

THRIVING in BABYLON

A STUDY OF DANIEL

SERMON TITLE: "Jesus vs. The Beasts"
SCRIPTURE: Daniel 7

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Sometimes life feels like it's all about survival. Sometimes it feels like all we can do is keep our head above water. This is true for everyone, but especially for followers of Jesus. As Christians, we are exiles, and that means that survival is doubly difficult. But God has not merely called us to survive; he has called us to thrive. And the place that God called us to thrive is in Babylon - the place of our exile. With this in view, the book of Daniel is a perfect picture for us of what it looks like to be faithful in a foreign land that isn't our home. Daniel doesn't merely survive in Babylon. Rather, with God's help, he thrives there. What would it look like for us to do the same here in Greenville?

When Jesus walked on earth, what did he think he was doing? How did he understand his own actions, mission, and vocation? Where did he get his personal sense of identity? These questions that can feel strange to ask, but, at the same time, thinking about them could give us greater insight into Scripture and the gospel itself. A good place to start answering this question is to start with the title Jesus used for himself more than anything else.

Jesus regularly called himself "the Son of Man." He said things like, "The Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne." Or, "The Son of Man came to give his life as a ransom for many." Or, "The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost." But where did he get this language? And why is this Jesus' chosen way of expressing who he is, and what he's up to?

Enter Daniel 7.

This chapter is the key place in the Hebrew Bible that helps us understand what Jesus was getting at when he called himself the Son of Man. And, if we understand how this kind of language works, we will find ourselves face-to-face with the duty of thriving in Babylon. So, what's the story in Daniel 7 that makes all this make sense?

Well, first and foremost, Daniel 7 is a vision that Daniel has. It's filled with pictures and images. And Daniel is still in exile, so whatever this vision of the Son of Man is, it's supposed to help him live well as an exile.

In Daniel's dream, he sees four beasts. These beasts are violent, powerful, and horrifying, especially the fourth beast. The fourth beast has 10 horns, and then sprouts another horn that starts yelling and screaming. In Daniel's vision, an angelic figure tells him that the four beasts are four kingdoms and that the fourth beast is the most fierce of them all. And in the middle of this frightening vision, Daniel sees a courtroom scene. God takes his seat. He is called the Ancient of Days, the one who alone has the right to rule and judge. And "one like a son of man" appears before the Ancient of Days (7:13). To this Son of Man (or "Human One") is given a kingdom that will not pass away. This vision of the Son of Man is a reminder of what we have been learning in Daniel:

God is in control of who's in control even when it seems like things are out of control.

But don't forget - this Son of Man picture - this is how Jesus understood himself. He was acting out Daniel's ancient visionary script, and he was playing the part of the Son of Man. In Daniel's visions, the Son of Man's kingdom was eternal, but the beasts' kingdoms all had expiration dates. Jesus saw himself as uniquely inaugurating God's kingdom here on earth. As N. T. Wright says, "Jesus understood himself to be leading God's people out of exile and defeating evil." And that's what is needed in the book of Daniel.

Also, because these beasts are representative of earthly politics and power structures, these visions should serve as a reminder to us that our security is ultimately in God's promises and not earthly politics. Yes, we should be grateful for things like independence, freedom, and sacrifice. These are gifts. But if we ever move from gratitude *to* swearing allegiance to things like militarism, nationalism, and patriotism *over* God, then we're on a beastly path. We're called to influence Babylon, not fully assimilate into it.

Next, in Daniel's vision, the fourth beast wages war against God's saints. The language is poetic enough that it also seems as if the beast is also waging war against the Son of Man. But in the end, "his dominion shall be taken away," and the Son of Man will reign with the saints of the Most High forever and ever (7:26-27). But the implication is that these four beasts collective picture mankind's best efforts to overthrow God's will and plan. Meaning, the beasts are doomed, but still fighting even today. And this means, our exile is not seasonal. It will last throughout our whole lives. So, What are you supposed to do if you know that exile is around to stay? Answer: Hope.

What do the beasts make us feel? Hopeless. What does the Son of Man make us feel? Hopeful. So, what is required for thriving in Babylon? Hope.

When you're tempted to let politics give you security rather than Jesus give you security...

When you think about the prevalence of trafficking, suicides, sexism, and racism...

When you start to doubt God's presence or His power...

You have to hold on to hope in the face of the beast.

When you're confused about this balancing act of influence and identity...

When compromise and comfort feel like your only ways out...

When the urge to self-medicate seems stronger than the urge to trust...

You have to hold on to hope in the face of the beast.

When you have had enough of corrupt and manipulative political leaders...

When all you want to do on Twitter is shred people who don't share your politics...

When you watch the news, and terrorism and violence feel omnipresent...

You have to hold on to hope in the face of the beast.

Hope acknowledges that it might get worse before it gets better. And beyond this, hope clings to God's promises in the face of all earthly powers. Whether those powers are good or bad, right or wrong, or right or left, hope's grip is on a kingdom that will not be destroyed. We know hope isn't fictitious because the tomb is empty. The monsters don't win. No matter how heavy or dark things get, God has spoken, and his word is true: "The kingdom shall be given to the saints of the Most High God, and His kingdom shall be everlasting" (7:27).

And the supreme way we know that hope is real is Jesus took all the power and wrath of the beast into himself at the cross. Meaning, not even death can stop God's plan. His death is how we have hope to live another day, no matter the chaos in our world or in our lives. Jesus understood himself to be the Son of Man, the Human One, who was reversing the curse of the first human one, Adam. Adam was exiled from God's presence because of his rebellion and became beastly. Jesus was exiled from God's presence in heaven to bear the beastly burden humanity had chosen. And in doing so, he establishes a new humanity. A new creation. A kingdom beyond the reach of the beast. And this is the ultimate basis for our hope. "And he shall reign forever and ever."

Discussion Starters: Have someone read Daniel 7

1. What's something that helped make Daniel 7 more clear to you?
2. What's a question you still have about the uniqueness of Daniel 7?
3. How have you seen earthly power and politics abused to the point that they become "beastly?"
4. Because hope is required for thriving in Babylon, what are some main characteristics of hope that we should have?
5. In what way does the Son of Man bring hope for people in exile?
6. Personally, what's your biggest takeaway from this message/passage?