

Going Round in Circles

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[0 : 0 0] Excellent. Well, morning everyone. I hope you're well. What a special morning. Who wears a lifeboat t-shirt to a baptism? Anyone else notice that? Loved it. Talk about fitting. Excellent. Well, let's have a deep dive into Daniel 7.

This is brilliant this morning. And here's a big question that Daniel chapter 7 asks us to consider today. And whoever you are here today, whatever you think about the God of the Bible, here's the question that comes at you. Is history heading anywhere? Here's one of the most famous scenes from The Lion King, as you're thinking on it. It's the one where Mufasa is telling Simba when he's a young cub how life works. It goes like this. He says, Mufasa says, no, Simba says, but dad, don't we eat the antelope? Yes, Simba, but let me explain. When we die, our bodies become the grass and the antelope eat the grass. And so we're all connected in the great circle of life. And bam, at that point, Elton John comes in with his song, doesn't he? The idea that we can absorb from this film is that our lives are circular. Our lives are circular. It's like a trip on the London Eye that you get on at the bottom, you kind of ride the wave to the top, you enjoy your moment in the sun.

And then life just comes all the way back down. And the next generation get on and they do exactly the same thing. And round and round it goes. Our lives can often feel like that, can't they? I remember my last day at the company that I worked for before I started here, being so aware that as nice as the leaving drinks for me were on the Friday, that there was going to be another name on the door on the Monday. No one was going to remember who I was in 10 years' time, no matter what kind of mark that I'd made on the company. We do this kind of thing every June, I think. We're so aware of the turnover. Maybe you're a student here today and many of you guys have moved out of your flats and all those memories that were associated with the flat and your timing in it. You move out and you're so aware that another person is going to move in and do exactly the same thing. Some of us are teachers. Some of us are finishing school. You're not so aware, all your memories, all the things that you did in your class this year, that you finish this term and there's going to be another class sitting in your seats come August. And life can feel like that, can't it? That we are just a tiny insignificant cog in a vast concrete jungle machine, one that just goes round and round and round in life. And so often what we do, we respond to the monotony and we respond to the pain and questions of life with apathy or maybe even we respond with cynicism, that we don't think history's going anywhere. And here's American political scientist. I do like to read widely. Francis Fukuyama, he said this, the 20th century, it's safe to say, has made us all into deep historical pessimists. We don't think history's going anywhere.

And the thing is, Daniel 7 is the pin in the balloon that powerfully thunders into our everyday existence. And it pops history, this idea that life is circular and it says, no, history is linear.

It's linear. Now, if you remember, we started this series saying that this book of Daniel, it's, it kind of makes us into cross-country skiers, that it gives us two poles by which we can grab and move forward in the Christian life. One of those poles was God's sovereignty. That word that just means that he is in total control of all things big and little in life. He is the one who knows the end from the beginning. He is the one who is outside time. And the second pole is the one that says history is going somewhere and it's going somewhere according to the purposes of this triune God to bless the world for the good of his people and for the glory of his name. And so as we step into the second half of this book, what God is doing is he is giving his people, if you like, the second pole.

[4 : 29] And this chapter, as we step into it, friends, we need to understand that we're in a different part of this book. You probably got that vibe as we read it through. Now, this comes to Daniel in a dream.

If you've been following along in this series, you'll know that that is nothing new. But up until now, Daniel, if you notice it, has been interpreting other people's dreams because God has something he wants to communicate to the watching and to the listening world.

But this time, if you notice it, Daniel himself has the dream, which I think is meant to be a trigger in our minds that actually God has now got something to say to the souls of his people.

And this comes in the form of what's known in the Bible as apocalyptic literature. In other words, God speaks to his people, not by words and by logical sequential arguments, but by pictures and visions.

And maybe at this point, some of us are tapping out because this is not how we're used to thinking in the 21st century West. We love our arguments to be logical. We like our emails to be in bold font.

[5 : 43] If you've ever got an email from me, you will notice it has bold words. And if it's a really, really important word, it will have it in red. It's like we've stepped into some kind of Marvel comic when we jump into chapter seven, what on earth is going on? And here's the question I want us to think about. Why does God speak like this? Because he could have just gone what Paul does and just go sequential argument and tell his people what the future holds. Why does God speak like this? Perhaps it's simply that images and pictures can make us feel truth in a way that sometimes words on a page, particularly when we're weary, can't. You know, if I was to tell you that I was angry this morning, I wasn't, but go with it.

