

Christ's Ascension

1 May 2008

Ps. 45: 1 - 3

Ps. 110: 1, 2, 5

Ps. 24: 1, 4, 5

Ps. 2: 1 - 4

Ps. 47: 2, 3

Scripture reading: Daniel 7: 1 - 28

Text: Daniel 7: 13 - 18

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

If you would look at a mountain that lies far on the horizon, you might simply see one mountain. But as you come closer you discover many mountains, the one rising behind the other. As you move forward, coming closer and closer, you are able to discern the first mountains from the main mountain which lies still further.

This applies also to the prophecies which we find in the old covenant. At first it seems as if they will have only one fulfilment, but as you move forward following the line of history, you see a second fulfilment, and sometimes a third fulfilment. The prophecy, here in Daniel chapter 7, reaches to the first coming of Christ. But if we move on and compare this prophecy of Daniel with the teaching of the new covenant, we see that it reaches even further to the last days, and to the final consummation of all things, and to its final fulfilment at the second coming of Christ.

This prophecy in chapter 7 has been preceded by a similar prophecy in chapter 2.

Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, had a dream. The image of a man, enormous and dazzling, stood before him. It represented four kingdoms that would follow the one after the other - gold, silver, bronze and iron. A stone came from heaven

and destroyed these kingdoms, and that stone became a mountain that fills the whole earth.

“...the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever” - Dan.2: 44.

In our text the prophet Daniel receives a similar dream. There are a few differences. The four successive world-kingdoms are this time shown as four beasts. And this time something extra is revealed: the relation between these kingdoms and the church.

Nebuchadnezzar saw these kingdoms in their imposing power and glory, while the Lord's prophet see them now as ravenous beasts of prey. It is especially with the fourth beast that their enmity against the church is revealed. A heavy persecution will be launched against the saints, and the saints will seem to be defeated - verse 21 - 25. It is then that the Son of Man will appear on the clouds of heaven to establish His eternal kingdom that will last forever.

When we hear of the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven, we immediately think of Christ's second coming, for His second coming is indeed described in these terms. But first we have to look at this prophecy in its historic context, and only then can we move on and see its final and glorious fulfilment in the second coming of Christ.

In its first application our text speaks of Christ's ascension into heaven. But we will also see how His ascension into heaven is linked to His second coming.

I will now proclaim to you the gospel of His kingdom. We will see Him as...

The Son of Man on the clouds of heaven

That will be the theme. And we note...

1. The church in exile

2. That the Son of Man received the kingdom
3. That the saints will reign with Him

In the first place we note...

The church in exile

Judah finds herself in Babylon. The seventy years of captivity are nearly over. Soon they will return to rebuild the ruins of Jerusalem, as the Lord has spoken.

When Judah would call to memory those prophecies of the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah who spoke of Israel's wonderful deliverance from Babylon and their return to Jerusalem (Jer.29: 10; Isaiah chapters 14, 21 and 49, etc.), then they could easily think that with their return to Jerusalem they will enter complete peace and prosperity.

But now the future of Israel, *after* their deliverance from Babylon, is made known to them. Jerusalem will indeed be rebuilt, but it will be built in troublesome times. And another destruction of Jerusalem and of the temple is still to come - Dan.9: 25, 26. It becomes clear that when the seventy years of their captivity is full, the church will not immediately enter the peace of their promised Messiah.

And that, brothers and sisters, is the reason for this prophecy. The Lord makes known to His church that there will still be four world-kings *before* their promised King will come. With this prophecy He prepares His people for the sufferings which they will yet have to endure, before they will enter eternal peace and glory, together with their King when He will reign on the throne of His eternal kingdom.

Our text reveals the history from Babylon up to Rome. Daniel saw the four world-empires of the Assyrians, Persians, Greeks, and lastly the Romans. A description is given of Daniel's own time up to the first coming of Christ in the time of the Roman Empire. And thus the Lord prepared His church in the old covenant for the sufferings that were still to come.

At the same time this prophecy also reaffirms the surety that the glorious kingdom of their Messiah is coming.

Understanding this to be the content and purpose of the prophecy, we now turn to the vision itself.

The four winds of heaven break loose upon the sea of nations. The sea symbolises the nations. This image is very popular in Scripture, as we find it in many places.

