

Explore the Bible: Future Seen

February 7, 2022

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for Feb. 20 focuses on Daniel 7:1-14.*

Having been in ministry more than 30 years, there are several things I pretty much can guarantee leaders are going to be asked to address during their time in any given ministry situation. Members will want to know about relationships and how to make them better. They will want to know how to get more out of reading the Bible and how to apply it to their life. But more than any other question I have been asked to address, Christians want to know about the future.

The desire is neither surprising, nor wrong. We live in a fallen world that brings us the pain of loss, separation, sickness and death. Wanting to see the end of all of that is natural and appropriate. Add into the equation the wonder and mystery of the visions surrounding the future, and one can easily understand the fascination.

Despite the logic and appropriateness of the desire to know what the Bible has to say about the future, there is a downside to the captivation. Because part of the impetus for the search is certainty, people can often look for answers the Bible doesn't seek to give. Jesus himself talked about not knowing days and hours (Matthew 24:36), yet we attempt to fill in gaps and answer questions that are the biblical equivalent of that information.

When dealing with a passage such as Daniel 7 through 12, it is important to realize that certainty about some parts of the interpretation is elusive. Our presuppositions about the text and what we expect to encounter there can drive us down a path of drawing conclusions beyond what the text presents. This can become especially important when relating to people who might see the text differently than we do. Therefore, it's best to draw

firm conclusions in those places only where we can and tentative conclusions when warranted, always remembering to show charity and Christian love to those who disagree with us.

The First Three Beasts (Daniel 7:1-6)

Almost all scholars agree that chapters two and seven of Daniel both deal with the same four nations. Daniel 2 highlights these nations through a series of metals that made up the statue in Nebuchadnezzar's dream, while Daniel 7 list these nations by portraying them as monstrous creatures. Beyond that point of agreement, however, scholars are not as certain about the identity of those four nations.

Undoubtedly, the first nation in both list is Babylon. This is the nation with which Daniel was directly interacting and fits in both description and purpose in the visions. The second nation has been variously identified as Medio-Persia or Media alone. The third nation then has been classified as Persia, Greece and Alexander the Great alone. Whatever the actual identify of nations involved, the purpose of the passage is to highlight the temporal and degenerative nature of human kingdoms and the power and eternal nature of the divine one. Indeed, one growing tendency among scholarship is to suggest that nations two through four should not be connected with any specific nations at but are simply intended to paint a picture of humanities growing crudity and viciousness.

The Fourth Beast and the Horn (Daniel 7:7-8)

Like nations two and three, much debate surrounds the identity of the fourth beast. For this nation, some have proposed Rome, Greece, the successors to Alexander the Great (Seleucids) and a future reconstituted

Rome. Within the discussion is the identity of the little horn; that is, a leader who grows from the midst of the kingdom to rule and to ruin. Similar to the debate over the nation involved, the identity fluctuates between a Roman Emperor, Antiochus IV and the Anti-Christ at the end of the history. Interestingly, within the book of Daniel itself, the little horn who did great things in Daniel 8 indisputably is Antiochus IV. The question then becomes what the relationship is between this little horn and that little horn.

The arrogance of the little horn is the focal point of the vision. Whoever he is, he represents the very nature of humanity who views itself as a competitor to God himself. His cruelty and vicious actions reveal that to trust in the machinations of humanity is to pursue self-destruction. Unabated by some intervention from God, man's plans and arrogance always result in death. Fortunately for Daniel and his readers (including us), the vision continues.

The Judgment (Daniel 7:9-14)

Like the stone from heaven that struck at the base of the statue in Daniel 2, the arrogant culminating beast is met by one who undoes his arrogant works and brings in an eternal kingdom that brings life and hope. Most important for our understanding of God's plan for humanity is the introduction of the term son of man into the messianic vocabulary.

In Hebrew thought, the phrase son of man simply means "human." It is somewhat surprising, then, to have this human described as "coming with the clouds of heaven" (Daniel 7:13). The union of the two is not accidental or inconsequential. This is the clearest Old Testament revelation that the Christ would be both God and man. It is also likely behind Jesus' use of this favorite term for himself in the Gospels. Whereas his audience would hear a non-threatening term of humility, in the context of this passage, Jesus was

also revealing himself as the divine Son of God.

When all of this is taken together, we have a vision of the future that is intended to call its readers to a stance of courage and hope, knowing the evil kingdoms that distort truth and destroy lives are temporary. The relationship we build with the God who rules and who is eternal helps us to see a future that includes an abundant life, no matter how it plays out.

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