



A Bright Vision for Bleak Times Pilgrim Living in the 21st Century

Daniel 7

David Sunday

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Many Americans feel as if we are living in difficult, bleak times. If you look at Right Direction Wrong Track polls, for years Americans have been consistently saying, “We’re on the wrong track.” We’re not confident in the direction our nation is heading, and there’s widespread dissatisfaction with the options that are being presented to us. Maybe you would agree that we’re living in bleak times, unless you’re a Cubs fan right now. We’ve had a little bright sunshine in this part of the country right now.

But, seriously, don’t you wish you could know the future? This week, a popular evangelical minister, Max Lucado, made a very confident prediction about the outcome of this year’s election. He boldly stated what he believes will be the reality when we wake up on November 9th, the morning after the election. Max Lucado thinks he knows the future. Listen to what he wrote:

We are really ready for this presidential election to be over. We’re ready for an end to the rancor and tackiness. Voters on both sides feel frustrated, even embarrassed, by it all. There is a visceral fear and angst about the result. What if so-and-so wins? When we wake up on November 9th, post-election, when the confetti is swept away and the election is finally over, what will we see? I have a prediction.

But before I tell you what Max Lucado predicted, let’s read God’s Word to see if his prediction lines up with what God has revealed. So far we’ve been looking at wonderful narratives that are so gripping. Now we’re coming into a new section that is more like the deep end of the pool: apocalyptic literature. “Apocalyptic” means that which reveals something hidden.

Sometimes the language in apocalyptic literature is bizarre or scary. Sometimes it might seem confusing. But God didn’t give us this literature to confuse us. He gave us this literature to

cultivate our imagination with a bright vision that will sustain us in the bleakest of times. I know the Bible has a lot of practical teachings—and we love these—but ultimately we need to know where the future is heading. We need to know what’s in the future, don’t we? Otherwise, how can we keep on living the practical teachings of the Christian life, if we don’t know that it’s all heading somewhere good?

So we need literature like this. We need Scriptural texts like we’re about to read, in order to put our feet on solid ground and to keep us from growing weary in well-doing. We need this bright vision of the future in order to live faithful and fruitful lives in bleak times. So let’s read the whole chapter together and listen to the bright vision in the bleak times of Daniel’s day that God gives us through His Holy Spirit and His Holy Word.

Daniel 7:1:

In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon, Daniel saw a dream and visions of his head as he lay in his bed. Then he wrote down the dream and told the sum of the matter. ² Daniel declared, “I saw in my vision by night, and behold, the four winds of heaven were stirring up the great sea. ³ And four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another. ⁴ The first was like a lion and had eagles’ wings. Then as I looked its wings were plucked off, and it was lifted up from the ground and made to stand on two feet like a man, and the mind of a man was given to it. ⁵ And behold, another beast, a second one, like a bear. It was raised up on one side. It had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth; and it was told, ‘Arise, devour much flesh.’ ⁶ After this I looked, and behold, another, like a leopard, with four wings of a bird on its back. And the beast had four heads, and dominion was given to it. ⁷ After this I saw in the night visions, and behold, a fourth beast, terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong. It had great iron teeth; it devoured and broke in pieces and stamped what was left with its feet. It was different from all the beasts that were before it, and it had ten horns. ⁸ I considered the horns, and behold, there came up among them another horn, a little one, before which three of the first horns were plucked up by the roots. And behold, in this horn were eyes like the eyes of a man, and a mouth speaking great things.

*⁹ As I looked,
thrones were placed,
and the Ancient of days took his seat;
his clothing was white as snow,
and the hair of his head like pure wool;
his throne was fiery flames;
its wheels were burning fire.*

¹⁰ *A stream of fire issued
and came out from before him;
a thousand thousands served him,
and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him;
the court sat in judgment,
and the books were opened.*

¹¹ *I looked then because of the sound of the great words that
the horn was speaking. And as I looked, the beast was killed, and
its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire. ¹² As for
the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but their lives
were prolonged for a season and a time.*

¹³ *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.*

¹⁵ *“As for me, Daniel, my spirit within me was anxious, and the
visions of my head alarmed me. ¹⁶ I approached one of those who
stood there and asked him the truth concerning all this. So he told
me and made known to me the interpretation of the things. ¹⁷
‘These four great beasts are four kings who shall arise out of the
earth. ¹⁸ But the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom
and possess the kingdom forever, forever and ever.’*

