

“Preparing for the King”
Daniel 7:1-14
August 22, 2010

INTRODUCTION:

We’re at the final sermon today of our survey of the key historical events of the Old Testament, and we’re going to look at the four-hundred year period of time known as the “Intertestamental Period.” As the name indicates, this is the time between the testaments. Israel at the time of Malachi, the last Old Testament prophet, writing around 400 B.C., was very different from Israel at the birth of John the Baptist. Malachi lived in post-exilic Israel, with Persia being the nation in power. John the Baptist lived in a nation under Roman occupation. Significant changes had taken place within the nation.

Sometimes change is good. A young married couple brings home their firstborn child, and their lives change dramatically as a result. But that’s a good change. Other changes are more challenging, and Israel’s during these four hundred years fit into this category of difficult changes. As they returned from the land following their 70 year exile, hopes were high for the restoration of the nation to the former glory under David and Solomon. But it didn’t happen that way. As a matter of fact, things went from bad to worse as a succession of powerful foreign nations ruled over the tiny nation of Israel.

Our passage this morning helps us understand how changes prepare us for the arrival of the king who will himself change everything for good. The changes God brought about during these four hundred years prepared the way for King Jesus to arrive in the fullness of time. Change has the same effect in our lives. Many of you are going through significant changes in your lives right now. Several have been through job changes. We had a large class of high school seniors this last year, and most of them have now left home, leading to difficult changes in the families left behind. There have been deaths, relocations, the onset of difficult and chronic health issues, and a large number of other changes in life. Our passage this morning will stabilize us and give us joy in the midst of difficult changes in life, showing us how God uses these changes to bring a new reign of the King.

I. Waiting for the King

Daniel describes in visionary, prophetic form a long period of time that encompasses the Intertestamental period of time. He does so in chapter 2 by interpreting a dream of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, and in our chapter through a vision of four beasts. Daniel 2 and 7 describe the same four kingdoms through different images. Nebuchadnezzar dreams of a grand statue

in Daniel 2, reflecting man's views of these kingdoms. Humanity views the mighty kingdoms of the world as grand and glorious. The same four kingdoms are portrayed in Daniel 7 as carnivorous beasts. The first beast is the lion with the wings of an eagle, representing the kingdom of Babylon. Next is the bear, raised up on one side as if about to pounce. The main feature of this bear is thirst for blood and conquest. He has three ribs in his mouth and is still wanting more. He represents the Medo-Persian kingdom that followed the Babylonian kingdom. This is the kingdom that was in power when Israel returned from their exile, and was still in power when the Old Testament draws to a close with the prophet Malachi.

In 331 B.C., Alexander the Great conquered the Persians and much of the ancient world. His kingdom is likened to the leopard with four wings and four heads. The leopard is known for its speed, and it is well-known that Alexander conquered the world quickly. He not only conquered militarily, but culturally as well. The Greek language became so pervasive that many Jews grew unfamiliar with the Hebrew language of the Old Testament, and it had to be translated into Greek. The Greek translation of the Old Testament is known as the Septuagint, finished in the middle of the second century B.C.

Alexander died in 323 B.C. at the age of 33. He left no heir, and two of his generals battled for control of his kingdom. Two dynasties resulted from this, the Ptolemies and the Seleucids. Israel was caught in the battle between these powers, being ruled by both of them at various times from 311 B.C. to 164 B.C. The most well-known part of Israel's history during the Intertestamental period came in 167 B.C. The Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes entered the temple in Jerusalem to loot its treasures and set up the worship of Greek gods. He set up an altar to Zeus within the temple and offered up a pig—the most unclean animal to Jews—as a sacrifice. But one day an elderly priest, Mattathias ben Johanan, who had been ordered to offer up an unclean sacrifice to one of the pagan gods, refused to do so. He killed a Greek soldier standing nearby and fled to the desert with his five sons and there organized a rebel force to overthrow the Greeks. The old priest died shortly after this act, but his third son, Judah, assumed leadership of this band of rebels and proved himself to be a capable military leader. He was given a nickname, *Maccabee*, which means “the hammer,” because of his hammering of the enemy. The Maccabees achieved many victories, culminating in a battle against the Seleucid army on December 25, 164 B.C. After this victory, Judah Maccabee cleansed the temple in Jerusalem and rededicated the whole temple to the Lord. This event is now celebrated in the Jewish feast, *Hanukkah*. Israel enjoyed a period of independence until 63 B.C., which brings us to the fourth beast.

Daniel doesn't name the fourth beast, but this one terrifies him more than the others. This beast is so awful that no likeness in the vast animal kingdom can be found for it. It is half animal and half machine, with its iron teeth and bronze claws (v. 19). It uses this power to crush and devour its victims, and

then to trample underfoot any who escape its powerful jaws. This beast represents Rome, which, under Pompey the Great in 63 B.C., entered Jerusalem and began a Roman presence that would last about 500 years.

Though this fourth beast clearly represents Rome, it also seems to go beyond Rome to represent a type of alliance between all the kingdoms of this world against the kingdom of God. It is particularly the emergence of the little horn that demonstrates this. We don't have time to look at this in detail, but I think this little horn is the first depiction in the Bible of the one called the antichrist in the New Testament. Later in the chapter, when Daniel has the vision explained to him, it is said of this horn that he **“made war with the saints and prevailed over them”** (v. 21).

Here's the point I want to make. God prepares Israel for their Messianic King by bringing about difficult and challenging changes to the nation. He does the same in our lives, sometimes to the point that we are powerless before forces much stronger than us, and forces that are clearly malevolent.

