



THE RISE OF A PERSECUTING POWER

Course 6, *New World Coming*, Lesson 3

The Problem: Where are we in the stream of history? How close are we to the second coming of Jesus? Daniel 7 provides a compelling answer, offering a detailed prophetic outline that parallels Daniel 2 but with expanded symbolism and deeper insights. While Daniel 2 presents a broad historical framework, Daniel 7 reveals the experiences God's people would endure after the fall of the Roman Empire, including centuries of persecution. This chapter also introduces imagery evoking a divine courtroom, where records are examined and judgment is rendered. Many believe this is where God's faithful ones are vindicated, and their adversaries condemned. At its climax, the Kingdom of God is established through Christ's second advent, ushering in ultimate justice and the complete defeat of all opposition to His reign.

Daniel received this vision "*in the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon*" (Daniel 7:1), likely 553 B.C.. Belshazzar, the son of Nabonidus, ruled Babylon as co-regent while his father conducted military campaigns. Daniel's prophecy spans history from his time to the establishment of God's eternal kingdom. The early dating of Daniel is well-supported, particularly by the Dead Sea Scrolls, which contain copies of Daniel predating the Maccabean period. These manuscripts affirm that Daniel was widely accepted as canonical long before the second century B.C., reinforcing its authenticity and divine inspiration.

Daniel's ability to predict history with remarkable accuracy is unparalleled among uninspired prophets. He consistently credited God as the source of revelation (Daniel 2:28), aligning with the biblical teaching that only God can declare the future with certainty (Isaiah 46:9-10). Daniel 7 is one of the strongest evidences of biblical inspiration, demonstrating God's sovereignty over history. Most of its prophetic events have already been fulfilled, confirming that we are living in the final stages of time. The urgent message of this chapter is clear—we must prepare to meet the Lord, who is coming soon.

Objectives:

- I. We consider the meaning of the lion that Daniel saw coming up out of the sea.
- II. We study the significance of the bear.
- III. We note the symbolism of the leopard, and how history fulfilled the prediction.
- IV. We study the indescribable beast and its historical fulfillment.
- V. We give special attention to the little horn power, its seven characteristics, its attack on God's truth and people, and the way in which it is condemned and destroyed.

I. THE LION – BABYLON

Since Daniel 7 is parallel to Chapter 2, we know that the lion represents the same power as the head of gold of Nebuchadnezzar's great image.

The Word:

1. What did Daniel see first in this vision? Daniel 7:2
2. Describe the first beast that Daniel saw coming up out of the sea. Daniel 7:3-4

Explanation: An angel explained to Daniel that the four beasts emerging from the sea represent four nations that would rise to power (Daniel 7:17). The sea symbolizes the multitudes of people from which these nations emerge (Isaiah 17:12-

13; Revelation 17:15), while the winds stirring the sea represent international strife and conflict that lead to their rise (Jeremiah 4:11-13; 25:32-33; 49:36-37; Zechariah 7:14). The first beast, like the head of gold in Daniel 2, represents the Neo-Babylonian Empire (605–539 B.C.). Babylon was often depicted as a lion, as seen in Jeremiah 4:7; 50:17. The eagle's wings symbolize its swift conquests (Jeremiah 4:13; 48:40; 49:22). However, the wings were plucked, and the lion was made to stand like a man, receiving a human heart—signifying Babylon's decline in strength and aggression. After Nebuchadnezzar, its rulers became weak, corrupt, and morally degraded, leading to the empire's downfall.

Relevance: Like every nation in history, Babylon was given an opportunity to serve the true God. Yet, its rulers chose luxury and idolatry over faithfulness, leading to its demise. This serves as a warning—nations and individuals alike must choose between spiritual integrity and self-indulgence.

II. THE BEAR – MEDO-PERSIA

Daniel 2 presented the chest and arms of the great image as a symbol of the Medo-Persian Empire. Daniel 7 represents the same nation as a bear that rose out of the sea after the Babylonian lion.

The Word:

3. What was especially interesting about the beast that Daniel saw? Daniel 7:5

Explanation: The Persian Empire began with the unification of Media and Persia under Cyrus the Great in the mid-6th century B.C., forming what is often called the Medo-Persian Empire. This dual nature explains why Daniel saw the bear raised up on one side—Persia ultimately became the dominant power, rising after Media (Daniel 8:3). The bear had three ribs between its teeth, symbolizing its three major conquests: (1) Lydia – Defeated by Cyrus in winter 547 B.C.; (2) Babylon – Fell to the Persians in fall 539 B.C.; and (3) Egypt – Conquered by Cyrus' son Cambyses in 525 B.C.