¹⁹ *“Then I desired to know the truth about the fourth beast,
which was different from all the rest, exceedingly terrifying, with its
teeth of iron and claws of bronze, and which devoured and broke in
pieces and stamped what was left with its feet, ²⁰ and about the ten
horns that were on its head, and the other horn that came up and
before which three of them fell, the horn that had eyes and a mouth
that spoke great things, and that seemed greater than its
companions. ²¹ As I looked, this horn made war with the saints and
prevailed over them, ²² until the Ancient of Days came, and
judgment was given for the saints of the Most High, and the time
came when the saints possessed the kingdom.*

²³ *“Thus he said: ‘As for the fourth beast,
there shall be a fourth kingdom on earth,*

*which shall be different from all the kingdoms,
and it shall devour the whole earth,
and trample it down, and break it to pieces.*

²⁴ *As for the ten horns,
out of this kingdom ten kings shall arise,
and another shall arise after them;
he shall be different from the former ones,
and shall put down three kings.*

²⁵ *He shall speak words against the Most High,
and shall wear out the saints of the Most High,
and shall think to change the times and the law;
and they shall be given into his hand
for a time, times, and half a time.*

²⁶ *But the court shall sit in judgment,
and his dominion shall be taken away,
to be consumed and destroyed to the end.*

²⁷ *And the kingdom and the dominion
and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole
heaven
shall be given to the people of the saints of the
Most High;
their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom,
and all dominions shall serve and obey them.’*

²⁸ *“Here is the end of the matter. As for me, Daniel, my
thoughts greatly alarmed me, and my color changed, but I kept the
matter in my heart.”*

Friends, this is God’s Holy Word. Can we thank Him? Thanks be to God. What an awesome vision!

So, what is Max Lucado’s prediction for the outcome of this year’s election? Here’s what he wrote:

I have a prediction. I know exactly what November 9th will bring—another day of God’s perfect sovereignty. He will still be in charge. His throne will still be occupied. He will still manage the affairs of the world. Never before has God’s providence depended on a king, president or ruler—and it won’t on November 9, 2016. The Lord can control a king’s mind as He controls a river. He can direct it as He pleases. So, circle November 9th on your calendar, and write upon it these words: “Our good God rules the world.”

Amen. That’s the truth. It’s good news that can sustain us in the bleakest of times. We’re going to look at two points today: bleak times—and a bright vision.

1. When we are living in bleak times

Daniel was living in bleak times. Verse one tells us that this took place in the first year of Belshazzar. So we're not going in chronological order anymore in Daniel. We are going back about 50 years into the exile in Babylon when Daniel was in his 60s. Belshazzar was the king who saw the handwriting on the wall, and whose kingdom was destroyed that very night and handed over to the Medo-Persians.

Daniel has a dream in the first year of Belshazzar's reign. In many ways, the dream is reminiscent of the dream that Nebuchadnezzar had, back in chapter two, of that great statue made of four different elements—gold, silver, bronze and iron—and of the stone that struck the image and became a great mountain that filled the whole earth.

Daniel's vision is a lot like that, except in his vision we have four beasts representing four kingdoms. And in verse two, Daniel writes what he saw in his vision by night: *"The four winds of heaven were stirring up the great sea."* So God is sovereign here. The four winds of heaven are stirring up the great sea, which is probably the Mediterranean, and out of that great sea, verse three says, *"Four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another."* "Four great beasts" suggests comprehensiveness.

The question we need to be asking as we look at this visionary description is where does human power lead? When it's allowed to expand without boundaries, what can we expect from human power? Well, we see four beasts, representing four kingdoms.

The first is a lion (verse four). It has eagles' wings. Then its wings are plucked off, and it's made to stand like a man. Here's a beast that is both human and inhuman—a distorted human. This lion represents the Babylonian kingdom, which is still existing when Daniel sees this vision.

Then the second beast shows up in verse five—a bear, a dreadful sight. Half beast, half man, this bear has three ribs between its teeth. And it's being told, "Arise! Devour much flesh!" Google "surviving bear attacks," and you'll see some of the stories I read this week of how scary it is to see a bear stand up and come at you, and then to be held in the teeth of a bear—as happened to a man out in Montana just a couple weeks ago.

Then there's the leopard, the third beast in verse six. A very swift cat with wings. It's fast enough without the wings, but when you put wings on it there's think blazing speed. That's symbolizing Alexander the Great and his Greek kingdom. Did you know that in ten short years, Alexander the Great conquered the world from Italy to India? And then in 323 B.C., he died, and his kingdom was divided into four kingdoms with four generals. So note the remarkable specificity of God's prophetic Word. God knows the future. Daniel is prophesying this.

