

The sermon

Intro

There's been a tendency in American Christianity to obsess over eschatology, the study of last things. The things that happen at the end of time. The events associated with Jesus' return.

Eschatology speculation was pretty big in the 70's with Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Newer copies say "over 15 million copies sold." When I got saved in 1999, all the Christian movies were about the rapture and the tribulation and the Antichrist. I was guided to books that identified which current historical figure was the Antichrist.

Eschatology obsession led to unbalanced Christians. People who loved studying the end times, but weren't so interested in lived-out wisdom. Why were prophecy conferences springing up, but not Proverbs conferences?

I'm suggesting this is a problem. I'm suggesting the obsession with apocalyptic visions led to a neglect of practice. I'm suggesting reading books about which current historical figure is the Antichrist isn't the best use of our reading time.

So why know and study eschatology?

Good questions include, why did God preserve these truths? Why is Daniel 7 in our Bible? How should we connect eschatology with life today?

READ PASSAGE

Body

Passage Focus

We've reached a major shift in Daniel. No more stories about God acting for his exiled people. We're on to prophecy.

This morning we have no commands. We don't have story where there's a positive or negative examples. We don't have wisdom like we find in the Proverbs or Ecclesiastes. However, we do have God's promises.

This week I'll introduce apocalyptic literature. We'll learn how to use apocalyptic visions well and how to use them poorly. We'll consider the purpose of apocalyptic visions. And we'll consider what apocalyptic visions mean for us.

Next week we'll identify the beasts, the little horn, etc.

BIG IDEA: God gave eschatology for our encouragement.

Point 1: Apocalyptic is different than prophecy.

First, prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah focus on repentance. In Isaiah and Jeremiah, the Jewish people have subjected themselves to God's judgment by breaking the Old Covenant, the law of Moses.

Isaiah and Jeremiah explain that God is the source behind their military defeat, highlight the people's infractions, warn of future hardship, and call the people to repent, promising God's blessing to the faithful. Books like Isaiah and Jeremiah call the unbelieving Israelites to repent and trust God's promises. The primary audience is the unbelieving. However, amidst calls to repent, the faithful are encouraged with promises. A mixed audience.

In Daniel 7, there's no call for the exiles to repent. Daniel's purpose is elsewhere.

Second, prophecy and apocalyptic both use metaphors and imagery, but prophets like Isaiah generally speaks in terms the people are familiar with whereas apocalyptic literature uses imagery that doesn't correspond to everyday human

experience. Isaiah speaks of God shaving with a razor and chopping down trees (Isa 7:20; 9:14) whereas Daniel speaks of fantastical creatures coming out of the sea. Daniel uses sci-fi language. Isaiah uses everyday language.

Daniel's vision is for believers. Daniel's imagery doesn't correspond with everyday experience.

Point 2: The purpose of apocalyptic imagery is to encourage the faithful.

Daniel's circumstance

Who are these visions for? **First**, it was for Jewish exiles in Babylon. Israelites defeated in battle, taken captive, and brought against their will to a foreign land. Israelites forced to live in a culture whose beliefs and values conflicted with their devotion to God. Israelites whose devotion to God made them outsiders.

Daniel 7 is a vision for believers who find themselves exiles and outsiders in a foreign land.

Second, it was for the Israelites who would follow after Daniel. Israelites who would return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple, yet never regain the independence they possessed during Solomon's reign. Israelites like Nehemiah who were threatened with violence by Samaritans when attempting to rebuild the city's walls. Israelites who suffered under Greek rule in the time of Antiochus Epiphanes. Israelites in Jesus' day who longed to escape Roman oppression.

Daniel 7 is a vision for believers who find themselves under oppressive, ungodly rulers.

Third, it's for God's people today. Those living in democracies with religious freedom where Christianity is marginalized. Those living under oppressive dictators. Those who've converted from Islam living in countries where converting from Islam to Christianity is outlawed.

Daniel 7 is a vision for the believer who's tempted to give up. For the believer who's worn out by a broken world, gospel opposition, and being an outsider because of Christian beliefs.