I would be communicating to you a truth. But if I were to say to you that I was red with rage this morning, I would be communicating to you the same truth, but it's coming at you in all sorts of different ways, isn't it? I like how Pixar kind of tapped into that with their film Inside Out. If you've ever seen that little angry man, he is red with rage. It's the same truth, but it doesn't come at you just 2D, it comes at you 3D. And you feel the contours of that truth in all sorts of different ways when you use word pictures to communicate it. And there's times in history when I think God knows that that's exactly what his people need. You'll know what it's like when you get to the end of a day and you're tired and you're weary. And you don't want to read anything. You just want to watch something, don't you? There's times in life when you're weary and what you need is words. You don't need words, you need pictures. I think that's exactly what God knows that this generation who are weary in Babylon need to know about the future. Maybe you can think of it like this. David Helm puts it like this. I found this helpful. He said, perhaps apocalyptic literature is God's way of helping visual learners. There's nothing like this particular genre to keep us on the edge of our seats in hope of seeing how things turn out. I found that really helpful. Maybe this is God's way of helping visual learners. And so three things that we're going to take from this passage today, real quick, three things that God has to say to his people then and his people throughout time about the future as they take in this vision. You ready for these? Here's the first one. And we get the first in the opening eight verses. And it's simply this, that the forces of evil are not unexpected.

Have a look at those four beasts. Now, remember the sea for people in this day in the Bible is symbolic for evil. So we're meant to read this and be scared by what we see. And take in these creatures.

Firstly, we get this lion with eagle's wings. Now think about that. That is two of the most powerful animals that you can imagine. This is on Deadly 10, isn't it? I take it that's why the United States, what animal did they pick? Come on guys, you're American. Who did you pick?

You pick the eagle. And who did England pick? The lion. We're going to be reminded soon, aren't we? I'm sure again and again that there's three of them on that shirt. But what a deadly combination, right? A lion and an eagle. What's the truth that's being communicated? You just cannot outrun and defeat this thing. It will get you. You cannot escape its clutches and its look. Then we get this bear that has three ribs in its mouth. We're presented with this aggressive hunter who's out for blood.

[9 : 29] Then there's this leopard. Do you see how it has four wings and four heads? In other words, this is looking in every single direction when it comes to picking its fights. What we learn later in Daniel is that we can understand these creatures as representing three consecutive powers that will come in the line of history. But we'll save a little bit of that for next week. So you've got Babylon there, then you've got them succeeded by Media Persia, and then you've got Greece. But these pictures are conveying to Daniel that nations and kingdoms all the way through history are going to come and they're going to battle it out for power and control. And as they do that, they will trample over people and inflict misery on the world in the process. And keep the turning the wheels of history. Friends, has that attitude not played out in history? You think of Hitler, you think of

Putin, you think of Kim Jong-un. Go from the global level to the social level. You think of internet scammers. You think of human traffickers. You come to the Bible and you will not find a book that is detached from reality. They always say it's the hope that kills you, don't they? If you're a Scotland fan, that is where we'll be living for the next two weeks. But we've got to understand that hope in the Bible is not detached from reality. Quite literally, hope in the Bible is birthed in the facts of history. And that God sees it and that God says he will do something about it, I take it should calm our worried souls. And then in the narrative, you get this fourth creature, you get this horned beast. And it gets some serious airtime in the passage, if you notice that, compared to the previous three. In fact, so terrifying and different is it, verse 19, Daniel has to know more. It's like he goes back for a second round with God, tell me more. And I think it's because, verse 21, this evil will speak things against the most high God. Do you see that in the passage, verse 21? And its teeth will be wielded directly against God's people. That's why Daniel has to know more. And the fact that there's only one thing that's going to put an end to this evil,

I think suggests that this is an evil that's going to keep coming at God's people down the lines of history. And it's going to come from Satan himself.

Now, the fact that this is here, do you notice it? God's people are not going to be spared from pain. This is what it's saying. God's people are not going to be spared from pain.

But the very fact that God knows about the existence of these forces of evil before they've even sprung up in the world stage should spare God's people from panic.

[12 : 37] And that takes us to the second thing that we need to see here. And this is the lens through which we're to understand these evil forces as they come at us here. Here's the second thing from verse 9. And it's that the throne of heaven is not unoccupied.

So Daniel's taken, do you see it in the narrative, verse 9? He's taken from looking at the utter chaos that's playing out on earth. And all of a sudden, he's transported to looking at the glory that's in heaven. And it kind of comes out of nowhere. It's as if God just snatches him out and forces his eyes upon heaven. Verse 9, this figure that we've been singing about called the Ancient of Days, takes his seat. And allow the imagery there to give you a picture of the Ancient of Days and his majesty. Do you see the picture that we're given? One of utter purity and sheer power. A figure that thousands upon thousands never ceased to delight in praising. So for God to be the Ancient of Days means that this God has just always been. He's always been. And particularly in the context of what has come before, he was there before space was cleared in history for any of these evil forces to exist. And into the presence of the Ancient of Days comes this figure. Do you see it? The center point of this chapter called, verse 12, the Son of Man. Now take this in if you've got the scriptures there. Take this in. Here is a human being who is being crowned as a divine ruling king.