Then there's a fourth beast in verse seven, and the thing you need to understand about this fourth beast is it's unlike any other beast. He really can't even give it a name. It doesn't correspond to any other known animal. One writer describes the fourth beast like this:

It is utterly destructive, symbolic of the worst of human power and totalitarianism, shorn of all culture, civilization and humanity. The iron teeth suggest militarism, and the frightening violence of the beast is further emphasized by words like crushed, devoured, trample.

Unlike anything you've ever seen before—that's what Daniel wants us to understand about this fourth beast. It has ten horns, representing enormous power, and from those ten horns rises a little horn that has eyes like a man, which symbolizes intelligence and a mouth that speaks boastful arrogance. What do you get when you put intelligence and arrogance together? Trouble. Intelligence plus arrogance equals trouble.

Now, some would say this fourth beast refers to the Roman Empire. Others suspect that this different kingdom refers to the last human kingdom, the one in which human evil and rebellion is going to reach its climax. In other words, the antichrist, the man of lawlessness that Paul speaks of in 2 Thessalonians 2.

Regardless of how we interpret these details, we need to concentrate on the fact that we live in a world that's broken, fallen and disordered. Human power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Politics has been called by Henry Adams, "The systematic organization of hatreds." This leads to deeper hatred, fear, panic and dread.

Just in the past century, on the 24th of April, 1915, the Turks destroyed 600,000 Armenians in one day. Then in 1919, a similar massacre from the Japanese toward the Koreans. Then in 1932, Joseph Stalin arranged for the systematic starvation of five to seven million Ukrainians—starved to death. We know about World War II, and Idi Amin and Uganda in the 1970s. Horrible atrocities. This is where human power leads.

God wants us to know that earthly rulers will not necessarily be friendly to the people of God. We're going to experience opposition, oppression and suffering in this world. We shouldn't be shocked when WikiLeaks reveals that political powers are not always favorable to faithful saints, because human power is threatened by God's power, opposing God and His people.

God gives us a picture here of the people of God being oppressed.

- Verse 21, the horn is making war with the saints and prevailing over them.
- Verse 25, we see that he shall speak words against the Most High and shall wear out the saints of the Most High.
- Verse 25, his time is limited. God limits the power of evil. It will only last a time, times and half a time. It's God's way of saying, "I've got this under control."

Friends, this is reality. “This world with devils filled threatens to undo us.” If you want to follow Christ in this world, you are going to be opposed. There will be persecution. God’s people throughout the world right now are undergoing opposition. Listen to an email we got this week from our friend Usaf Sivick, who preached here in November of 2014.

He’s requesting prayers for a woman named Asia Bibi, who has been on death row in Pakistan since 2009. She’s accused by Islamic fundamentalists of blasphemy, because she’s a Christian. The supreme court of Pakistan was to hear her case this past Thursday, the 13th of October, but they cited a conflict of interest and deferred her case. Now her fate lies in the hands of the chief justice. If she’s not acquitted, Asia Bibi will be the first Christian woman to be executed under Pakistan’s blasphemy laws. Her daughter, Esham, said in a recent interview, “Life seems incomplete without my mother. We’re moving from place to place for safety. There is fear due to uncertainty all around. But our hope is in God.” Somehow in the midst of this bleak time that Asia Bibi’s family is going through, her daughter Esham has a bright vision—a vision of a God Who gives hope.

This is what Jesus wants us to have as believers in this world. Jesus said to us, “In this world you will have tribulation. Don’t be alarmed by it.” But what else did He say? “Take heart, for I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). There’s going to be an end to the suffering.

Look again at verses 21-22. Notice in 21 we see the description of the warfare that we’re going through as God’s saints. But look at the first word of verse 22: “*until*.” I love that. Until. In other words, it’s not going to last forever. We see it again in verses 25-26. As the suffering is described in verse 25, verse 26 opens with these words: “*But the court shall sit in judgment*,” and bring it to an end.

That brings us to our second point.

2. When we are living in bleak times, God wants us to be captivated by a bright vision.

One of the greatest enemies we face right now is a giant called Despair. And if you like Anne of Green Gables, you may remember what Aunt Marilla said: “To despair is to turn your back on God.” To despair is to act as if this vision of Daniel 7 is irrelevant, as if God has never spoken what He says here in the middle of this chapter. To despair is to pretend there is no court room where thrones are set, and the Ancient of Days takes His seat, and One like the Son of Man comes and is presented before Him, to Whom is given dominion and a glory and a Kingdom.