Relevance: Daniel received this vision during the first year of Belshazzar's reign, allowing him to accurately predict the rise of Persia. The fulfillment of these prophecies affirms that God's word is reliable—His forecasts of history have been fulfilled with precision. Just as Daniel's visions came to pass, we can trust the Bible's revelations about the future.

III. THE LEOPARD – GREECE

Daniel 2 symbolized the Greek empire, which existed from Alexander to the rise of Rome, as the thighs of brass. Daniel 7 depicts the same empire as a leopard coming up out of the sea.

The Word:

4. Describe the leopard that Daniel saw? Daniel 7:6

Explanation: The conquests of Alexander the Great were among the most amazing military campaigns in ancient history. He progressively and very rapidly dismembered the Persian Empire. First he took Asia Minor, then Palestine and Egypt. Finally he defeated the Persian army at the Battle of Arbela (331 B.C.) near the Tigris river in Mesopotamia. From there, Alexander moved his army with great speed across central Asia to the borders of India. In about a decade, Alexander conquered all the territory from Macedonia to India. This speed of conquest is symbolized by the four wings of a bird on the back of the leopard. Alexander died suddenly in 323 B.C. at the height of his power. By the middle of the third century B.C., his empire was divided into the four Hellenistic Kingdoms: Egypt (ruled by the Ptolemies); Syria (ruled by the Seleucid kings); Pergamum (ruled by the Attalid kings); Macedonia (ruled by the Antigonid kings). Since the Lord foresaw this fourfold division of Alexander's Empire, he showed Daniel a vision of the leopard having four heads. The heads symbolize the four Hellenistic Kingdoms that controlled the eastern Mediterranean region until the rise of the Roman Republic.

Relevance: Since Alexander conquered Palestine, he had ample opportunity to learn about the true God. He chose to live as a self-willed oriental monarch with little regard for the lives of others, and little respect for ethical and moral decency. God could not bless such a ruler.

IV. THE NONDESCRIPT BEAST – ROME

The Hellenistic world was followed first by the Roman Republic and later by the Roman Empire. The story of Rome's conquest of the Mediterranean world, beginning with the Punic Wars in the third century B.C., in which she defeated Carthage and took the Western Mediterranean, is one of the great stories of ancient history. Rome absorbed the four Hellenistic Kingdoms one by one until she was also mistress of the eastern Mediterranean.

The Word:

5. How was the Roman Republic and Empire depicted in the vision given to Daniel? Daniel 7:7
6. What was Daniel told about this fourth great empire? Daniel 7:23-24

Explanation: Pagan Rome conquered Macedonia in 168 B.C., making it a Roman province in 148 B.C. Pergamum was bequeathed to Rome by Attalus III, and it was absorbed as the Roman Province of Asia in 133 B.C. Syria-Palestine became a Roman Province in 63 B.C. Egypt became a Roman province in 30 B.C., after Octavian (later Augustus) had conquered Antony and Cleopatra in the Battle of Actium (31 B.C.). Thus, the Greek Empire was in Roman hands by 30 B.C. Rome was different from the powers that were before it (Daniel 7:7, 23). It was a Western power; its predecessors had been predominantly Eastern powers. Macedonia had never conquered the western Mediterranean. Moreover, Rome absorbed the philosophy and culture of the Near East to such an extent that its religion, art, literature, and philosophy were to a great extent a mixture of those found in its conquered nations. The Roman Empire was the most powerful and destructive of the four nations revealed to Daniel. It was fittingly represented as an indescribable monster with great iron teeth.

The fall and division of the Roman Empire were represented in Daniel 2 by the feet and toes partly of iron and partly of clay. In Daniel 7, the same division is symbolized by the ten horns on the head of the nondescript beast. In the 4th, 5th, and 6th centuries A.D., "barbarian" tribes from the north dismembered the Roman Empire and often settled in the territories they had taken. Thus, the medieval and modern nations of Europe emerged.

The Roman Empire had ample opportunity to know Christ and His love. Jesus was crucified by a procurator, and the Gospel spread rapidly to all parts of the empire in the first century A.D. One of the reasons for the economic collapse of Rome was her rejection of the Christian Gospel. National ruin followed national spiritual degeneration.