Apocalyptic imagery is for:

- 1) Christians in labor camps in North Korea who've seen their Christian friends and family executed.
- 2) Christians in Pakistan tired of being worried about their places of worship being burned to the ground.

[We may not identify. We may not be as encouraged by God's judgment as they are!]

- 3) For people tired of metal detectors in airports and Boston Marathon bombings.
- 4) For people tired of biological boys competing against their daughter in sports.
- 5) For people tired of being pressured to affirm the sexual revolution and tired of being shamed when they don't.

When you live in a place that screams you're on the wrong side of history, that calls you dinosaurs, intolerant, bigots for maintaining biblical convictions, you need encouraging messages. That's where apocalyptic visions come in.

Daniel screams out press on, stand firm, don't give up, keep following Jesus. It's worth it. God will end these things. God will open the books. God will rule forever.

So, **the purpose of apocalyptic imagery is to encourage the faithful.** To help you stand firm and persevere when there's pressure to conform and our circumstances breed discouragement.

To the child in a Christian home

To the 12 year old who's tired of being an outsider/odddity and wants to fit in who's asking themselves, should I follow Jesus? Is it worth it? Should I put up with dressing modestly, being unable to take part in vile humor, not fitting in when

they're talking about their favorite TV shows, holding beliefs people laugh at, holding beliefs that make people uncomfortable and life awkward, holding beliefs that make people angry?

Daniel 7 screams out YES!!!

Point 3: What eschatology and apocalyptic visions aren't for.

Here I'm lumping apocalyptic and eschatology together while recognizing some eschatological passages aren't apocalyptic visions like Daniel 7. Regardless, their function has similarities.

A few cautions on how not to use eschatology/apocalyptic.

1) Speculation

Trying to match up current events with Daniel's beasts. Scouring the internet for conspiracy theories that seek to uncover the Antichrist's hidden plot. Trying to discern the mark of the beast.

2) Fear

Fears about the Antichrist or being alive in the great tribulation or fretting over being duped into taking the mark of the beast. Visions in Revelation aren't given to make us fearful. They're given to encourage us to persevere in hard times.

If visions intended for our encouragement are producing fear, we're not using the Bible correctly!

3) Neglect of basic Christian duties

Obsession with nailing down every eschatology detail leads to unbalanced Christians. When all I care about is what the three ribs (7:5) or the great iron teeth (7:7) represent, I'm neglecting the purpose of the vision. The vision's purpose isn't tidbits of knowledge. The vision's purpose is helping me stand firm.

Obsessing over these obscure details keeps me from pondering things like my heart and my witness and my practice. Fixation on these details can even keep me from the rest of the Bible.

There's nothing wrong with interest in the Scriptures. There's nothing wrong with curiosity. If a person can be an expert in Civil War history, there's nothing wrong with knowing a lot about the Bible. **The problem is when knowing is an end itself. When knowing facts is divorced from faith and practice.**

The purpose of apocalyptic visions is encouragement, not neglecting self-examination. Sadly obsession with eschatology often leads to unbalanced Christians.

4) Division

Another problem arises when Christians become divided over eschatology details. It's conceivable people have left churches because they disagreed about the great iron teeth (7:7). I haven't seen it. But I'd bet it's happened!

This one I've heard of. The person with a passion for eschatology looks down on other church members because they don't share the same passion. My poor weaker brothers who don't share my passion for God's word they reason. In reality the other church members don't have an unbalanced focus on eschatology. The person in question loved eschatology but failed to trust that God was involved in his life. Loved eschatology but thought God had it out for him. That's failure to connect truth with life. Failure to trust God's promises.

And local church doctrinal statements divide Christians when they're too specific about the timing of the rapture and the nature of the millennium and exclude from membership those who've concluded differently. It's better to leave room for disagreement here while affirming gospel essentials like a visible, physical return of Christ and a final judgment.

God didn't give us Daniel 7 to prevent Christians from fellowshiping together! When this is the result, we must be using our Bibles incorrectly.

