

# CASKET EMPTY

## Part 7 – Expectation

Daniel 7:1-14

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ November 12, 2017 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

<sup>1</sup> In the first year of King Belshazzar of Babylon, Daniel had a dream and visions of his head as he lay in bed. Then he wrote down the dream: <sup>2</sup> I, Daniel, saw in my vision by night the four winds of heaven stirring up the great sea, <sup>3</sup> and four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another. <sup>4</sup> The first was like a lion and had eagles' wings. Then, as I watched, its wings were plucked off, and it was lifted up from the ground and made to stand on two feet like a human being; and a human mind was given to it. <sup>5</sup> Another beast appeared, a second one, that looked like a bear. It was raised up on one side, had three tusks in its mouth among its teeth and was told, "Arise, devour many bodies!" <sup>6</sup> After this, as I watched, another appeared, like a leopard. The beast had four wings of a bird on its back and four heads; and dominion was given to it. <sup>7</sup> After this I saw in the visions by night a fourth beast, terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong. It had great iron teeth and was devouring, breaking in pieces, and stamping what was left with its feet. It was different from all the beasts that preceded it, and it had ten horns. <sup>8</sup> I was considering the horns, when another horn appeared, a little one coming up among them; to make room for it, three of the earlier horns were plucked up by the roots. There were eyes like human eyes in this horn, and a mouth speaking arrogantly.

<sup>9</sup> As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One took his throne, his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, and its wheels were burning fire.

<sup>10</sup> A stream of fire issued and flowed out from his presence. A thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him. The court sat in judgment, and the books were opened.

<sup>11</sup> I watched then because of the noise of the arrogant words that the horn was speaking. And as I watched, the beast was put to death, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire.

<sup>12</sup> As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was

taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time. <sup>13</sup> As I watched in the night visions,

I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven.

And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him.

<sup>14</sup> To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him.

His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.

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The world champion Houston Astros had to wait 55 years before they won the World Series. None of the Astros, including their manager, have even been alive for 55 years. That's a long time to wait for the promised land. Although it's peanuts by comparison. The Boston Red Sox had to wait 86 years between titles. The Chicago Cubs waited 107 years until they broke through last year. There are seven Major League teams which have never won a championship. Collectively, that's 275 seasons without one single trophy. And speaking of waiting, this Giants fan isn't too heartbroken that the Los Angeles Dodgers will have to wait at least one more season to be called champions.

Waiting for the promised land in sports seems difficult enough until we remember that in the scope of things, championship trophies are largely irrelevant. I grew up a Denver Broncos fan waiting season after season to taste the sweetness of Super Bowl glory. No team has lost more Super Bowls than my Broncos. The night they finally won in 1998 I was ecstatic. But then I woke up the next morning and realized that absolutely nothing in my life had changed. Sometimes the promised land is overrated.

By contrast, there are many of us here who know what *real* waiting is like. And it's one thing to wait for something you can't be sure will ever come – there's no guarantee that your team will ever win the

championship - it's quite another thing to wait for something you believe will come because you believe God has promised it will come and God, as far as you know, is not one to break promises. So you wait for healing. You wait for a child or grandchild to find their way. You wait to experience – *really experience* – God's love and forgiveness in your life. You want to be set free from an addiction or habit which has dogged you for decades. You wait for true friendship or true love. You wait to find purpose in your life. Or, on a grander scale, you wait for things in this broken world of ours to finally lean towards beauty, kindness, abundance and peace.

As we've walked through the Old Testament this fall we keep coming back to this theme of waiting. It's no wonder. Remember, it was 2,200 years before the birth of Christ when God revealed himself to an old, childless, idol-worshipping pagan named Abraham and promised him and his wife that he would bless them in their old age with a son and that in time his family would grow in numbers that rivaled the stars in the sky. God promised to bless Abraham's family to the extent that some day that they would be a blessing to every other family on earth.