V. THE LITTLE HORN POWER – A GREAT PERSECUTOR

This prophecy of Daniel 7 gives special emphasis to the conflicts within the Christian Church from the sixth century A.D. to the eighteenth century. As we shall see by comparing with Daniel chapter 8, this little horn power will be the enemy of God's people down to the second coming of Jesus. Its work of intolerance and persecution in the Middle Ages was simply a foreview of its work worldwide just before the coming of Jesus. In studying the little horn of Daniel 7 and 8, and God's method of dealing with it, we are studying the great controversy between Christ and Satan, which culminates in the second advent of Jesus. At that time all those who have aligned themselves with the little horn power will be eternally lost, and all those who have followed Jesus will be eternally saved.

The Word:

7. How did Daniel describe the rise of the little horn on the head of the fourth beast? Daniel 7:8
8. What seven characteristics of the little horn power help us to identify it? Daniel 7:24-25

9. In what judgment is the little horn power condemned? Daniel 7:9-10

10. When is the little horn power finally destroyed? Daniel 7:26; 8:25

Explanation: The little horn power was to arise after the 10 divisions of the Roman Empire (Daniel 7:24). The significant power that arose in the sixth century after the dismemberment of the Roman Empire, was the medieval Papacy. It was different from the nations that divided the Roman Empire, in that it was primarily a church and only secondarily a political power. It is true that the Papal states in Italy were political territories, but the Papacy itself was primarily a religious organization. By contrast, the powers that divided the Roman Empire were secular nations.

Daniel 7:24 says that three kings (or nations) would be put down in the Papacy's rise to power. The Heruli conquered Rome in A.D. 476 and subjected the Pope to their control. The Heruli were defeated by the Ostrogoths in A.D. 493. They now took control of Italy and subjected the Bishop of Rome to their power. Meanwhile, the Vandals in North Africa were persecuting Roman Christians. In A.D. 533, Justinian, the Eastern Emperor, passed a decree that the Bishop of Rome should be the head of all the churches, both east and west. The decree could not be put into effect because the Ostrogoths were in control in Italy and the Vandals in North Africa. However, in 534, the Vandals were defeated and destroyed in North Africa, and in 538, the Ostrogoths were defeated in Italy. Both tribes eventually vanished from history. Thus, the prophecy was fulfilled. Three of the tribes that attacked the Roman Empire were wiped out, making possible the rise of the Papacy. Those tribes were the Heruli, the Vandals, and the Ostrogoths.

Daniel 7:25 provides deeper insight into the actions of the little horn, stating that it would “*speak great words against the Most High.*” In biblical terms, speaking against God is considered blasphemy—a direct challenge to His authority. The Bible defines blasphemy in several ways:

- ✓ Claiming to be God – John 10:33 records that Jesus was accused of blasphemy for claiming to be God. However, He was telling the truth—He was the divine Son of God, come in human form to redeem humanity. Anyone else who falsely claims divine authority usurps Christ’s role and is truly guilty of blasphemy.
- ✓ Claiming to Forgive Sins – Luke 5:21 describes how Jesus was accused of blasphemy for declaring someone’s sins forgiven. Yet, as God in the flesh, He had the divine right to do so. Any human or institution that claims the power to forgive sins apart from Christ commits blasphemy.

The little horn in Daniel 7 is characterized by arrogance against God, persecution of His people, and attempts to alter divine laws. Its blasphemous claims reflect a spirit of rebellion, seeking to replace God’s authority with its own.

Did the Bishop of Rome claim to have divine power and authority? Does he still make that claim? Within Roman Catholic tradition, the Bishop of Rome (the Pope) is recognized as the successor of Peter and holds a distinctive position of authority in the Church. Over time, this role evolved into what is known as papal supremacy, the belief that the Pope holds full, supreme, and universal power over the Church by divine institution.

Historical Claims to Divine Authority:

- Early Church Writings – Church Fathers like Ignatius of Antioch and Irenaeus of Lyon recognized the bishop of Rome’s primacy, linking it to Peter’s leadership.
- Medieval Developments – By the Middle Ages, the Pope was seen as Christ’s representative on Earth, with authority over both spiritual and, at times, political matters.
- Ecumenical Councils – The Council of Ephesus (431) and Council of Chalcedon (451) affirmed the Pope’s role as the first among equals, reinforcing his jurisdiction over the Church.

Does the Pope Still Make This Claim?

- Modern Catholic Doctrine – The Catholic Church maintains that the Pope, as Vicar of Christ, has supreme authority over the Church, but this is understood as spiritual leadership rather than direct divine power.
- Papal Infallibility – Defined in 1870, this doctrine states that the Pope is protected from error when proclaiming official teachings on faith and morals, but it does not mean he is divine.
- Current Practice – While the Pope is still seen as Christ’s representative, modern Catholic practice currently emphasizes servant leadership rather than absolute divine authority.

