

**Statues and Animals - Visions of the Future**  
**Daniel 2: 36 – 45, Daniel 7:2-14**

Faith Popcorn...no friends this isn't the latest Christian marketing gimmick to sell snack food which accompanies Christian movies. Nor is it a theological term explaining how one might describe an experience of sudden conversion to Christianity.

Faith Popcorn is a person, perhaps you've heard of her...and she is best known for being what is called "a futurist."

A futurist is someone who attempts to predict the future by observing social and behavioral trends and extrapolating from these trends what sorts of things people might be doing in the near future.

Things like what they might be interested in buying, or wearing, or doing, or how they might be thinking politically – and of course these predictions are of great interest to business people and politicians because knowing what will happen in the future can give you an edge over your competition.

And then there are people like Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and Mark Zuckerberg – one could say they don't try to predict the future, they simply create it.

Thirty years ago the terms Microsoft, Apple, and Facebook would have meant nothing to the average person on the street, but now...everyone knows them and is affected by them. Many have said that these people are helping to create our future with their business leadership and visionary ideas.

But regardless of whether you are a futurist or a visionary, regardless of whether you have visions of the future or visions for the future, the question is what will it look like?

Will it be the tolerant, multicultural, technologically advanced society of *Star Trek* where humanity has evolved to a new level of peace and enlightenment...

Or will it be a post-apocalyptic world like the *Matrix* where Artificially Intelligent machines have subjugated human beings and harvest them as batteries to supply electrical power...

I'm certain that most of us have contemplated the future of the world at some point and that we hope for a positive vision of the future to come about, though there are always the pessimists who believe that civilization is always about to collapse and they are busy preparing to survive.

But, whether the future is positive or negative, most people would say that however it turns out... it will be the result of our actions and consequences.

But I wonder, is the future simply the consequential results of the collective activity of human beings from the past and the present? And how would this help us determine if we are progressing towards something better or are we simply spiraling down towards our destruction?

Well friends, Presbyterians are known for saying that scripture is the only rule for faith and life... and so this morning we turn to the bible to see what God has to say about these questions regarding the future.

And to answer these questions, the Scriptures take us back to visions of the future given to King Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel in the golden age of the Neo-Babylonian Empire.

And friends, this golden age of Neo-Babylonian civilization was impressive, as were the accomplishments of its king Nebuchadnezzar.

He established and built the Empire, defeating the Assyrians and destroying their capital city of Nineveh. He swept across the Middle East, subduing and conquering all the nations living there, eventually defeating Egypt as well.

Having established a period of peace he set about on an ambitious building campaign constructing roads, aqueducts, reservoirs and temples. He also completely rebuilt the city of Babylon, its walls were so thick that a chariot with a team of four horses could make a u-turn on the top of the wall.

He spared no expense for the royal palace and He is credited with building one of the seven wonders of the ancient world – the famous Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

Truly impressive...he was the Bill Gates, Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg of his day.

And the question could have well been asked at the time, had civilization reached its peak? Had Nebuchadnezzar established such an impressive empire and civilization that it would endure and shape the future? What would the future look like?

And for Daniel there was an additional question – what did the future look like for the people of God?

Because Nebuchadnezzar had defeated them, captured Jerusalem, looted the temple and scattered the people of God across his empire.

Was this the end of the people of God and the Promised Land?

What was to be their future?

Questions, so many questions, so let's look at what answers these visions contain, starting with the vision of the statue.

And the first thing this vision reveals to us is that Neo-Babylon was not the ultimate empire nor was it the last word on empires. Babylon would eventually fall and be replaced by another empire - in fact there would be another three empires to come after Babylon.

As impressive as empires are they are not indestructible. Remember the statue rests on a very weak and unstable base. Its feet are constructed of clay and iron - a rather weak mixture to support such a top heavy statue, makes it very easy to topple.

And thus we learn that the future is always uncertain for any human empire or enterprise no matter how impressive or secure they may look.

Second, each empire would become crueler and last a little longer than its predecessor, as illustrated by the declining value but increasing durability of the metals in the statue.

This contrasts our usual view of history which tends to see progression, going from the Stone Age to Bronze to Iron to the Golden Age... but this vision starts with the head of gold and declines to iron.

It's also worthwhile to note that from a human perspective we tend to see that the empires which followed Babylon made improvements with regards to civilization, esp. the Greeks with their philosophy and democracy and Rome with its rule of law and amazing buildings like the Coliseum.

But the vision shows that as their accomplishments increased, their value in God's perspective actually decreased because these endeavors are pursued for human glory and not for God's glory.

And third, this vision shows us the future of the world is not an unending succession of human empires rising and falling and replacing each other, occurring over and over again; no, there is a final goal - a heavenly kingdom which will come after only three more empires in Daniel's day.

And the heavenly kingdom does not gradually grow or evolve out of a future stage of enlightenment, instead there is a clear and distinct break between these human kingdoms and the final kingdom, it comes and destroys them and replaces them.

So both Daniel and the King are getting a clearer picture of the future here, and Daniel would also be encouraged that God has not forgotten about his people since the vision reveals that Babylon's conquest of Jerusalem has been allowed in God's sovereign plan – it's not because the gods of Babylon are more powerful than Yahweh and have defeated Him.

