

## Christ vs. Empire

### *The Book of Daniel*

## Jesus Above the Empires

### *Daniel 7:1 – 14*

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#### **Introduction: Secret Police**

This week we start a new series called Christ vs. Empire. And I am excited about this series but I grieve the reason for why it is absolutely necessary. We are seeing the conflict between Christ and the Empire in which we live. We are seeing an escalation in the use of military force on U.S. citizens. Let's say you are out protesting police brutality, peacefully, exercising your First Amendment rights. Then people who look like Army commandos, dressed in camouflage—who claim they are police, but without any identification on their uniform—draw their machine guns on you, put a bag on your head, and arrest you without explanation, violating your Fourth Amendment protection against illegal searches and seizures. As the Federalist Papers said: If someone can arrest you without charge, then you have no other rights.

That is what is happening and that is what will continue to happen.<sup>1</sup> Federal agents deployed by President Trump and Attorney General Bill Barr swarmed the streets of Portland, Oregon, one of the whitest cities of the nation which was surely a testing ground, and what will soon happen in Chicago and Albuquerque, which are more diverse. They confronted Black Lives Matter protesters—and is it any surprise that they are trying to portray Black Lives Matter protesters as the lawless ones? Or Democratic Governors and Mayors as the incompetent ones? These federal agents were not invited by the Governor or the Mayor, which means they broke State law. They were not trained by local law enforcement, which means they broke State law. They did not have proper identification on their uniforms, with only the word “police” on their vests, which means they broke policy. They drove in unmarked minivans they rented from Enterprise Rent-a-car. They put bags on people's heads and arrested them without explanation, took them to federal buildings without charging them, and then released them without explanation. One Navy veteran dared to peacefully demand that they identify themselves and their commanding officer; they baton-whipped him and broke his hand—an incident that was caught on video. They confronted a line of moms with flash grenades and tear gas.

#### **Relevance:**

This is what Empire looks like, from Scripture. It is when “law enforcement” is used unlawfully. It is when “law and order” becomes a gimmick phrase completely detached from “justice and peace.” And it is when the white supremacist power structure punishes those who say “Black Lives Matter,” punishes anyone like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez who said maybe crime is driven by poverty, or punishes anyone who dares hold them accountable. Empire is what began in Genesis 4 when Cain killed Abel and then built a city to defend himself even though God said, “I will protect you, Cain.” Cain made his family defend him, farm for him because he couldn't, pretend that Cain was the innocent one, that Cain was the victim, that Cain is the exceptional human being, that Cain's version of freedom is the real freedom. Empire is what happened again in Genesis 10 and 11 when human beings rebelled against God and built a high tower called Babel so maybe a few people could outlive the next flood, while everyone else who labored from the ground, will be living on the ground when and if the waters come again. Even though God said, “I will not flood the earth like that again.” Empire is what happens when the corruption of sin inside human nature becomes a corruption of sin in human relationships on a big scale.

#### **Text:**

So we are going to look at Daniel chapter 7 to understand more deeply what Empire is, and how Christ challenges the Empire. The book of Daniel is part of the Old Testament. It is one of the last books of the Bible to be written

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<sup>1</sup> Devin J. Stone, “Portland Occupied by Secret Federal “Police”?”, *Legal Eagle Real Law Review*, July 23, 2020; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uglv-fV1CqI> is a lawyer who comments on current events from a legal perspective. Ken Klippenstein, “The Federal Response to Protests Extends Far Beyond Portland,” *The Nation*, July 23, 2020; <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/cbp-deployment-harris/> talks about the possibility of federal agents being deployed in Chicago and Albuquerque, with more cities being possibly NYC, Miami, Philadelphia, San Diego, and DC.

and included as part of this library collection called the Bible. It tells the story of an Israelite man named Daniel and his three friends, at the time of the Babylonian Exile. The Babylonian Exile happened to the people of Israel in 586 BC when King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came with his armies and conquered Jerusalem and took the Jewish people captive. He deported them, forcing them to march first north and then east along the Tigris or Euphrates River until they got to the city of Babylon. Babylon's massive walls and gates towered above the people. The people of Israel were then enclosed in the Babylonian Empire. King Nebuchadnezzar, having conquered other nations and other peoples, called himself 'king of kings' (Dan 2:37). Meanwhile, Daniel and his three friends got into the University of Babylon and got promoted to become advisor to King Nebuchadnezzar. He stayed in that position for decades. He stayed on as advisor to the next King of Babylon, Belshazzar. And that's when God gave Daniel a vision of the future—a vision that was about Christ vs. Empire.

