

Houston, We Have a Problem

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[0 : 0 0] Daniel 7. 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 angel. 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. The 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 destroyed its victims and trampled underfoot what 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. Great. So we can imagine Daniel looking down towards this great sea and watching these beasts emerge up from chaos and we're going to get to that in a little bit. But first I want to start where he turns his eyes upward and Daniel gets a view directly into the throne room of God. So Jody is going to humor me and read the next couple verses also.

The 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.

Thank you. So did you guys hear what Daniel sees there when he looks into the throne room of God? So God is dressed in snow white robes. His hair is like pure wool and we see the Ancient of Days taking his seat in his fiery portable throne chariot. He's got fiery flames, burning wheels, and a literal river of fire is coming out in front of him. This is a narrow walkway so we could only maybe imagine like a small brook of fire, but it'd probably still be enough to like bring some marshmallows along.

[3 : 0 9] It sounds terrifying. And somehow this is not only a royal throne room, but it's also a courtroom. A great many served and stood before him. The court sat in judgment and the books were opened.

Literally in the original language it says judgment sat. It gives it the embodiment of a person or character. If you found yourself in court to contest a parking ticket and the courtroom looked like this, I suspect you'd reconsider your decision and just quietly pay the clerk. You're fine.

And go your own way. This vivid imagery gives us more than enough to understand the sovereignty and the power of this ruler and judge. God is set to judge his creation.

But do you guys see a problem here? In all of this order, there's something that's just a bit off. So let's look back at verse 9.

And it says thrones. It's bold and underlined just to draw extra attention. So I'm going to ask a question two different ways. I could say it this way. Would you like a donut?

[4 : 21] Or I could say it this way. Would you like donuts? Kids, which would you prefer? Donuts. Donuts are good in multiple form.

Especially the fruit ones. Those are healthy for you. They say eat fruit. So that's... You should have all that you can get. So what's going on here in God's throne room?

And why are there multiple thrones? If God occupies one, that means at least one is empty. So the problem here is an empty throne. And I want to just take a minute and back up out of Daniel and kind of get an idea how we got to this point where we have an empty throne.

And I like Genesis, so that's where we're going to go. So when God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, the man became a living creature.

And God blessed them and said to them, Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.

[5 : 27] The word dominion or some Bible versions will give us the word rule. That's kingdom language. So God is inviting humanity, which is the meaning of the first man's name, Adam, to share in the work of ruling and reigning alongside him.

This is the ideal. It's perfection. At the end of day six of creation, when God rested from ordering and creating, he himself said it was very good. So man, the latecomer of God's creation, was tasked with the responsibility of caring for and ruling over those who came earlier, which is all of creation.

You know how this story goes. It only goes downhill. Seeing, taking, eating, defining what is good and not good from our earthbound perspective is what animals do, brothers and sisters.

Animals respond to their surroundings and act upon impulses and urges without regard to consequences for their actions. The Diley family is responsible presently for one beast, and his name is Remington.

This spring, we were out in the driveway, and he just had to go meet a dog across the busy street that we live on, and he just went carelessly and recklessly running across the street with no regard for his master.

[6 : 47] That's not me. That's Sarah. Sarah is his master. But he was just doing what he does. He didn't consider that his actions could result in less than ideal outcomes, and he acted upon desire without regards to those wishes or thought.

Jeremy in chapter 4 reminded us, when Nebuchadnezzar was judged by God in his attempt to elevate himself above others, that sin makes us subhuman. It reduces us to the level of an animal.

It inverts or flips God's intended order on its head. And so, because of the beastly behavior in the garden, all of humanity is inseparably tied to sin.

We are, as a result, some confusing mix of good and not good. We possess abilities to reason, think, and consider our consequences and our actions, but oftentimes we still act upon our urges, impulses, and desires and become the beast that we were intended to rule over.

So Paul lays this out in Romans chapter 7. There's more going on, but there's not less than this idea here. He says, For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is in my flesh.

[8 : 03] For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.

Wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death? If Paul, the apostle, writer of many good letters, we've read a lot of his mail over the years, if he struggles with this, what hope do we have?

That remainder of sin that each and every one of us, all of humanity still deals with, disqualifies and renders us unfit on our own to live up to our original purpose that God designed us for and tasked us with.

To reign and rule alongside God. And that's the problem. So the throne remains empty. We're going to let that problem sit. And we're going to look back down towards the chaotic sea and look what that has for us.

[9 : 26] So verses 2 and 3, Daniel declares, I saw in my vision by night, and behold, the four winds of heaven were stirring up the great sea. And four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another.