And cut to the chase, friends, Jesus has no problem equating himself with this figure in Daniel chapter 7.

It's recorded 80 times if you track it through in the Gospels. The Gospel writers give airtime to the fact that Jesus calls himself the Son of Man, which means that they have made a connection that they want readers down the ages to see. And the question is, when did Jesus become the Son of Man? This figure. When did this scene play out? Well, Jesus was seen to be this figure at a moment in history. After his crucifixion, as he dies for the sins of his people to rescue them from the eternal judgment that's awaiting them, and from the clutches of Satan who had us in his grasp, and after his resurrection, Jesus is seen to be this Son of Man when he ascends to heaven. Because the ascension, far be it from just a kind of side point of theology, the ascension is massively important because it is the homecoming crowning of heaven's king.

And to him, verse 14, the Ancient of Days gives dominion, which means complete power over everything. The Ancient of Days gives this to the Son of Man, meaning that the Son of Man will be the one at the end of time who will have the final say over everything and everyone.

[16 : 06] And one of the most powerful places that Jesus uses that title, Son of Man, to talk about himself, is when he uses it at his trial. Now, the religious council in that scene, having arrested him, question him in this kangaroo court. And they say, who are you? Just tell us who you are.

To which Jesus replies, one day you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power. It has always baffled me why Jesus at that point would play the Son of Man card.

But it wasn't until this week that I saw it, really. Subtext. I'm enduring this in your courtroom now, because I know that one day you're going to be sitting in mine.

The fact that Jesus hasn't returned yet as this glorious Son of Man is nothing to do with his incompetence. And it's everything to do with his mercy.

In not wanting anyone to perish, but allowing more space for more people to bow the knee before history's king, come and find life and forgiveness in him. But make no mistake that Jesus is this ruling king over everything in heaven right now.

[17 : 29] The only difference between now and then is that then we will see it with our eyes. But make no mistake that as I speak, that as you and I draw yet another breath, that Jesus is this ruling king in heaven for his people right now.

And make no mistake that that truth explains days like today.

The very fact that anyone becomes a Christian is due to the fact that Jesus has dealt Satan a decisive blow. And that's what his victory on the cross is.

It is him saying to the devil, that claim that you had on that person, well, because of their faith in me, because I died for their sin on the cross, that claim does not stick anymore.

And because he has done that, Jesus is in the process of raiding Satan's locker room, as my American pals would say. And he is snatching out people, winning them for himself.

[18 : 37] Do you know, Taylor Swift is not the greatest show in town at the moment. Come to the Bible and see that as far as heaven is concerned, local churches, as they gather together under the kingship of King Jesus, that is the greatest show in town today.

And that takes us to the third thing that God wants us to see in this passage from verse 15. And it's really simply this. It's that the end of history is not uncertain.

And the camera focuses on this fourth beast. Do you see waging war against God's people? Until that is verse 22, the Ancient of Days decides that the time is up.

It is the moment when Satan's dominion will be taken away. It is the moment when evil will be destroyed and banished forever. And I take it this is talking about the return of King Jesus when he comes back.

And I want you to see who benefits from this moment. And see it there. It's amazing what you see. Even though you studied this passage for hours and hours this week, you don't see it until the reading.

[19 : 47] See the word there at verse 22. The Ancient of Days came and judgment was given for the saints.

Do you see that word there? For the saints. In other words, who benefits from the victory of the Son of Man? See that it's not inadvertently, but see with that word for that it's purposefully.

The saints benefit. Do you see that word come up? It comes up five times in those 14 verses there. Saints. The saints. The saints. God's people benefit.

We benefit. In fact, it's all passive verbs here to describe the saints. They are given the kingdom. They receive a kingdom. We benefit. We share in the victory of the Son of Man.

And let me draw one application from this in terms of the context of the book of Daniel. And it's all tied up with the chronology. You ready for this? I'm not talking about end time charts.

[20 : 50] I'm talking about the fact really simply that chapters 7 and 8 in the book of Daniel come before chapter 5 and 6. Now you get your heads around that. Okay?

Chapters 7 and 8 come before chapters 5 and 6. Which means that Daniel gets into the lion's den, not just with this vision of the Son of Man in his mind, but I think we can make, join the dots and say it was because he had this vision of the Son of Man in his mind that he was prepared to pay the price.