Can I just say a word of admonition? I hear too much despair coming out of the mouths of Christians these days, and I see too much despair in some of our Facebook posts. I want you to

just search your heart for a minute. Ask yourself, “Do my Facebook posts and my Twitter feeds and my conversations reflect more of the bleakness of our times than the brightness of our vision?” What are you portraying to a watching world? Does it sound to the world among us like we have an immovable hope in Jesus Christ? Or does it sound like we are ridden with anxiety over this little horn that rises up against the saints? God is saying to us in His Word, “Don’t get too anxious about that little horn.”

Look at how quickly we move from verse eight to verse nine. It’s like God is saying, “I don’t want you to focus too much on those four beasts and that turbulent scene coming out of the sea. Here’s what I want you to focus on. There’s a parallel reality. Though this world might look bleak under the cover of clouds, things are bright once you get above the clouds and see it from heaven’s perspective.” There are three images we need to have fixed in our minds, captivating our vision.

First image: A heavenly courtroom

There is a heavenly courtroom and on the throne is seated the Ancient of Days. The nations rage, but our God reigns. And His reign is not limited by time. He is the Ancient of Days, and ancient means not that God is frail, but that He is grand; not that God is senile, but that He is dignified. So said Dale Ralph Davis.

In this world where everything is turbulent, look around God’s throne. What do you see in verses nine and ten? You see light, majesty, calmness and authority. Someone is in charge, and His government is stable. Thrones are in place and the Ancient of Days is seated there, not wringing His hands in fear. He’s stable. And the One Who’s seated on that throne is pure. He’s clothed in white—white as snow. The hair on His head is like pure wool. His majesty is supreme. Thousands upon thousands serve Him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stand before Him. He rules over all the peoples of the earth with absolute authority.

Throughout Scripture, fire symbolizes His presence. He is guarding the Garden of Eden with flaming cherubim. At the burning bush, Moses had to take off his shoes. At Mt. Sinai, the mountain was filled with smoke and fire. And here, a stream of fire flows from His throne, signifying His fury and judgment against all who oppose Him and His people.

We see in this vision that God is control of the beasts that rule and rage. As the books are opened and court sits in judgment, look at verse 11. This is unbelievable. “*I looked then because of the sound of the great words that the...*” what? “*The horn was speaking.*” This little horn can’t shut up. Here he is, in the presence of Almighty God, and he goes on boasting. He goes on speaking, challenging the authority of the Most High God. And this is no threat to God at all.

Look at this, verse 11: *“And as I looked, the beast was killed.”* *“One little word shall fell him.”* It’s all it takes. God rules with ease. He can just speak, and His enemies are destroyed. Not just put down—*“destroyed and given over to be burned with fire.”* God utterly destroys evil. He can also restrain evil. Should He choose to let beasts continue to rage, they’re under His control. They don’t have dominion—God does.

That’s the first thing we need to get into our minds. Judgment is good news, not bad. If you’re suffering and you want to know, *“How long is this going to last?”* and you want to know there’s One Who can set wrongs right, and you want to know there’s a good God in control of this universe—Daniel says, *“There certainly is. He will decisively overthrow His enemies and will bring in an everlasting Kingdom of righteousness and peace. Then He will give that Kingdom to His Son, Jesus Christ.*

Second image: The Everlasting King

Just as there is a courtroom with a throne on which sits the Ancient of Days, there is also an Everlasting King, and we are called to worship Him. Verse 13:

*I saw in the night visions,
and behold, with the clouds of heaven
there came one like a son of man...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.*

We know Who this *“one like a son of man”* is, One Who is fully man and yet Who is worthy of the worship of *“all peoples, nations, and languages”* (verse 14). This is none other than our Lord Jesus Christ. He Himself identified with this *“son of man”* of Daniel 7. Listen to what Jesus said in Mark 14 when the High Priest asked Him at His trial, *“Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?”*

Jesus said to Him, *“I am”* (Mark 14:62). The great I AM. *“And you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.”* And when Jesus said this, the high priest tore his robes. They accused Him of blasphemy and took Him away to the cross, where He would die. And little did they know that they were crucifying the Lord of

glory. For on that cross, Jesus would disarm the rulers and authorities, putting them to open shame, triumphing over them.

When we read verses 13 and 14, I just would like to make the whole sanctuary a “Hallelujah Chorus.” I’d like to get all of you up on your feet, and I’d like you to sing, “The kingdom of this world is become the Kingdom of our God and of His Christ. And He shall reign forever and ever. Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Amen.” That’s where our vision needs to focus.

