cruelty represents pagan Rome. Now we must consider the little horn and the power it represents. As portrayed in the vision, the fourth animal has ten horns, of which three horns were plucked out to make way for a little horn. This horn has human eyes and speaks “pompous words” (*Dan. 7:8, NKJV*). It is clear that the little horn emerges from the entity represented by the terrible animal, which is pagan Rome. In a way, the horn extends or continues some features of pagan Rome. It is just a later stage of the same power.

Daniel sees this other horn making war against the saints. The angel explains to him that this horn is a king who will perform three unlawful actions: (1) speak pompous words against the Most High, (2) persecute the saints of the Most High, (3) intend to change times and law. And as a consequence, the saints would be given into his hand. Next, the angel gives the time frame for the activities of the little horn: *a time and times and half a time*. In this instance of prophetic language, the word *time* means “year,” and so the expression *times* signifies years, a dual form: “two years.” Hence, this is a period of three and a half prophetic years, which, according to the year-day principle, indicates a period of 1,260 years. During this time the little horn will mount an attack against God, persecute the saints, and attempt to change God’s law.

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12. What similarities are there between the man of lawlessness and the little horn? What power do we believe that this is talking about—and why? What is the only power that arose out of pagan Rome but remains part of Rome, a power that extends from the time of pagan Rome until the end of the world, meaning that it still exists today?

The Court Was Seated

After the vision of the four animals and the activities of the little horn, the prophet sees a scene of judgment in heaven (*Dan. 7:9, 10, 13, 14*). As the court convenes, thrones are put in place and the Ancient of Days takes His seat. As the heavenly scene shows, thousands and thousands of heavenly beings minister before the Ancient of Days, the court is seated, and the books are opened.

What's important to note about this judgment is that it occurs *after* the 1,260-year period of the little horn's activity (A.D. 538–1798; see Friday's study) but *prior* to the establishing of God's final kingdom. In fact, *three times* in the vision the following sequence appears:

Little-horn phase (538–1798)
Heavenly judgment
God's eternal kingdom

Read Daniel 7:13, 14, 21, 22, 26, 27. In what ways does the judgment benefit God's people?

The Old Testament describes several acts of judgment from the tabernacle and temple, but the judgment referred to here is different. This is a cosmic judgment that affects not only the little horn but also the saints of the Most High, who will eventually receive the kingdom.

Daniel 7 does not describe the judgment or give details about its beginning and closing. But it implies that the judgment is undertaken in the wake of the little horn's attack against God and His people. The point here, then, is to emphasize the beginning of a judgment of cosmic proportions. From Daniel 8 and 9 (see following weeks), we will learn about the time of judgment's beginning and the fact that this judgment is related to the purification of the heavenly sanctuary on the heavenly Day of Atonement. The lesson here is that we clearly will have a pre-Advent judgment in heaven that will be in favor of God's people (*Dan. 7:22*).

Why is an understanding of what Jesus accomplished for us at the cross so central to why we can have assurance in the day of judgment? What hope would we have, or even could we have, without the Cross? (See Rom. 8:1.)

The Coming of the Son of Man

Read Daniel 7:13. Who is the Son of man here, and how do you identify Him? (See also Mark 13:26, Matt. 8:20, 9:6, Luke 9:26, and 12:8.)

As the judgment unfolds, a most important figure enters the scene: the Son of man. Who is He? First, the Son of man appears as an individual heavenly figure. But as the title implies, He also displays human traits. In other words, He is a divine-human individual who comes to play an active role in judgment. Second, the Son of man coming with the clouds of heaven is a common image of the Second Coming in the New Testament. However, in Daniel 7:13 specifically, the Son of man is not depicted as coming from heaven to earth, but as moving horizontally from one place in heaven to another in order to appear before the Ancient of Days. Third, the depiction of the Son of man coming with the clouds of heaven suggests a visible manifestation of the Lord. But this imagery also is reminiscent of the high priest who, surrounded by a cloud of incense, enters the Most Holy Place on the Day of Atonement to perform the purification of the sanctuary.