Additionally, this vision would have reminded Daniel of how God had delivered Israel in past by toppling the Philistine giant Goliath with a small stone hurled by the one who was anointed to be king – the shepherd boy David.

So friends we see that what happens in history and therefore what will occur in the future is not just an accumulation of human actions and consequences. This vision reveals that God is also involved; He sets the parameters for the future, casts the characters, and determines the outcome.

But Daniel also receives another vision. And this one is to make him aware that God and humans aren't the only players in the game of shaping the future. There are evil forces at work behind the scenes animating and empowering human endeavors and empires and this vision of the four beasts provides us some insight into how demonic activity works to influence the future and how it will turn out.

Now I realize this might seem a bit fantastic for us who live in the modern age of science and technology, but friends this isn't some crystal ball gazer giving us this info - it's the Holy Scriptures! So we must set aside our skepticism and allow scripture to give us a truer vision of reality, for who are we to claim we know it all, right?

So, the increasing cruelty and disregard for God in each successive empire is due in part to human sinfulness, but also because of demonic influence and power.

It's important to note that the first beast, Babylon, is described to have stood like a human and it was given the mind of a human – which I take to mean that since Daniel, one of God's chosen people was Nebuchadnezzar's closest advisor; and the King was

open to recognizing the one true God – his empire still has a degree of humanity – still has a degree of the image of *God!* .

However as the empires progress this humanity, this image of God disappears and the demonic influence increases. It makes each empire crueler until the fourth empire is simply described as a terrifying beast, a monster characterized only by its brutality and its power.

And eventually this demonic power will be expressed in concentrated form. Personified in a ruler who recognizes what it is and does not attempt to mask it. This is the little horn that uproots three other horns and has eyes and a mouth.

And this ruler will claim to be the greatest expression of power and achievement this world has ever known, that they themselves are god! But the true God will not put up with this, when this demonic activity is at its peak God will judge it, and destroy it.

Then a new age will begin. The ruler of this new age will come out of the clouds of heaven, not out of the abyss of the sea, and he is no beast but is described as “one like a son of man” in other words he’s recognizably human, so this new kingdom will be life giving and affirming, it will restore human beings to their rightful place

where God intended them to be – as rulers and stewards in his image over the creation. Thus all power and authority from God is given to the ruler of this kingdom, and this new age will last forever.

So friends, we are given an overall picture of the future that says things will get worse before they get better in spite of whatever cultural and civil advances human beings make.

Things will get worse because human sinfulness makes their endeavors open to demonic influence, and things will get better because God has determined to judge evil and renew this world. It’s a bit of a paradoxical picture actually.

And friends we know this vision for the future will occur because it has already happened before in the past. God has brought it about and fulfilled it in part already as a means of making a promise to fulfill it completely in the future.

It was in Jesus Christ that the rock not carved by human hands entered our world, and every empire which this world has ever known since his birth has broken itself upon him, or joined with him.

Friends, Jesus Christ is an anvil upon which many hammers have been broken, and will continue to be broken until the rock grows into a mountain which fills the whole world.

Because, while Christ's first coming was humble and lowly – like the small rock, His second coming will be glorious – like a mountain that fills the whole world!

So we wait for return of Jesus Christ, when He comes on the clouds of heaven. And then the one who identified himself as “The Son of Man” will be given all power and glory and the Kingdom of Heaven will come in its fullness forever.

And then every knee shall bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord!

So friends, these visions of the future which the scriptures give to us are both sobering and encouraging.

They are encouraging because in some ways we are like Daniel – we are part of God's people who live in a country and civilization which to some degree respects the one true God and His Son Jesus Christ and allows us to exercise a degree of influence in their name. We should continue to do that and pray it will increase!

They are sobering because we know there are other countries and governments where demonic influence has advanced, and God's people are crushed and devoured and trampled by the beast of persecution.

They are encouraging because we know that while Christians may have to endure and perish at the hands of persecution, demonic influence will never have the last word – God will judge and destroy it and governments can change and reform, and death is not the future for Christian – eternal life is.

They are sobering because they remind us not become enamored with all the progress and achievements of civilization which exist simply for the sake of bigger, faster, and more powerful, real progress is Christ transforming culture so that all of life becomes worship of God.

They are encouraging because we know that the future is moving towards the Kingdom of God coming in its fullness – and if the circumstances we live in make this seem improbable because some government or ruler seems to have demonic power to overcome and defeat God's people – then this itself is the very sign that God is about to bring judgment and his kingdom is right around the corner!

Friends, people will say many things about the future – some will even say things claiming to base them on the bible. But the scripture gives these visions which set the pattern and the norm for what the bible has to say about the future.

And since we know how it all turns out – that God’s Kingdom defeats and replaces the kingdoms of this world, we might want to consider making sure that our allegiance lies with the Kingdom of Heaven and with its Lord Jesus Christ.

Friends we can do this by simply confessing to Jesus Christ that we need to be forgiven for what we have done wrong....

.....By asking Him to give us a new heart that wants to love Him and serve Him, and follow Him...all the way

...into His future. Amen.