“...the multitude of many people...makes a noise like the roar of the seas... the rushing of nations...makes a rushing like the rushing of mighty waters! The nations will rush like the rushing of many waters...” - Isaiah 17: 12, 13.

Or, in another place we read that the Lord makes the stormy sea of nations quiet:

“You who still the noise of the seas, the noise of their waves, and the tumult of the peoples” - Ps. 65: 7.

And so, when the four winds of heaven cause the sea to rage, it means that the nations of the earth are raging in war and tumult. Out of this tumult and raging of the nations four empires arise.

After that, Daniel sees how God prepares to judge the nations. He says:

“I watched till thrones were put in place, and the Ancient of Days was seated; His garment was white as snow, and the hair of His head was of pure wool. His throne was a fiery flame, its wheels a burning fire. A fiery stream issued and came forth before Him. A thousand thousands ministered to Him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him. The court was seated, and the books were opened” - verses 9, 10.

God is called the Ancient of Days to indicate that He is the eternal God. He, the eternal God, was seated in order to judge. His white garment signifies His holiness. His judgment will be holy and just. His throne was a fiery flame, and a river of fire went out of His throne to consume His enemies. Daniel also sees that God’s throne has wheels of burning fire - the wheels indicate His omnipresence. He is not confined to the temple in Jerusalem which is now in ruins. No, He is the Judge of all the earth. The millions and millions of angels that stand before Him to serve, illustrates that He is indeed the Lord of hosts. God Almighty makes Himself ready to judge the nations.

The court was seated, and the books were opened - that is: the books in which the deeds of the nations are recorded, that they may be judged.

The fact that thrones, plural, were put in place for this judgement, refers to the fact that the saints will partake in this judgment. When the apostle John sees God on His throne in heaven, he sees that there are twenty four thrones around the throne of God. The twenty four elders were seated with God around His throne, clothed in white robes with golden crowns on their heads - Rev.4: 4.

And the apostle Paul says:

“Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world will be judged by you, are you unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Do you not know that we shall judge angels? ...” - 1 Cor.6: 2, 3.

And so, also in this vision, Daniel sees the thrones of the elders around the throne of God, as the court is seated for judgment.

While the court is seated, Daniel still hears the proud and blasphemous words of that little horn that came forth from the fourth beast. Then the beast was slain and its body was devoured by the fire that proceeds from God’s throne.

We do not know exactly who this little horn was - the one that uprooted three others and spoke proud words. Historically it has to refer to the Caesars of the Roman Empire. Probably it refers to all the Caesars from Julius Caesar up to Augustus who was Caesar when Christ was born, and maybe it also includes the other Caesars who followed, such as Nero, who persecuted the church. But commentaries differ on this point.

Yet, the very fact that this horn, or ruler, is not easy to identify, has some significance for us, for it will soon become clear to us that this prophecy has not yet reached its final fulfilment. In its final fulfilment, this little horn will be the last and final Antichrist that will come. He will act within the church and will present himself as God - 2 Thess.2: 4. He will be consumed by the breath of Christ at His second coming - 2 Thess. 2: 8.

There is a clear parallel between Daniel’s vision of the beasts and the vision of the beast which the apostle John described in book of Revelations.

“...he opened his mouth in blasphemy against God, to blaspheme His name, His tabernacle, and those who dwell in heaven. It was granted to him to make war against the saints and to overcome them. And authority was given him over every tribe, tongue, and nation. All who dwell on the earth will worship him, whose names have not been written in the Book of Life...”
- Rev.13: 6 - 8.

Now we need clear discernment. We should not try to extend the fourth kingdom in the prophecy of Daniel to our own time. These four kingdoms have perished and are gone. They were the empires from Daniel up to the first coming of Christ. But once this is clear to us, we also have to continue and see that this prophecy will have its final fulfilment with the second coming of Christ. Then the final judgment will take place. Then the church will enter the glory of her King. It is with the second coming of Christ that the eternal kingdom of God will come in all its glory.

It is clear then that, as with the other prophecies, also this prophecy stretches far beyond its first fulfilment.

Just as Israel's deliverance from Egypt became a picture and a symbol of God's deliverance and salvation to the church of all times, so also Israel's deliverance from Babylon. Israel's captivity in Babylon became a shadow of the sufferings that the church would experience at the end of time; and their deliverance from Babylon became a shadow of God's final deliverance when Christ will return on the clouds of heaven.