What are the claims of the Papacy in regard to forgiveness of sins?

- ✓ Sacrament of Confession – Catholics believe that priests, acting in Christ's name, can absolve sins when a person repents and confesses.
- ✓ Papal Authority – The Pope, as the Vicar of Christ, is seen as the highest earthly authority in administering Church doctrine, including forgiveness.
- ✓ God as the Ultimate Source – The Catholic Church teaches that only God forgives sins, but He does so through the priesthood, as established by Christ.

Such claims are directly contrary to the Word of God. Only Christ is the Head and Foundation of the church. Paul wrote *"For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ"* 1 Corinthians 3:11. *"And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence"* Colossians 1:18. The Apostle Peter wrote: *"Therefore it is also contained in the Scripture, 'Behold, I lay in Zion a chief corner stone, elect, precious, and he who believes on Him will by no means be put to shame'"* 1 Peter 2:6. On the means by which our sins are forgiven the Scriptures are unmistakably clear: *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"* 1 John 1:9.

Daniel 7:25 foretells that the *"little horn"* power would *"wear out the saints of the Most High."* In other words, this power would become a relentless persecutor of God's faithful people. History confirms this sobering prediction: during the Middle Ages and early modern period, millions perished under the authority of the Papacy. The horrors of the Inquisition—carried out in various countries with the sanction of the Papal Church—remain among the darkest chapters in Western civilization. Even prominent Catholic theologians defended such policies. Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1225–1274), in his *Summa Theologica*, wrote: *"With regard to heretics... they deserve not only to be separated from the Church by excommunication, but also to be severed from the world by death... Therefore... heretics, as soon as they are convicted of heresy, [ought] to be not only excommunicated but even put to death."* (*Summa Theologica*, II-II, Q.11, Art.3; *Great Books of the Western World*, vol. 20, p. 440)

In modern times, the Church has not issued a specific repudiation of historical actions such as the Inquisition or the execution of heretics. While modern popes have expressed sorrow over past abuses (e.g., John Paul II's public apologies for historical wrongs), there has been no formal doctrinal reversal or condemnation of the theological justifications once used to support those actions.

Daniel also prophesied that the little horn would *"think to change times and laws"* (Daniel 7:25). Many scholars and historians identify this as a reference to the Papacy's role in altering the biblical Sabbath. Between the second and fifth centuries, movements within the Roman Church gradually shifted observance from the seventh day (Saturday) to the first (Sunday), effectively setting aside the fourth commandment, which plainly states, *'Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy... the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God.'* See Exodus 20:8–11.

Roman Catholic catechisms openly acknowledge this change, asserting the Church's authority to do so. In the process, the Ten Commandments were also reordered: the second commandment (against graven images) was merged with the first, while the tenth was split into two to preserve the number ten. The fourth commandment was renumbered as the third, and the Sabbath was redefined as Sunday—the first day of creation and the day of Christ's resurrection.

The historical shift from seventh-day Sabbath observance to Sunday worship unfolded gradually but significantly. The New Testament portrays Jesus and His disciples observing the seventh-day Sabbath, consistent with long-standing Jewish practice. However, by the early fourth century, the influence of Rome began to steer Christian practice in a new direction. In A.D. 321, Emperor Constantine issued a civil decree declaring Sunday a legal day of rest, aligning with customs that had already begun to emerge among some Christian communities. This shift was later reinforced by ecclesiastical authority at the Council of Laodicea in A.D. 364, which discouraged Sabbath observance and promoted Sunday worship instead. Catholic sources acknowledge the Church's role in facilitating this transition, which many view as a fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy that a power would *"think to change times and laws"* (Daniel 7:25).

Other ecclesiastical laws, such as the requirement of celibacy for the priesthood, have also drawn scrutiny in light of Scripture. The Bible affirms the honor of marriage—*“Marriage is honorable in all, and the bed undefiled”* Hebrews 13:4—and explicitly allows for married church leadership: *“A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife”* 1 Timothy 3:2. These departures from biblical norms illustrate the broader pattern of human authority altering divine instruction.

The Papal Church altered the biblical doctrine of righteousness and salvation by faith alone (Romans 3:20–24; Galatians 2:16), replacing it with a system that requires both faith and human works. This shift was formally codified at the Council of Trent, which responded to the Protestant Reformation by anathematizing the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Canon 9 of the Decree on Justification states: “If anyone shall say that by faith alone the sinner is justified, so as to understand that nothing else is required to cooperate in the attainment of the grace of justification... let him be anathema.” (*The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari, par. 819) This declaration stands in direct contrast to the apostolic teaching that justification is a gift of grace, received through faith apart from works.