The Son of man also is a royal figure. He receives “dominion and glory and a kingdom” and “all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him” (*Dan. 7:14, NKJV*). The verb “serve” also can be translated as “worship.” It appears nine times in chapters 1–7 (*Dan. 3:12, 14, 17, 18, 28; 6:16, 20; 7:14, 27*) and conveys the idea of paying homage to a deity. So, as a consequence of the attempt to change the law of God, the religious system represented by the little horn corrupts the worship due to God. The judgment portrayed here shows that true worship is eventually restored. The worship system set by the papal system, among other elements, places a fallen human being as a mediator between God and humanity. Daniel shows that the only mediator capable of representing humanity before God is the Son of man. As the Bible says, “For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus” (*1 Tim. 2:5, NKJV*).

From all that we have read in the Bible about the life and character of Jesus, why is it so comforting to know that He is so central to the judgment depicted here?

The Holy Ones of the Most High

What happens to God's people according to the following texts? *Dan. 7:18, 21, 22, 25, 27.*

The “holy ones of the Most High” (*NKJV*) is a designation of God's people. They are attacked by the power represented by the little horn. Because they insist on remaining faithful to God's Word, they are persecuted during the times of papal rule. Christians were persecuted during the time of the pagan Roman Empire, too (the fourth beast itself), but the persecution mentioned in Daniel 7:25 is a persecution of the saints by the little horn, which arises only after the pagan phase of Rome ends.

However, God's people won't be subjected to oppression by worldly power forever. The kingdom of God will replace the kingdoms of the world. Interestingly, in the actual vision, to the Son of man “was given dominion and glory and a kingdom” (*Dan. 7:14, NKJV*). But in the interpretation offered by the angel, it is the “holy ones” who receive the kingdom (*Dan. 7:18, NRSV*). There is no contradiction here. Because the Son of man is related to God and humanity, His victory is the victory of those He represents.

When the high priest asks if Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, Jesus points back to Psalm 110:1 and Daniel 7:13, 14 and says: “I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven” (*Mark 14:62, NKJV*). Therefore, Jesus is the One who represents us in the heavenly tribunal. He already has defeated the powers of darkness and shares His triumph with those who come close to Him. Therefore, there is no reason to fear. As the apostle Paul so aptly states: “Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (*Rom. 8:37–39, NKJV*).

Look at how accurately Daniel's vision depicts history, thousands of years in advance. How should this help us learn to trust all of God's promises for the future?

Further Thought: A cursory look at history reveals that after the collapse of the Roman Empire, which came about by attacks from barbarians from the north, the bishop of Rome took advantage of the overthrow of three barbarian tribes and established himself as the sole power in Rome as of A.D. 538. In this process, he adopted several institutional and political functions of the Roman emperor. From this emerged the papacy, invested with temporal and religious power until it was deposed by Napoleon in 1798. This did not bring an end to Rome, but only to that specified phase of persecution. The pope not only claimed to be the vicar of Christ but also introduced several doctrines and practices contrary to the Bible. Purgatory, penance, auricular confession, and the change of the Sabbath commandment to Sunday are among many other changes of the “times and law” introduced by the papacy.

“In his own strength, man cannot meet the charges of the enemy. In sin-stained garments, confessing his guilt, he stands before God. But Jesus, our Advocate, presents an effectual plea in behalf of all who by repentance and faith have committed the keeping of their souls to Him. He pleads their cause, and by the mighty arguments of Calvary, vanquishes their accuser. His perfect obedience to God’s law has given Him all power in heaven and in earth, and He claims from His Father mercy and reconciliation for guilty man. To the accuser of His people He declares: ‘The Lord rebuke thee, O Satan. These are the purchase of My blood, brands plucked from the burning.’ And to those who rely on Him in faith, He gives the assurance, ‘Behold, I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee, and I will clothe thee with change of raiment.’ Zechariah 3:4.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 586, 587.

Discussion Question:

① Look again at all the characteristics of the little-horn power that arises from, and remains part of, the fourth beast, Rome. What power alone arose out of pagan Rome many centuries ago and, besides having persecuted God’s people, remains in existence today? Why should this clear identification help protect us from speculation about its identity, including the idea that the little horn refers to a pagan, Greek king who disappeared from history more than a century and a half before the first advent of Jesus? How should these clear identifying marks also protect us from the belief that the little horn is some future power yet to arise?