And thus this whole theme of suffering and deliverance returns in the book of Revelations, and we are not surprised when it is symbolised by the church's captivity and deliverance from Babylon.

Thus the basic theme of our text returns in the new covenant. The beast will war against the church, persecute it, and destroy the church to such an extent that the church will seem to be wiped out - Rev.11: 7. In this regard we could also compare Revelations chapters 13 and 17. The parallel between that beast and the beasts here in Dan.7 is clear. We see the same persecution here in Dan.7 in the verses 21 - 27.

The whole world will unite in war against the church, and when it will seem as if the church will be totally wiped away, deliverance will come from heaven. Fire will fall from heaven, and the beast will be thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone - Rev.20: 9, 10.

God will act on His throne of judgement. All people will be gathered before Him and the books will be opened. And the dead will be judged according to their works as recorded in the books - Rev. 20: 11, 12. It is then that the saints will receive the glorious and everlasting kingdom of their God and King.

And so the parallel with Daniel 7 is clear.

Yes, Israel in Babylon has become an example and a picture of the church in this world, to such an extent that this prophecy of Daniel applies also to us, and will have its final fulfilment when Christ will return on the clouds of heaven as the everlasting King of kings.

Now, within this context we find a description of Christ's ascension into heaven. The Son of Man ascended into heaven. He ascended on the clouds of heaven, and was brought to the Father. To Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. We note that in the in the second place...

The Son of Man received the kingdom

When we hear of Christ's coming on the clouds of heaven, we immediately think of His second coming which will be in great power and glory. And rightly so, for the

second coming of Christ is indeed described to us in many places as the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven. But we have to note that that description of His second coming is rooted in His ascension into heaven, which was also on the clouds of heaven.

Our text says in verse 13:

“I was watching in the night visions, and behold, One like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought Him near before Him”.

This is also how Christ’s ascension is described in the book of Acts. In our translation Acts 1:9 reads:

“...He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight”

But we should rather translate the Greek text as follows:

“...and a cloud took Him up out of their sight”

The meaning is not that a cloud blurred Him out before their eyes, but that He was taken up by a cloud.

And that is what the prophet Daniel saw. The Son of Man was taken up on the clouds of

heaven and was brought to the throne of God and received the dominion.

The rest of Scripture refers to this ascension of Christ as “He was seated at the right hand of God”. Listen again what the prophet Daniel saw. The Son of Man came with the clouds of heaven to the Ancient of Days and 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 the one which shall not be destroyed - verse 14.

When we understand Christ’s ascension into heaven within the context of this whole chapter, then we also start to grasp the meaning of His ascension. He ascended into heaven in order to receive the dominion over all, and an everlasting kingdom.

Now, someone may ask whether He, as the Son of God, did not have the dominion from all eternity. Surely He did! He did not lack any dominion. Nor could anything be added to His glory. But He is now described to us in His office as the Son of Man. He is described as God in the flesh. He is described in His office as Mediator, and not merely as the Son of God. The Son of Man is the Son of God

who became flesh. And for what purpose? He became flesh for our sake in order to restore us and to make us share in His glory!

He is the second Adam, or second Man, representing His people. And thus, when *He* receives the dominion, something new is created, something that never existed before. There is now a Man seated at the right hand of God! Yes, He ascended into heaven and received the dominion, not for His own sake - as if the Son of God lacked any dominion - but He received this dominion as the Son of Man. The Son of God became flesh in order that we may share in His glory. And so Christ ascended into heaven for our sake! He received the dominion as our Mediator representing us.

For that purpose the Son of God came from heaven, and for that purpose the Son of Man ascended into heaven: that we may share in His glory and in His kingdom.

In this regard we may think of Psalm 2:

“I will declare the decree: the LORD has said to Me, ‘You are My Son, today I have begotten You’”.

While the Son of God was from all eternity, the Son of Man was not from all eternity, but created by the decree of God. As man, born of the seed of David, Christ received the dominion for the first time when He ascended into heaven. As the Son of God this glory was His from all eternity, but as the Son of Man, something new is described in our text.

It is a glorious moment in the history of our salvation.

Why then do we read here in verse 15 that Daniel was grieved in his spirit and that the visions troubled him?

Daniel’s grief does not refer to the glory of the Son of Man, but to the whole vision by which it is made clear that much suffering awaits the church *before* their promised King will receive His dominion.