And suddenly 55 years doesn't seem like a very long time at all. Yes, eventually Abraham's family did grow to become the nation of Israel, but over 2,000 years later they are still waiting to see the covenant fulfilled. 2,000 years! In fact, the Old Testament ends before there is fulfillment. Furthermore, during the 400 years between the Old and New Testaments, God went silent. No prophet came in those years, no update as to what God was doing to bring his people, and the world through his people, to glory. Making matters worse, in those days Israel was conquered by yet another foreign power – Rome this time – and relegated once again to being a people subject to another nation.

What sustains people in these times of waiting? It can't be possibility, right? The possibility of glory isn't enough. Is it possible that your hapless team will win the championship next year? It's possible, sure. It's also possible that they may *never* win it...ever. So can possibility be enough to sustain us? I don't know. I'd rather have hope. Not wishful thinking, but real biblical hope that is the assurance of things not yet realized but promised.<sup>1</sup> It's the sort of hope you have in the middle of a long, dark, cold night when you wait and watch for the dawn. The dawn is not a possibility. The dawn is promised. It will come. That's the confidence, the *expectation*, of hope. And hoping in the promises of God

is hoping in that which is even more certain than the rising of the sun.

In Israel's case it was hope that sustained them, hope in the promises of God they had been given over the years. In fact, the text we just read from Daniel 7 was one of the primary sources of hope for God's people during this long time of waiting for glory. Daniel, as you may know, was one of the Israelites carted off into exile in Babylon in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. God used Daniel's life to demonstrate what it looks like to practice your faith in the midst of a culture that opposes your faith. God also spoke regularly to Daniel through dreams and visions to remind him, and others through him, that the Lord is sovereign above all, no matter how the circumstances of life suggest otherwise. In a way, you might say these dreams provided an aerial perspective. I am forever trying to explain to visitors why this neighborhood is called the Pocket. From ground level it looks nothing like a Pocket. But go on Google Maps and show a visitor this neighborhood from several thousand feet up and it all becomes clear. In the same way, these visions were meant to lift Daniel and his people out from and above their day-to-day circumstances and give them a glimpse of the wider expanse of God's redemptive story so that hope could be nourished.

The passage we just read is the summary of one of these dreams, although we shouldn't think about this in the same way we usually think of dreams. You know the experience of suddenly finding yourself awake in the early morning hours – or half awake at best – and realizing that what was just, a moment ago, a vivid reality, maybe even terrifyingly so, is now recognized as only a dream. But even a moment later if you try to recall that dream, especially in great detail, it's very difficult to do. You certainly couldn't get up that next morning and write it all down in detail.

So what Daniel receives here and at other times is more like a vision, a divine revelation that came with enough clarity to be recorded and passed on, which it was. As I said earlier, this text may have been for Israel the single most important source of hope from God's Word during this time of waiting and expectation after the Old Testament ended.

It's not an easy text to understand. The imagery is bizarre, typical of this sort of apocalyptic genre. It begins with this vivid description of four terrifying beasts. Whenever I've read this text I can't help but think of the Wild Things in Maurice Sendak's classic children's book – roaring their terrible roars, gnashing their terrible teeth, rolling their terrible eyes, and showing their terrible claws.

<sup>1</sup> See Hebrews 11:1 – “Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.”

Notice that the beasts do not descend from heaven but arise from the sea, making clear from the outset that these creatures are human in nature. As they arise, they exercise violent dominion and terrorize those under their rule. Now, from very early on the consensus interpretation of this text among scholars has been that these four beasts represent the rulers of four great empires which, one after another, had dominion over Israel: Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. Let me briefly show you why this interpretation is so widely accepted.

The first beast is a lion with wings like an eagle. We know from history that the lion was a symbol of Babylon. The Ishtar Gate, a prominent entrance to that ancient city, was adorned on either side with a long procession of yellow lions.<sup>2</sup> Babylon, of course, conquered Jerusalem in the early 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. and carted off the Israelites, including Daniel, to exile in Babylon.