So for today, we're not going to do, we're not going to focus too much on any particular beast. But I just want to see collectively how they work as a whole, and how there's some larger scale details that we can maybe notice and pull from here.

The scene is set like a movie scanning across the stormy sea. The sea is chaos. And chaos is defined as disorder and confusion. If you were to hop in, you'd soon realize that the forces around you are much larger than your ability to control them.

The wind is roaring, the waves are relentless, and you would find yourself struggling even to take a simple breath between waves rolling over you. And soon all hope of reaching the safety of shores would quickly disappear.

This unordered and wild sea is in direct and sharp contrast to the courtroom scene that we see in 9 and 10. Out of this chaos, we see these beasts in a progression.

[10 : 38] You see 1, 2, 3, and it culminates in a dreadful and exceedingly strong creature. We'll call him the mega beast today.

Beast number 4. But I want you to see something else. Can you also see that God's sovereign hand is over all of this? In the midst of chaos, we see the language is clear.

That even though these beasts are terrifying, they're only doing what they're allowed to do. There's a lot of language through here, and I've just pulled out a few. But it's lifted up, made to stand, given to it, raised up, arise, devour, and dominion was given to it.

These beasts are for sure terrifying. But don't be fooled into thinking that there aren't limits imposed on them. Don't believe that in the midst of what seems to be uncontrollable chaos, God is not perfectly in control.

God doesn't even dignify these beasts with a verbal response or rebuke. We need to see here that there isn't any equality between the great and powerful nations and God.

[11 : 42] He deals with them effortlessly. If we look at 11 and 12, we can see their ultimate end. 11 says, As people multiplied and filled the earth, as God instructed them to do, so did sin.

Because we are this strange mix of good and not good, the more people you have, the more not good you have. You just, hand in hand.

So when groups of people collect and concentrate themselves into kingdoms and nations, the leader or ruler of that group is the representative and is an exaggeration of the collective.

This is what the beasts are to represent. Just as Adam represented all of humanity, Nebuchadnezzar represented all of Babylon. So we have these four beasts.

Each beast represents an empire or a kingdom on the earth. So let's look, take a minute, and we'll look at what earthly kingdoms look like. What do earthly kingdoms act like?

[13 : 01] In a fallen world's economy, empires are not built through humility. They are built upon strength. Taking what is desirable, extracting value, casting aside and disposing of what is deemed weak and invaluable.

It's a lot like the game King of the Mountain. Kids, I know that it's like a thousand degrees outside now. But days ago, we had piles of snow. Do you guys play King of the Mountain?

Evelyn, you big King of the Mountain player? I suspected. We can all probably also think of an example from world history that kind of fits into this pattern.

They're set squarely in opposition to God and his original design and plan for humanity. To build an earthly kingdom, you must build yourself up at the expense of others. This reaches a point where they strive to have so much power and authority and to be king of the mountain and to be just like God.

But the result is that, ironically, the opposite of their desire is the reality. They are depicted here in the text as animals instead of gods.

[14 : 12] Brothers and sisters, this is a tragic irony. Jeremy quoted Nietzsche. He said, Do you guys know who Paul Harvey is?

It's time for a sort of a Paul Harvey-like story time break from the sermon. It was a Thursday evening.

The CEO of a mid-size organization had an important after-hours meeting on his schedule. He knew that he should be at home now with his family preparing for the rapidly approaching holiday. However, this was a very important meeting.

The organization he was now at the helm of had been an institution in his community. Over the many years since it had been established, it had weathered the ebb and flow of time. There had been positives, to be sure.

A once profitable balance sheet. Successful building projects. Many supportive patrons. But equally, it had experienced its share of scandals, hardships, bankruptcies, and outright failures.

[15 : 33] This history weighed heavily on the CEO as he considered the current state of the organization. The balance sheet looked bleak. The organization was a shell of what it once was. And there was talk that someone within the company claimed it was on a trajectory for failure.

Leadership was out of touch with reality and that he was the person who could turn things around and restore the company to what it was always intended to be. Maybe even better. The board of directors thought that this talk was complete nonsense and was looking to the CEO for answers.

He needed to act with urgency and force. They weren't happy about the division that was arising within the company and they were looking to him for action. They had a sharp business acumen and they smelled blood in the water.

They had been searching for just cause to rid the organization of this squeaky wheel when finally two had come forward with some information that they thought they could leverage. Tonight's meeting was with that man who dared speak out against the plan and direction of the corporate leadership.