### **Daniel's Vision of the Empires: 7:1 – 8**

Use your imagination when you hear Daniel describe his vision.

<sup>7:1</sup> In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon Daniel saw a dream and visions in his mind as he lay on his bed; then he wrote the dream down and related the following summary of it. <sup>2</sup> Daniel said, 'I was looking in my vision by night, and behold, the four winds of heaven were stirring up the great sea. <sup>3</sup> And four great beasts were coming up from the sea, different from one another. <sup>4</sup> The first was like a lion and had the wings of an eagle... <sup>5</sup> And behold, another beast, a second one, resembling a bear... <sup>6</sup> After this I kept looking, and behold, another one, like a leopard, which had on its back four wings of a bird; the beast also had four heads, and dominion was given to it. <sup>7</sup> After this I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, a fourth beast, dreadful and terrifying and extremely strong; and it had large iron teeth. It devoured and crushed and trampled down the remainder with its feet; and it was different from all the beasts that were before it, and it had ten horns. <sup>8</sup> While I was contemplating the horns, behold, another horn, a little one, came up among them, and three of the first horns were pulled out by the roots before it; and behold, this horn possessed eyes like the eyes of a man and a mouth uttering great boasts.

Empires look like great beasts. Daniel explains later that he is seeing a preview of human history until the Messiah comes. The Messiah is the last king of Israel, the true king of Israel, the one who would bring God's shalom and make things right. And if you are interested, the first beast—the lion with eagle's wings—is the Babylonian Empire. The second beast—the one resembling a bear—is the Persian or Medo-Persian Empire which conquered the Babylonian Empire. The third beast—the one like a leopard with four wings—is the Greek Empire of Alexander the Great. The fourth beast—the one with iron teeth and ten horns—is the Roman Empire.

But I want to spend time with the imagery. The Empires are like animals. But they are not normal animals. They are mixtures. How did that make Daniel feel? It would have been jarring, and shocking, because it would represent a world gone mad. This is a world in rebellion against God. Daniel is Jewish. And in the Jewish story which began with the Genesis creation story, real animals did not look like this. Lions were lions. Eagles were eagles. Each multiplied after their own kind. That phrase happens over and over in Genesis 1. In Genesis 1, it's really important that there are boundaries between the animals. There were no lions with eagle's wings. There are no leopards that could fly. Why is that important? Because the military power, the police power, and the economic power of Empires are unnatural. They have crossed boundaries. An Empire is where one group of people crosses the boundary of another group of people in order to rule over them. God gave some boundaries to people when people spread out over the earth. We see mention of that in Genesis 10; Deuteronomy 32:8; Amos 9:7; and Acts 17:26–27. Because God loves all people, He provided them with space, with land, with the blessing of the creation. But in an Empire, one people conquers another people, either enslaves them or makes them second class citizens, all the while extracting wealth from them through their forced labor, or taxes that they have no say about because it's not about public investment; it's about getting wealth out of them. I want to be clear that we are not talking about friendship between groups of people, or intermarriage, or partnerships. Empires are about the systemic power one group has over others.

Now Empires don't like to see themselves this way. Empires like to see themselves as civilized and even civilizing, like "you should be glad we conquered you because we civilized you." In fact, in Daniel 2, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had a dream and a vision of the four Empires. But to him, the Empires didn't look like beasts. To him, the four Empires looked like a statue of a man—glorious and powerful—made of four precious metals. The head was made of gold, the chest and arms were made of silver, the belly and thighs were made of bronze, the legs were

made of iron, but the feet were made of clay mixed in with iron. Daniel gave the interpretation: the gold head was the Babylonian Empire and Nebuchadnezzar in particular; the silver chest and arms were the Medo-Persian Empire that comes next; the bronze belly was the Greek Empire that comes after that; the iron legs were the Roman Empire that comes after that. But Daniel said God would then set up a Jewish kingdom under the Messiah, the Hebrew word for “anointed one” meaning the true king of Israel, the last king of Israel. And you know what God will do to that statue? He’ll pull it down, and destroy it. What a moment to talk about statues being pulled down. In Daniel 2: “<sup>44</sup> In the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed, and that kingdom will not be left for another people; it will crush and put an end to all these kingdoms, but it will itself endure forever. <sup>45</sup> Inasmuch as you saw that a stone was cut out of the mountain without hands and that it crushed the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold, the great God has made known to the king what will take place in the future; so the dream is true and its interpretation is trustworthy.” That would be Jesus, the Christ, *christos* is the Greek word for “anointed one,” or “Messiah.”