Now, brothers and sisters, when Daniel asks the angel to interpret the vision to him, the whole vision is summarised for us in verses 17 and 18:

“Those great beasts, which are four, are four kings which arise out of the earth. But the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom, and possess the kingdom forever, even forever and ever”.

There is something amazing about this interpretation. Was it not the Son of Man that received the dominion and the kingdom? Yes, but now, in the interpretation, it is the saints that receive the kingdom! The dominion of the Son of Man is their dominion, and His kingdom is their kingdom!

This is repeated and confirmed in verse 27:

“...the kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people, the saints of the Most High. His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey Him”.

The ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ into heaven, is described as the moment in history that He received all dominion and power in heaven and on earth. That was the official start of His reign at the right hand of the Father, and of His dominion and His kingdom. But we see that this vision and its interpretation describe Christ’s ascension as the glory of His people. Then the saints - that is all believers - will receive the kingdom and reign with Him.

The same is stated in Rev.22: 5, that we will reign with Christ forever and ever.

You will realise that we are now starting to discern the first mountains from the main mountain. The fulfilments of the vision are lined up the one after the other, and as it were, the one hidden behind the other.

Let us see how the new covenant clears this up, and brings us to the final peak of this mountain. We note that in the third place...

The saints will reign with Him forever

When Christ ascended into heaven on a cloud, the apostles looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up. Suddenly two men, dressed in white, stood next to them and said:

“Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you in heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go to heaven” - Acts 1: 11.

Dear congregation, here you have the connection between our Lord’s ascension and His second coming. His ascension is linked to His return, with this promise: as you saw Him ascending on a cloud, so also will you see Him return on a cloud.

And thus His ascension is both the start of His kingdom, and the link to the consummation of His kingdom. His ascension was a mountain before the eyes of Daniel, but as we reach this mountain we see yet another fulfilment behind it: the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven in great power and glory.

If we look at Christ’s ascension into heaven, as described by Daniel, we can hardly see how this could have been described by Daniel as the moment that the church will receive the eternal kingdom. Yet it is true. **We** were raised up together

with Christ, and God made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus - Eph.2: 6. He did not only die on our behalf; He did not only rise from the dead on our behalf; He also ascended into heaven representing us. In principle we are already reigning with Christ.

But now, as the first fulfilment lies behind us, we realise that there is also more to it. Christ will also return on the clouds of heaven. The last and final fulfilment of this glorious prophecy is still to come: The Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven.

Let us now, in conclusion, go back to Daniel 7 and see how the context of that chapter gives us a fuller insight in the meaning of Christ's ascension.

Before the Son of Man ascended into heaven, Daniel saw that the court was seated, and the books were opened. A river of fire flows from the throne of God. Christ's ascension into heaven is placed within the context of God's judgment on the nations. The dominion is taken away from them and given to the Son of Man. With His ascension into heaven the nations have been judged. With His ascension the dominion has been taken away from the empires of this world. Christ came to this world as the stone that struck the image on its feet. He is dashing it to pieces. He is grinding it to powder. He is stretching out His sceptre from Zion, ruling in the midst of His enemies. He is putting them under His feet. He is the rock that becomes a mountain, until His kingdom will fill the whole earth.

We note also something else in this vision: the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven is given as a comfort to the people of God in Babylon. The church finds herself in captivity, and still more suffering awaits her.

Brothers and sisters, many antichrists may still come, and we know that one is coming who will make war against the saints and overcome them - or so it will seem. But we may know already the first fulfilment of this prophecy. We know our Lord Jesus Christ, who ascended into heaven and sits at the right Hand of God from where He, the Son of Man, will come to judge the living and the dead.

And so we look forward to the final fulfilment when we will receive dominion with Him and enter the glory of His everlasting kingdom.

That is the message of our Lord's ascension. This gospel is given to His church in captivity, that we may not despair in the sufferings that still awaits us.

Christ's ascension into heaven is our comfort in the present, and our hope for the future. All power in heaven and on earth has been given to Him, our representative, who reigns at the right hand of God to the benefit of His church.

Let us in all persecutions and trials lift our eyes up to heaven and see our Mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ, at the right hand of the Father.

Spiritually our eyes are fixed on heaven. Why? Because: the Son of Man is seated on the throne of God. He will surely come on the clouds of heaven, and His kingdom will be ours.

Let us bow before His majesty, and thank God for the wonder of His salvation full and complete.

Amen.