The second beast is a hulking bear, by description raised up on one side. The inference is that this creature depicts a world power that was made up of the alliance of two nations, one dominating the other. Scholars, therefore, agree that the image represents the Medo-Persian Empire, an alliance in which Persia dominated as it extended its reign far and wide, “devouring much flesh” as the vision states. King Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon in the late 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. and even though he showed tolerance to Israel, allowing them to return to their homeland, he still made them his subjects.<sup>3</sup>

The third beast is a swift four-headed leopard, made even swifter by the four wings on its back. This beast represents the Greek ruler Alexander the Great, whose empire spread rapidly far and wide but was, after his death, divided into four parts. Israel became a part of the Greek world through Alexander’s conquests in the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C.

The fourth animal, probably the strangest of all, is a dreadful ten-horned beast with iron teeth. The strength of this beast far exceeds the first three and so clearly points to Rome, which came along and absolutely trampled whatever was left of the first three empires. In 63 B.C., the Roman general Pompey

besieged Jerusalem, desecrated the Temple, and brought Israel under Roman rule through Caesar’s puppet king Herod the Great.

So do you see what’s happening here? From his place as an exile in Babylon, Daniel is given a vision from God that the world power which has currently devoured Israel is only the first of four world powers which will, in succession, continue to devour Israel in the days to come. This is God’s way of letting his people know beforehand that they should not be surprised when this happens. And in some way, for reasons that may only be revealed at the end of time, all this will be according to God’s plan. No circumstance in history, even the world-wide conquest of powerful human empires, is outside of God’s sovereignty. In other words, these world powers do not threaten God’s redemptive plan. No matter how bleak the circumstances of history may appear, the fulfillment of God’s promises is not just a possibility. No! God doing what God has promised to do is our certain hope, as certain as the coming of dawn after a long, dark night.

In fact, as impressive as these beasts are in their description, did you notice that the vision makes clear that each one of them is subject to a greater power. The lion has its wings plucked off and is *forced* to stand on its two hind legs. The bear is commanded to arise and devour, *commanded* by one who has greater authority. The leopard only possesses dominion which has been granted to it. Even the ten-horned beast, in spite of its arrogant boasting, is ultimately given over to be burned with fire.

For you see, in the second half of the passage the vision makes clear that there is One in the midst of these beasts who is the true authority. In fact, the description of the scene that follows makes clear that these beasts find themselves in a high court before a divine judge whose judgment cannot be questioned or overturned. This is, in fact, the court of heaven where God, the Ancient One blazing with purity and splendor, has come to judge with fire those who have opposed his supreme authority. The court is seated, thousands upon thousands of witnesses. The book full of evidence is present and open. The stage is set for the wicked and unrepentant to be brought to justice. The deathly reign of these beasts will end with the coming of the Lord upon his throne.

All these years later there is no doubt that this vision was, in fact, realized. Where is Babylon today? Only a memory. Where is King Cyrus of Persia? His body, along with his great kingdom, are dust and ashes. Where is the Greek Empire now? Or the Roman Empire? We can visit the ruins but have to stretch our

<sup>2</sup> *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Volume 7, edited by Frank E. Gæbelein (Zondervan, 1985), 86.

<sup>3</sup> Biblical scholars suggest that the three ribs which the bear is commanded to feast upon correspond to the three major conquests made under the leadership of King Cyrus: Lydian kingdom in Asia Minor (546), the Chaldean Empire which he annexed (539), and the kingdom of Egypt (525). *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 86.

imaginations to see the glory that once occupied these places.

Imagine telling Roman citizens in the 1<sup>st</sup> century that the Roman Empire would eventually be reduced to rubble. Nobody would have believed you. On its face, human power seems enduring and impenetrable. It is not. That's the long view. There will be a day when North Korea and Iran are no more. When we look from the perspective of eternity we remember that it will be only a moment before France, Russia, South Africa and Brazil will cease to exist. Even our own nation is not eternal. There will come a day when the United States of America will be no more.