So we have this conflict over how to see the Empire. The ruling class of the Empire sees itself as a beautiful statue, but God sees the Empire as a deformed animal that should not exist. That becomes a conflict between Christ and the Empires. Because the rule of Christ and the kingdom of Christ is meant to challenge the Empires. Choose you this day whom you will serve.

### **Is the United States an Empire?**

Is the United States really an Empire? Yes. I mean right now, the people of Washington, DC, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the U.S. Virgin Islands do not have a vote. They are ruled over as second-class citizens. So yes, technically the U.S. is still an empire. But we could make those four territories into full States and technically fix that problem. But there’s a deeper issue. And now we have to define white supremacy in the U.S. What is it? The idea of racial “whiteness” was developed in order to take different people of Western European ethnicities and fuse them into one group so that it was easy to enslave or stigmatize people of African or Native American ethnicities, to use their bodies or to take their land. It was to create an Empire.

Let me give you some quick facts. Let’s take the colony of Virginia as an example. In 1607, English settlers came to Virginia. By 1612, they succeeded in growing tobacco, and started a system of indentured servitude to attract more immigrants. In 1619, African people, kidnapped, were delivered in chains, and became slaves—legally “indentured for life.” In 1639, the English colonists passed the first law to exclude black people from certain normal protections by the government. In 1662, they passed a law that made the legal status of a child—free or slave—was determined by the legal status of the mother. So a free man could rape enslaved women at will. If a child resulted, that child was a slave. But if the gender roles were reversed, there was a problem. Because a free white woman in a biracial relationship would give birth to biracial children who would be free. So Virginia also put severe fines and penalties on white women engaging in relationship with non-white men. So whatever white patriarchy there was before got way worse. It gets worse. In 1667, white Virginians made a law when enslaved black or Native American people came to Christ and got baptized, they would no longer be set free. Before that, throughout Western Christianity, that was the custom. Christians recognized that if Jesus is Lord and wants to be Lord over other people, you can’t keep them in slavery. But in colonial Virginia, when black or Native American people came to Christ, the white Virginians decided either that conversion wasn’t real, and there was a theory that African or Native American people had hereditary unbelief. Or, maybe conversion was real but they were totally second-class Christians. So Virginia was a racial empire, formally, from that point. Race trumped Christian faith, completely. In 1682, Virginia passed a law saying that race would define slavery. That year, they also enacted a law which said marriage between a white person and a non-white person was punishable with six months in prison and pay a steep fine. In 1691 Virginia law declared that any white man or woman who married a non-white person would be banished from the colony forever. In 1705, they criminalized a Christian minister performing any marriage ceremony between a white person and a non-white person. The whole reason why there is now a Black Lives Matter movement and also a Native Lives Matter movement is because the word “all” in the phrase “all men are created equal, endowed by their Creator” never really meant “all.” Even Irish, Italian, Greek, and other European people didn’t count as “white” until like 1922–3.

And just like the book of Daniel chapter 2, those who benefit from the Empire see it as great and glorious and civilizing. Meanwhile, there is the perspective of Daniel chapter 7, that this is a deformed animal. There are ways that the Empire is not as evil as it could be, because (a) God always speaks to people’s consciences and (b) God’s people of every ethnicity

### **Daniel's Vision of the Emperor, the New King of Kings: 7:9 – 14**

So what does God do? Well, in the book of Daniel, Daniel is probably thinking, “Well, God brought His people out of Egypt. One day He will bring us out of the next Empire.” But that’s not actually what God says to Daniel. God saw this pattern of Empires as a bigger problem. So God’s response would not be to just rescue one people out of Empire. It was to set up a new Emperor, a new King of Kings. God’s king on earth who would come from the Jewish people will challenge every Empire. This is what Daniel sees in his vision, next.

<sup>9</sup> I kept looking  
Until thrones were set up,  
And the Ancient of Days took His seat;  
His vesture was like white snow  
And the hair of His head like pure wool.  
His throne was ablaze with flames,  
Its wheels were a burning fire.