Point 4: How eschatology encourages us.

Let's consider some big picture elements in the pictures.

- 1) These beasts are destructive predators

The first three beasts have the characteristics of predatory animals. Like a bear devours its prey (7:5), these four beasts metaphorically devour those they attack. The 4th beast "*devoured and broke in pieces and stamped what was left with its feet*" (7:7). The picture is these beasts feed on others and destroy them.

- 2) These beasts inspire fear

The 4th beast was "*terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong*" (7:7). Those who encounter these beasts are afraid of them. The picture is powerful creatures that inspire fear.

- 3) Their terror will come to an end

"the beast was killed, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire" (7:11). The picture is the 4th beast will be defeated by an unstated rival. "*As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time*" (7:12). Dominion indicates some form of rule, authority. Some unstated force takes their rule from them. Some unstated force prolongs their existence, but that existence is temporary. The unstated force is God.

The picture is their devastation is temporary. The picture is God is in control: their rule is removed by God and their duration is determined by God.

How does this apply to us?

Destructive rulers exist in every age. Some enforce false religion (Islam). Some attempt to conquer the world (Hitler). Some imprison opponents and steal from the people and rig elections. Some possess nuclear capabilities. Some destroy by legislating sin.

Destructive rulers inspire fear. Fear of terrorism or invasion or taking away rights or marginalizing Christians. There are legitimate reasons to be afraid.

But understanding God's rule brings perspective, comfort, confidence, and hope. Destructive regimes will be destroyed. They won't rule forever. Their reign is temporary. Their times are governed by God. The books will be opened (7:10) and they won't get away with any of it. God will do away with the causes of our suffering.

Why should we be encouraged?

- 1) Beastly reigns are temporary.
- 2) Beasts will be judged.
- 3) God is in control.

The victory of God is our encouragement! We serve the winner, not the losers. We serve a king who reigns over every generation, not a temporary, destructive despot. Apocalyptic visions tells us it's worth it to stand firm and persevere in the faith because God rules. Today and forever.

Illustration

In the investment world you want to attach yourself to a winner, not a loser. Tom Brady attached himself to a crypto scheme called FTX. It cost him \$30 million. Those who attached themselves to Amazon and Microsoft early on have made out.

Daniel 7 is God's declaration that his people haven't attached themselves to a loser.

Daniel 7 is God's declaration that he's in control, even if appearances suggest otherwise.

Point 5: Encouragement is found in the Son of Man.

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. ¹⁴ And to him 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. – 7:13-14

The New Testament identifies this son of man to be Jesus.

*So, if they say to you, 'Look, he is in the wilderness,' do not go out. If they say, 'Look, he is in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. ²⁷ For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ²⁸ Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather. ²⁹ "Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ³⁰ Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. ³¹ And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. – **Matthew 24:26-31***

Here Jesus is answering the 2nd half of the question asked in 24:3: “*what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?*”

Answer? I'm the son of man in Daniel 7. My coming will follow a period of tribulation and be marked by cosmic, unmistakable signs in the sky.

The time of destructive, dreadful beasts will give way to the reign of Christ. “*that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him*” (7:14) indicates that kingdom inclusion will extend beyond Israel to all the nations. That's all those who will ever believe in Jesus.

God furnished proof of these things by raising Jesus from the dead!

Gospel connection

Jesus isn't merely a returning conqueror who ends the time of the beasts. He's also a suffering Savior. During his 1st coming, Jesus took the posture of a servant, dying on the cross for sinners. Sinners like you. Sinners like me. Jesus says, “trust in me, my death and my resurrection, you'll be forgiven today and you'll reign with me forever.”

Who are you serving? Destructive beasts that will be destroyed? Or a self-giving Savior who offers you mercy and escape from the judgment to come?

Where are you placing your trust? Yourself? Destructive beasts? Jesus?

Conclusion: why should we be encouraged?

1) Jesus died for our sins.

The wrath of God is satisfied.

2) Jesus is coming again.

Beastly rule will come to an end.

3) Jesus will reign forever with his people.

He's preparing a place for us.