II. Seeing the King

The transition between verses 8 and 9 is dramatic. Daniel's vision of the fourth beast and of the little horn was terrifying and dreadful. This was the power before whom Israel would be so powerless. But verse 9 moves immediately to another vision, something else that must be seen if we are to survive the difficult changes that occur in our lives. Daniel is given a vision of heaven. **“As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat.”** He took his seat on the throne. There is no anxiety in this being. He is not frantically pacing back and forth worrying about how things are going to turn out. The beasts are not terrifying to him because he rules over all. This can be seen even in the language used earlier to describe the beasts. Notice the silent actor in these verses. The beasts are being controlled by some force outside themselves. The lion had its wings torn off, the bear was told to get up and eat his fill of flesh, and the leopard was given authority to rule. Who was in control of all this? It's the one on the throne, the Ancient of Days. As Christians, we don't believe in the kind of dualism where good and evil struggle against one another as equals. We don't believe that God is locked in a struggle with Satan and that the outcome is somehow uncertain. We believe instead that Satan and all his kingdom is on a rope controlled by God. He does nothing beyond what he is given permission to do. God is on the throne.

There are two other things we need to see in heaven that are pictured for us in Daniel's vision. We see God's judgment of evil. **“His throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and came out from before him... The court sat in judgment, and the books were opened”** (v. 9-10). These are all ways of speaking of God's judgment. To believe that God

will bring judgment upon evil releases us from bringing judgment. We can leave it in God's hands rather than seeking our own revenge.

Notice also that we as God's people on earth are not alone. When we suffer at the hands of those more powerful than we are, there is a tendency to feel isolated. It must have felt that way to Daniel, one of the Jewish exiles living in the court of the evil King Belshazzar. But notice what Daniel sees in heaven. **“A thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him”** (v. 10). We may at times feel our minority status, but the truth is that those who follow the Ancient of Days are part of a vast army.

Finally, Daniel sees **“one like a son of man”** (v. 13). This is our Lord Jesus, who will be given dominion that is everlasting. His kingdom shall not pass away and shall not be destroyed. It is this vision of heaven that gives us stability in our lives during difficult times.

III. Trusting the King

How does a vision of the kingdom give such stability? It does so because we learn to trust this glorious and sovereign king. The alternative is to trust ourselves, and there are at least two versions of self-trust I want us to consider.

The first version of self-trust comes out of the Intertestamental period we have been considering. We've already mentioned that post-exilic Israel expected to recapture the nation's former glory after their restoration to the land. This was based somewhat on promises in Deuteronomy 30. But as we have seen, it didn't happen that way. With minor exceptions, Israel was ruled by a series of powerful foreign nations, with the last one, Rome, being the most powerful. Life wasn't working the way they thought it should, and they sought for an explanation. A significant movement began in this 400 year Intertestamental period that found the explanation for the nation's troubles in their failure to obey God's law. One author words their conclusion like this.

If the nation, though physically restored to their land, was still politically and religiously a nation in exile, it must be so because God had not yet finished his judgment on the people for violating his covenant. Thus, they could expect a full and final deliverance only when they had demonstrated a sufficient measure of faithfulness to the Torah” (*The Drama of Scripture*, p. 117).

In other words they were saying that life wasn't going well because their performance was lacking. If they could only manage to increase their level of obedience, then it would all work out according to plan. The result of this conviction was the launching of a movement that gave great attention to making sure that God's law was kept. They erected fences around God's law to make sure that people didn't even get close to breaking it. The Sabbath laws

were common targets of this group. They forbade things like a woman looking into a mirror on the Sabbath, not because there was anything intrinsically sinful in that act, but because it introduced the temptation to violate the Sabbath. She may see a gray hair in the mirror and be tempted to pluck it out, thus doing work on the Sabbath and breaking God's law. As you may realize by now, this effort produced a group that became Jesus' greatest enemies during his earthly life. The Pharisees believed that the explanation for Israel's troubles was the disobedience of its people to God's law. They also believed that if they could get their performance right, then God would respond in blessing.

This is still a very common response to trouble, isn't it? When things don't work out as we envision them, we think, "What have I done wrong?" This is self-trust, not trusting in God. The New Testament teaches that it is the performance of Jesus that earns the blessing of God upon us.

There is a second example of self-trust in our passage, and it is found in this little horn that grows up from the fourth beast, the one that we have said is the first appearance in the Bible of the one who is described elsewhere as the antichrist. Notice that it says of him that he possessed **"a mouth speaking great things"** (v. 8, 11, 20). Other translations say that he had a mouth that spoke boastfully. Isn't it interesting that the central description of him is a boastful mouth? There is something about boasting that is completely against Christ. It is this: boasting in our own accomplishments is one of the clearest expressions of unbelief. It says, "I don't need Christ and what he has done for me because I can do it myself." So shading the truth to make ourselves look better is a spirit of antichrist. Seeking to feel better about ourselves by pointing out our accomplishments, the accomplishments of our children, our favorite sports team, or anything else is a spirit of antichrist. As Christians, we boast only in Jesus as the one who has died for us and given us his righteousness.

CONCLUSION:

If you are undergoing some challenging changes in your life right now, let me invite you to trust Jesus our King. Boast in him. By his performance, the blessing of God has already been secured. John Paton was a 19th century Presbyterian missionary from Scotland. At 32 he accepted the call to missionary service in the New Hebrides in the South Pacific. In March of 1858, just a month before leaving for the mission field, he married Mary Ann Robson. He and his new bride set sail for the cannibal island of Tanna. In less than a year they had built a little home and Mary had given birth to a son. But on March 3 of 1859, only one year after their marriage, Mary died of the fever. Three weeks later, the infant son died as well. John Paton buried them alone, and wrote, "But for Jesus... I must have gone mad and died beside that lonely grave." The changes in his life were extraordinarily difficult. But he continued trusting Jesus and God used him for extraordinary fruitfulness.