Moreover, in Roman Catholic teaching, there is no assurance of forgiveness or reconciliation with God. The Council of Trent explicitly rejected the idea that believers can possess certainty of salvation. It declared: “...it must not be said that sins are forgiven or have been forgiven to anyone who boasts of his confidence and certainty of the forgiveness of his sins... since no one can know with certainty of faith, which cannot be subject to error, that he has obtained the grace of God” (*Ibid.*, par. 802). This position stands in contrast to the New Testament’s assurance that believers can know they have eternal life (cf. 1 John 5:13). The result is a system in which grace is mediated through the Church and its sacraments, rather than received directly through faith in Christ.

Daniel 7:25 declares that the saints would be *“given into his hand until a time and times and the dividing of time.”* This cryptic phrase has long been understood by historicist interpreters to represent the duration of the Papacy’s ecclesiastical supremacy. Remarkably, this same prophetic period appears in six other places in Scripture: Daniel 12:7; Revelation 11:2–3; 12:6, 14; and 13:5. Though expressed in different terms—“forty-two months,” “1,260 days,” or “a time, times, and half a time”—each reference points to the same symbolic duration.

Clearly, this is not a literal three-and-a-half-year reign. The Papacy held dominant religious and political influence in Western Europe for well over a millennium. The only way this prophecy makes coherent sense is through the year-day principle, where a prophetic day represents a literal year (cf. Ezekiel 4:6; Numbers 14:34). Under this principle:

- A “time” equals one prophetic year (360 days)
- “Times” equals two years (720 days)
- “Half a time” equals 180 days

Together, they total 1,260 prophetic days, or 1,260 literal years.

According to this interpretation, the Papacy rose to ecclesiastical supremacy in A.D. 538, when Emperor Justinian’s decree took effect, recognizing the bishop of Rome as head of all churches. Exactly 1,260 years later, in 1798, Napoleon’s general Berthier entered Rome and took Pope Pius VI captive. This event symbolized the collapse of papal dominance in Western Europe, fulfilling the prophecy with striking precision.

But prophecy does not end there. Scripture teaches that this professed Christian power—while claiming to represent Christ—would in fact oppose His authority and truth. Revelation 13 portrays the same power under the symbol of a beast rising from the sea. Verse 3 states: *“And I saw one of his heads as it were wounded to death; and his deadly wound was healed: and all the world wondered after the beast.”*

The deadly wound refers to the loss of papal supremacy in 1798. Yet the prophecy foretells a healing—a global resurgence of influence. Today, we witness the Papacy regaining moral and political authority on the world stage, just as foretold.

So when will this power be finally judged and removed? Daniel is clear: at the second coming of Christ, when the eternal kingdom is established (Daniel 2:44), the dominion of the little horn will be taken away. Daniel 7:9–14 describes a heavenly judgment scene—often understood as the pre-advent, investigative judgment—where the little horn is condemned and the saints are vindicated. Daniel 8:25 adds that this power will be “*broken without hand*,” echoing Daniel 2:45, where the stone representing God’s kingdom is “*cut out without hands*.” This signifies divine, not human, intervention.

Though the Papacy presents itself as the true church of Christ, Scripture identifies it as a counterfeit system—one that will ultimately be swept away when Christ returns. At that time, all false religious systems—whether pagan or professedly Christian—will be brought to an end. Only those who faithfully follow the teachings of Scripture will have their names retained in the book of life and enter into eternal joy with Jesus (Daniel 12:1).

Will you accept Christ and all His truth as revealed in His Word? Will you commit to searching the Scriptures for His message and walk with Him until He returns to establish His everlasting kingdom?

Review Questions

1. True or False
 - a. The lion in Daniel 7 symbolizes the Persian Empire.
 - b. The little horn power arises after the division of the Roman Empire.
 - c. Daniel stated that the little horn power would rule for a literal 3½ years.
 - d. The little horn in Daniel 7 is identified as the Papacy.
2. Daniel 7 offers compelling evidence that we are living in the final moments of Earth's history. If this is true, what responsibility do we have to share God's message with others? As the heavenly judgment nears its close, the little horn power faces judgment, and God prepares to gather His faithful people. In light of this prophetic reality, how should we respond? What does it mean—practically and spiritually—to be a faithful witness at such a pivotal time?