Every power in the world exists and exercises earthly dominion and authority only to the extent, and for the time, that they are allowed to do so by heaven. We must believe this about nations like our own, which are comparatively among the best examples in history of nations which have worked for justice and equity. We also certainly must believe this is true when it comes to the worst examples in history. Kim Jong-un, the brutal dictator of North Korea, only has temporary power because the Lord has allowed him to have such power. If the leaders of the ancient world powers referenced in Daniel 7 were given, according to this and other visions, dominion to rule by God though they were as terrible in their violence and injustice as anything we've seen today, then the same must be true of every leader in our time. Romans 13:1 declares plainly, **“Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.”**<sup>4</sup>

Now be careful here. Don't jump to conclusions in ways that God's Word doesn't allow. Is every world leader or government doing God's will? No. Not even close. Is every leader who comes to power anointed and blessed by God? No, I don't think so. I wouldn't say it that way. At the same time, no human leader or government rises to power without God's consent. The Lord never wakes up the morning after an election or rise to power surprised or disappointed with the results, as if he never saw that one coming. This is, I know, hard for us to understand, because human history is littered, and will continue to be littered, with terrible leaders. But if the Lord remained sovereign over the rulers symbolized by these dreadful beasts in Daniel, you better believe that in the same way the Lord remains sovereign over every human authority in existence today. Every one of them will eventually be forced to stand in the divine courts of heaven and come

under God's righteous judgment. When we look at things from the perspective of eternity, even the most powerful dictator or government rules on this earth for only the blink of an eye. Though their lives may be prolonged for a season and a time, their dominion will ultimately be taken away.

Why? Well, Daniel's vision is brilliant with hope. For in the midst of the divine court there enters one from above. This one does not come from the sea as the other beasts, but from the clouds, from heaven beyond earth. And yet, when he comes he comes in the form of a human. In some translations we read that in his appearance he is like a “son of man.”<sup>5</sup> When he comes, he comes before the Ancient One and receives from the throne dominion, and glory and kingship, authority over not just some people but all people - all nations, all tongues which come to serve him. And his kingdom is not temporary but eternal. His throne shall be everlasting.

It takes us back, of course, to the covenant God made with King David, promising him that one day there would come from his line a king the likes of which the world has never seen. The promise reads:

**When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.**<sup>6</sup>

Elsewhere in Daniel and the Old Testament scriptures we are told that no earthly kingdom will ever be able to destroy this heavenly kingdom. When this King of Kings comes, forgiveness for sin will be abundantly available. The Spirit of God will be poured out on all people, the blessing once extended exclusively to Abraham and his family will be expanded, through that family, to all families on earth. The dead will rise, evil will face final judgment, and a new heaven and new earth will at last be established where justice, and abundance, and righteousness dwell forever as God had first intended that they would when creation came to be.

Though in exile, the people of Daniel's day took hold of this brilliant vision of hope even though they had no idea how it would possibly come to pass. Still, they

<sup>5</sup> “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven.”  
Daniel 7:13, NIV

<sup>6</sup> II Samuel 7:12-14, NRSV

<sup>4</sup> NIV

trusted that as earthly kings came and went there was coming an eternal King, in the appearance of a man but come from heaven, one who would set everything right. And so century after century they held on to this hope, even when every circumstance of history seemed to contradict its reality. And so I would say to you, if our forbearers in the faith held on to hope in spite of the circumstances they faced, how is it possible that now any of us who sit on the opposite side of Christmas, the opposite side of Easter, the opposite side of Pentecost, could ever fail to do the same?

I look around these days and see so many people in our world who are consumed by fear. Many would say that the political situation in our world these days, even in our own nation, has never been worse. Some would say the same when it comes to the state of the economy, the environment, the moral fabric of our culture. To so many of us it all seems out of control. And we ask, where is God in all of this? What will happen in the days and years to come? How could this be happening in the first place? And the more we watch the news (one tragedy and crisis after another tragedy and crisis), and use social media to post and repost the divisive and self-serving decisions of leaders we can't control, and then turn time and time again to new human strategies and efforts we believe we can employ to set everything right again, the more anxious and fearful and angry we become. When such fear and angst over the state of our world finds its way into the church it raises serious questions about the substance and depth of our faith in the first place.