When did this happen? One like a son of man coming to the Ancient of Days and being given all authority and power on earth? It happened at Jesus’ ascension. He’s not waiting to reign—He reigns now. We didn’t say, “Rejoice, the Lord will be King.” We said, “Rejoice, the Lord is King. Your Lord and King adore.”

And when the final judgment described in verse 25 takes place, when all these evil dominions and all these beastly powers are given into His hand and the court sits in judgment, God will simply be saying “Amen” to what Jesus has already accomplished on the cross. God will simply be playing the grand finale from the triumphant symphony of Calvary’s victory: “And He shall reign forever and ever. King of Kings, Lord of Lord, Hallelujah.”

Friends, fix this in your mind. Behold the strength of your Great Shepherd. He’s got lions coming against Him. He’s got a bear standing up against Him. He’s got a leopard circling His camp. And He’s got this fourth beast unlike any other, with vicious iron teeth and claws. And your Shepherd’s not trembling. Your Shepherd’s not in terror. Your Shepherd stands to guard and protect and defend His little flock. And it’s all okay. You’re safe under His care. He reigns.

Is that enough for you? Is that good news for you? I think it’s enough, but there’s even one more thing.

Third image: God’s people will possess the kingdom

The Ancient of Days is seated in His courtroom. Jesus, the Everlasting King, reigns. But here’s the third thing: God’s people will receive and possess this everlasting Kingdom. Unbelievable! Amazing grace.

Just look at verse 18. This is the pivotal moment. “*But the saints of the Most High...*” Who’s that? That’s everyone who trusts in Jesus. That’s us. “*The saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom,*” for how long? “*Forever.*” No, that’s not enough. “*Forever.*” No, that’s still not enough. “*And ever!*” Wow!

In case we didn’t get it in verse 18, he says it again in verse 22. “*Until the Ancient of Days came, and judgment was given for the saints of the Most High,*” —we will be vindicated—“*and*

the time came when the saints possessed the kingdom.” We will receive it. We will possess it, every single part of it.

Again, verse 27, in case we didn’t get it the first two times:

*And the kingdom and the dominion
and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven
shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High;
their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom,
and all dominions shall serve and obey them.*

Dale Davis says, “So the servants have no kingdom apart from their King, and the King does not reign without His servants.” Jesus just cannot stand being separated from His people. He wants us to share in His Kingdom. That’s mindboggling. I can’t describe that.

Back in August, when we were saying goodbye to Ruth at Wheaton College, the chaplain gave us this beautiful card with a benediction that I’ve spoken to you many times since. At the heart of it are these words: “Do not be afraid.” On the back of that card, he wanted us to write out a blessing for our child that we will pray as they go through college. This is what I wrote from Luke 12:32, *“Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”*

Wow! We shall receive and possess the Kingdom. What if, instead of living as if our fate remains up in the air, as if we’re being controlled by beastly forces beyond our power, as if our fortunes rise or fall on Wall Street or in the doctor’s office or on our report card—what if we lived as if our destiny was already secure, and it is unspeakably awesome? What if we lived with a fearless confidence that it is my Father’s good pleasure to give me the Kingdom? That’s what I’m destined for. That’s the bright vision to which God calls you and me.

If you’re not trusting Jesus, if you have not repented of your sin and put your trust in Him, this bleak world is as bright as it’s going to get for you. But Jesus calls you now to repent, then you can share in this inheritance with all the saints in light. Isn’t that good news?

And believers, if you have Him as your King, He calls you to live with joy and to write on your calendar on November 9th, “My good Jesus rules the world. I’m not afraid.” He calls you to be a disciple-maker, because He has all authority and power in heaven and on earth. The way He’s building His Kingdom now is that we go into all the world and make disciples who believe that Jesus reigns.

It’s like when Gandalf was talking with Frodo about the trouble they were in and the evil of Soron. In despair, Frodo said, “I just wish it need not have happened in my time.” Gandalf replied, “So do I. And so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us.”

Will we be captivated by the vision of Daniel 7? Or will we let Fox News and CNN control our vision this week? This week is when it counts. Will you let God be your vision?

Let's pray together.

O great God, the Ancient of Days, with the time that is given us we would worship You and Your Son Jesus, crowning Him Lord of all. We believe that You reign, that Jesus is King and that we are inheriting the Kingdom. We ask that we would go into this world with a joyous hope and confidence this week, making disciples for You, for all authority in heaven and on earth is Yours. So we crown You now with many crowns and worship Your majestic name. Amen.

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