I always love it in the book of Acts that the early Christians are known as a sect. And they're called, if you remember the nickname that they get, they're called the way.

The way, people call them from the outside world looking in. The way. Perhaps it's because Jesus said that he is the way, the truth, and the life. That's probably where, maybe where the word way comes from. They're the way people.

But I also wonder whether tied up in all of that is a watching world looking on at the early Christians who are willing to make all sorts of bold decisions, who are declaring all sorts of certain things about this man, Jesus.

[22 : 04] And the world look in from the outside and they hear what they're saying, they see how they're living, and they think to themselves, those are people who think that they're headed somewhere. Oh, that they would see that that is true of us in our world.

But because of the victory of this king, because we follow him, we truly believe that we are headed somewhere. Love that thought.

Not inadvertently, but purposefully, we are given the kingdom. Here's a question to ask yourself just as we begin to wrap this up. What do you fear most?

As you look out on your life over the next six months, what do you fear most, particularly about something that might happen to you because you are faithful to Jesus?

Might it mean you saying no to a relationship that you're in that you know is not good for you to be in right now? Maybe it's making a decision at work that's going to raise some eyebrows.

[23 : 10] Maybe it's seeking to reconcile with someone that you know you're not right with, even if that means reopening a can of worms. What do you fear most over the next six months, particularly as it connects to your faithfulness to Jesus?

Whatever it is in your mind, here's what I want you to do. Just to grab it and drag it to this vision of the Son of Man and resolve in your heart to say, it will be worth it.

It will be worth it. You know, just as we close, let me just apply this pastorally. Do you know what I love doing with our kids?

I love doing jigsaws. I think I love doing it way more than they do. I love doing them. I think they just love the bit when they pour out all the pieces onto the floor in the middle.

But if you know that feeling of doing a jigsaw puzzle right at the beginning, one by one you begin to pick up the bits, don't you? And you look at them and they make zero sense.

[24 : 18] Some of them are black. Some of them have got all sorts of different colors in them. Some of them even have a little bit of an image that you can't quite make out. And it strikes me that life is a lot like that.

You know, some of us might be holding right now in our hands, this is your life right now. You're looking at a really dark piece. Some of us might be holding a piece right now that is really confusing.

All sorts of different things are going on. Some of us might be holding a piece that's really blue and things are going really well in our lives right now. But the thing about life, isn't it, is at some point we're going to be holding any one of those pieces.

And what is it, what is the only thing that helps you make sense, any kind of sense of any kind of jigsaw? It's when you see the whole picture. Daniel 7 is God giving his people the box.

And he's saying to them, is there holding a black piece? Is there feeling the effects of exile? Is there wondering what on earth the future holds? He's giving them the box and saying, this is where history is headed.

[25 : 33] This is the last play. This is where it's finishing. And it's going to finish for you. It seems to me that the message of the book of Revelation, I know people like to say it, and it's really snappy, that Jesus wins.

And it's not untrue. But I think we can go so much further than that and say that the message of this kind of literature is to say Jesus has won, and in him you too will overcome.

He's given them the box. And so here's what that means about history. It means that climate change won't be the thing that calls time on this world. It means war will not be the thing that applies the full stop to the pages of history.

Dear friends, it means that depression won't be the thing that... It won't be the thing that ultimately defines you. Death will not have the final say over you.

What this is telling you and I is that the final play in history, as hard as it gets, the final play in history will see this Jesus banish evil for good, and will see his people given the kingdom and basking with him for all eternity.

[26 : 48] The final scene in the Bible story is one where the saints are with Jesus forever. And they're worshipping him in the presence of the Ancient of Days.

And as hard as it is right now in life, by faith, friends, would you pick up Daniel 7 and see and let's encourage each other with these words every Sunday, every time we gather together.

It is hard as life is right now. This is where the story ends. This is where history is headed. And let's finish with these words from John 16, just as we pray.

The words of Jesus, I've said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation, but take heart. I have overcome the world.

And so Father, I just simply pray, Lord, that wherever this has landed in our hearts today, Father, I pray that you would bring, as we thought about earlier, John prayed it, you're the one who knows us intimately, you're the one who knows the hairs on our heads.

[28 : 07] I pray that your spirit would bring this truth and apply it to all sorts of different places in our hearts, even to the deepest and sorest of places. Father, thank you for this wonderful picture of the end and of the Son of Man declaring that evil is forgotten and banished and punished and dealt with and that his people, the saints, will be with him forever.

Father, maybe even today, as we've heard more stories about life that we found in Jesus, convince us, Father, maybe even some of us for the first time, that there is no saviour like Jesus.

And we just commit all of these things to you as we finish our time together. I pray that you would dwell amongst us and be working. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.