If the Lord could assure people who had just been carted off into exile after their nation had been destroyed, that in spite of such terrible circumstances He was still sovereign and working out his redemptive purposes in the world, how can we now, in the midst of present day circumstances fail to believe that the same is true? This doesn't mean that our faith doesn't lead us out into the world to join God in his establishment of compassion and justice in whatever corner of the world to which God would lead us, but it does mean that even when those efforts seem to be exercised in vain we don't lose hope because we are not betting on a possibility but counting on a promise. In Christ we are people of expectation!

Your team may not win the championship this year, or the next year, or the year after that. I hate to tell you that they may *never* win the championship. And even if they do, it won't really change your life in any of the ways the really matter. Of course, there are other, more significant ways we wait. In our personal lives we are all waiting for God to do what God has promised to do, to bring healing, forgiveness, wholeness, purpose,

community, love, and to not just bring these things but to make them last. In our world we are also waiting, waiting for God to bring justice, and peace, and wholeness, and abundance. Most of us have a picture in our minds of what this world was always meant to be and we long to see every square inch of it restored and renewed in this way.

As we wait, let us not wait in fear. Yes, the beasts before us and even within us can, at times, appear terribly invincible. They are not. Each one is on a tight leash and though their lives may be prolonged for a time or a season, their dominion will eventually be taken away. Even the dominion of sin and death, the greatest beasts of all, has been put on notice. As pastor and theologian Eugene Peterson put it, "In the course of all the noise and shuffling, strutting and posing, of arrogant rulers and nations that we call history, with the consequent trouble to us all, God is serenely sovereign; we can trust him to bring all things and people under his rule."<sup>7</sup>

In all this we are not called to inaction, to isolate ourselves in some corner as we wait for God to sort things out. No, we are called to live *in the world* as people of hope. The main task of the church, however, is not political, in the sense that the world understands politics. Though we are called, as followers of Jesus, to engage in the public square, as so many in this congregation faithfully do, we also recognize that the Kingdom of God will not be ushered in by electing all the right leaders or adopting all the right policies, even if such a thing were possible. We work hard for those things – yes! – but we don't put our ultimate hope or allegiance in the these things and we certainly don't sink into fear or anger when they don't go our way.

Instead, the main task of the church is to present itself as a visible representation of the sovereign kingdom which is breaking in and which will, in time, come in all its fullness. Remember from last week that the church is now the Temple of God, the settling place of God's presence and glory in the world today, the place in this world where the rest of the world is meant to most clearly encounter the breaking in of Heaven to earth. It is the visible church in which the world ought to find a community of people who are, in spite of everything around us that may seem to be headed in the wrong direction, the world ought to find a community of people remaining faithful to their promises, loving their enemies, telling the truth, honoring the poor, suffering

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<sup>7</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, (NavPress, 2005), 1369. Found in the introduction to the book of Daniel.

for righteousness no matter the cost,<sup>8</sup> and above all holding out confident hope. As we do, we testify boldly to the nature and work of the One who has, in fact, come from heaven in the form of a human but with eternal dominion, glory and kingship, to rule over people of all kinds, any and every person, in fact, who will serve and worship him in a world where everything will, no matter how things may now appear, ultimately be set right.

Amen.

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## The Next Step

### *A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application*

1. Read the text from Daniel 7:1-14 again. What stands out to you from this brilliant vision?
2. How would you summarize the message of this vision? Is there a main point being conveyed here?
3. According to this vision, what is the relationship between world powers/governments (the beasts) and the Lord (the Ancient One)?
4. What do you do with a verse like Romans 13:1 which declares, "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God." Do you believe every government authority on earth has been established by God?
5. If Christ is the one described in verses 13-14, what do we learn here about Christ?
6. What is the difference between possibility and promise to somebody who is waiting?
7. What promise are you expecting God to fulfill in your life or in the world? Be specific. Does God seem to you to be slow in keeping his promises?
8. When you look at the headlines in the news these days, do you become fearful, anxious or angry? If so, should this be our response as people of faith? If not, how should we respond instead?

### Table to Table Question

#### *A question for kids and adults to answer together*

Why do you think God seems to us to take so long to do the things he promised to do?

<sup>8</sup> I'm borrowing language here from Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Abingdon Press, 1989), 46.