As the time for the meeting drew close, the CEO considered the possible outcomes of this meeting. On one hand, he could be rid of this nuisance and he could return his focus to growing the organization and climbing out of the apparent hole it had found itself in.

[16 : 52] On the other hand, if things didn't go his way, he feared the reins of the company he so tightly gripped onto would slip out of his hand. He was resolved to come out on top.

His career depended on it and as the meeting started, he didn't waste any time demanding that the man give an account to all of the rumors surrounding him. The man's response to the CEO was calm and most unusual.

The man responded with a sentence that somehow seemed worlds away. In a simple moment, the CEO's concentration and focus was lost. He was pulled back into his childhood to a story he had heard growing up from his parents and that many others in his small community would repeat occasionally.

A story that was from a time long since gone about a time yet to come. A struggle for dominance and final judgment. A story about one who stood outside of time itself, ordaining a new kingdom and giving it to one who was like a son of man.

As quickly as the last piece of the jigsaw puzzle slid into place, revealing the full picture, our CEO snapped back to his meeting furiously. Does anybody think they know the rest of the story yet?

[18 : 06] In Paul Harvey? Speak? Alice? You tracking? Not yet? Okay. Hang tight. We'll get there. So the man who stood accused in this meeting was Jesus and the CEO is the high priest Caiaphas.

Obviously, I used a little creative license here with the details, but I wanted us to see with a fresh set of eyes how relatable Caiaphas probably is to us.

If we're being honest, we probably see a little bit of ourselves in him, seeking to squash any opposition to our plans to build our kingdom by our own strength and put ourselves on top as king of the mountain, even possibly at the expense of others, acting in anger, saying things we probably regret, manipulating someone to get what we want, and lying for our own benefit.

I'm sure that all of us in some way can think of how we've elevated ourselves at the expense of others, trying hard to establish our very own kingdom of one.

So I'm going to take a risk here. I had a focus group earlier, and my focus group had no idea what I was talking about when I said this movie one-liner. This just doesn't seem wise for me to use it here, but if I say this movie one-liner, Houston, we have a problem.

[19 : 28] Does anybody know what movie I'm talking about? You can shout it out if you'd like. Yes, that was quite a loud shout. Maybe. That's right.

Saying a one-liner is a lot easier for me to cue up in your brain than to say something like, on April 11, 1970, at 1.13 p.m., Apollo 13 launched from the Kennedy Space Center in Merritt Island, Florida, and on and on and on.

I'm not going to belabor that. It also does something else. It slots us into different places. If I say that line from the 1995 film Apollo 13, that's correct, that puts me into the character position of astronaut John Swigert.

I think I'm saying his name right. The actor that played him was Kevin Bacon. I'm pretty sure I got his name right. But if I'm playing that position, who does that make you guys?

That's right. That makes you NASA mission control. So using a well-known one-line saying brings all of the information. Good job, guys, at knowing movies.

[20 : 40] That's good. It brings all of the information and context that you know about that line to bear on your current situation. It's saying much without saying much at all.

Listen here to the one-liner that Jesus drops on Caiaphas. I don't think that they used microphones like we have today. But if they did, this may be the first ever recorded mic drop moment when Jesus says this.

So let's look at Matthew 26 and 64. That's his response to Caiaphas. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven.

When Jesus stands before Caiaphas and the whole council, his response brings this hard-to-understand vision that Daniel had into sharp focus. Jesus is telling Caiaphas that at the moment when he thinks he's the king of the mountain and that he has raised himself up above Jesus by putting him to death, death on a cross, he has actually done the opposite.

Jesus rightly sees this moment as the beginning of the end for sin, death, and the nations raging to assert dominance. This is when Jesus will be raised through his humility to the right hand of the Father and seated on the empty throne.

[22 : 02] So just like you guys are mission control, if Jesus, the cloud rider, the Son of Man, says that if he takes that position for himself, what does that make our chief executive, Caiaphas?

Caiaphas. He's the mega beast, isn't he? He's reprising his role as beast number four from Daniel 7. Caiaphas, like Nebuchadnezzar and the other kings in Daniel, built their kingdoms by the standard of a fallen world economy, self-exalting and at the expense of others.

A kingdom built by God's economy stands in stark contrast. It's built through humility, submission, and trust that God will one day make good on his promises.

Its domain is ushered in by Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men, and being found in human form.

He humbled himself by being obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. By using the Son of Man phrase, Jesus claims that he's the representative for humanity, the only one that's perfectly qualified to reclaim the empty throne that's next to God, that was abdicated by us in our sinful condition.

[23 : 30] So let's look back at Daniel at 13 and 14, and let's see how, what Daniel has to say about that title that Jesus attached to himself and used to describe himself the most in his earthly ministry.

13 says, I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven, there came one like a son of man, and he came to the ancient of days and was presented before him.

And he was given dominion and glory and a kingdom that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

God's plan from before creation of the world was to rescue and restore. Acts says it this way, this Jesus delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.

God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death because it was not possible for him to be held by it. God knew just how beastly human hearts can be. But what we as humanity did in an egregious act of self-exalting evil against God himself, God in his mercy gave us what we most desperately needed.

[24 : 56] Friends, on the third day, the stone was rolled back and the grave was empty so that the throne didn't have to be. Sorry.

So this is all super good news. But we're not quite done because Daniel is still troubled. He's concerned and anxious.

So as we continue, let's see what else there is. So Daniel wisely thinks to ask one of those who were standing there, he says, hey, what's going on here?

Which is smart rather than just think and assume you just ask somebody. Seems logical. Daniel wanted to know more about this little horn that emerged from the fourth beast.

Let's look at verse 21. So 21 says, As I looked, this horn made war with the saints and prevailed over them.

[26 : 02] This phrase is repeated again in verse 25, slightly different. Just as Ryan pointed out last week, faith is not an insurance policy against suffering.

Daniel, I believe, is troubled here because he knows until this son of man that we now know is Jesus is seated on the empty throne and his everlasting kingdom is established.

There will be suffering for the saints, even those that are not yet born. Daniel knows suffering firsthand. He knows how hard it is to walk the narrow road of staying faithful to God while living in a foreign land.

But this hard and troubling news is also coupled with some surprising good news. Verse 27 says, Three times it says that the saints will receive the kingdom and possess it forever.

This is incredible news. Not only do we see how God's economy differs in how a kingdom is established, but also how it's governed. Even though Jesus is the only qualified recipient of the throne at God's right hand, once he's given dominion and glory and a kingdom, do you see what he does with it?

[27 : 22] He invites those who serve him to receive and possess the kingdom. Jesus didn't humble himself and confine himself to an earthly body so that he could make a victory lap around the ancient Near East before being raised on high to rule over creation and assert dominance.

He did it because of his love for his creation. Even though we lack the ability on our own to stand before God, Jesus invites us back to the forfeited throne as well. Daniel is an example of faith to us yet today to help us persevere.

He does not attach himself to the kingdom of Babylon because Daniel isn't concerned about being the king of the mountain. However, he also doesn't hide and retreat until God makes good on his promises.

In fact, Daniel finds himself right in the middle of it. He works for the government of Babylon. He's able to walk the narrow road because he's steeped in the word of God and he understands that God's economy stands in a stark contrast to the fallen world's economy.

He has that substance of faith or that substance that Hebrews 11 describes. It's faith. Daniel can see in the court of the current, he can serve in the court of the current ruler because he knows the power given to that ruler comes from the one true ruler and he knows until Jesus is seated at God's right hand, powers will rise and another one will rise up and take their place.

[28 : 51] Like Daniel, we are also living in a foreign land, oftentimes feeling like we are treading water in an apparent sea of chaos. If we are found in Christ, we too have this substance of faith.

We may not realize it, but when we pray the Lord's Prayer, we are praying for this vision that Daniel has to finally become a reality. He says, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

We are asking for God's kingdom to come down and become our reality on earth. But until then, God calls us, Jesus teaches us, and the Holy Spirit helps to serve, love, witness, and testify to the gospel right in the middle of the chaotic world that we live in, right now, where God has put us.

Because we know that Jesus is on the second throne, it's no longer empty. And we believe that a day is coming when all followers of Jesus will be united and join him as the bride of Christ and reign with him forever.

Let's pray. Dear Lord, we are so thankful for this vision that you gave to Daniel. It just encompasses the entire story arc of scripture all in one tight but hard-to-understand vision.

[30 : 14] Lord, I just thank you for the humility that you had to bear with us in our sinful condition and still in our sinful condition. But you didn't wait. You acted according to your plan that you had determined from before time.

Lord, you sent Jesus to earth to live amongst us, a people that would turn against him. Lord, I just pray that we, as we approach communion, that we would just reflect on that reality and truth and that we could turn our hearts to you and just praise and rejoice you for that great gift that you've given us.

In your name we pray. Amen. Amen.