<sup>10</sup> A river of fire was flowing  
And coming out from before Him;  
Thousands upon thousands were attending Him,  
And myriads upon myriads were standing before Him;  
The court sat,  
And the books were opened.

<sup>11</sup> Then I kept looking because of the sound of the boastful words which the horn was speaking; I kept looking until the beast was slain, and its body was destroyed and given to the burning fire. <sup>12</sup> As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but an extension of life was granted to them for an appointed period of time.

<sup>13</sup> I kept looking in the night visions,  
And behold, with the clouds of heaven  
One like a Son of Man was coming,  
And He came up to the Ancient of Days  
And was presented before Him.

<sup>14</sup> And to Him was given dominion,  
Glory and a kingdom,  
That all the peoples, nations and men of every language  
Might serve Him.  
His dominion is an everlasting dominion  
Which will not pass away;  
And His kingdom is one  
Which will not be destroyed.

So there is a heavenly courtroom, with a throne. And “one like a Son of Man was coming” up to the throne, on the clouds. Jesus called himself “the Son of Man.” And his journey on earth was a journey of him coming up to his throne. In Acts 1, after his death and resurrection, he rose up to heaven on clouds, which was the fulfillment of Daniel’s vision.

In fact, God had a second problem with the Empires, and that was the title of “King of kings.” That was a title that God, from the beginning of creation, reserved for His own Son.

### **Jesus Challenged the Empire**

Now how did Jesus read the book of Daniel? Did he see himself this way? Yes, he did. Let’s turn to Matthew 26. This is the night before the Jewish leaders and the Romans crucified Jesus. The scene is where the Jewish leaders held an illegal trial at night to make a formal accusation against Jesus:

<sup>59</sup> Now the chief priests and the whole Council kept trying to obtain false testimony against Jesus, so that they might put him to death. <sup>60</sup> They did not find any, even though many false witnesses came forward... <sup>63</sup> But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest said to him, ‘I adjure you by the living God, that you tell us whether you are the Christ, the Son of God.’ <sup>64</sup> Jesus said to him, ‘You have said it yourself; nevertheless I

tell you, hereafter you will see 'the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power,' and 'coming on the clouds of heaven.'

What passage is Jesus quoting there? Daniel 7:13 – 14. Why? Because they invoked “the living God” to get Jesus to answer whether he is the Christ, the anointed king, the Son of God. So Jesus looks the high priest straight in the eye and says not only “yes,” but “yes” using the most powerful passage he could. Yes, he is that king. Yes, he is the one God will put on the throne. But not only that, Jesus was saying, “As in the book of Daniel when the Son of Man goes from the midst of the beasts to his throne, I am going from the midst of beasts to my throne. You thought you were the good guys in Jewish prophecies just because you’re Jewish. You are part of the beastly Empire. You’re acting on behalf of the Roman Empire against God.”

<sup>65</sup> Then the high priest tore his robes and said, ‘He has blasphemed! What further need do we have of witnesses? Behold, you have now heard the blasphemy; <sup>66</sup> what do you think?’ They answered, ‘He deserves death!’ <sup>67</sup> Then they spat in his face and beat him with their fists; and others slapped him...

They’re upset! And it’s not because Jesus claimed to be God. Not in this case, though that did happen elsewhere, like in John 10. Here, Jesus made a bold statement about politics. Politics not in the sense of political parties, but politics in the sense of power in relationships.

### **Counteract the Empire: Care for the Poor and Vulnerable: 4:27**

Now if we follow Jesus, what does it mean for us? How do we counteract the Empire? Now here at Neighborhood Church of Dorchester, we have talked about the emotional side of things, mostly about how to be a community together during these hard times. But we also have to address issues systemic issues. As John Lewis said, “We want to cause good trouble.” So how do we do that?

First of all, ask other people, “Did you know that the Bible says a lot about Empire? And that Jesus came to challenge them?” See where that conversation goes. You might not know all the answers. That’s okay. But when I was in college and I first started seeing books on Empire in Scripture, I got really excited. I told a friend of mine who was exploring Buddhism at the time, and was studying political science. I asked him whether his exploration of Buddhism led him to more insights into power and human nature. He said no. I said, “I’m a Christian, and I feel like I’m just getting started!” Here’s another example: Just this past month, a friend of mine who lives in

Second, do not separate Jesus and social justice. I have seen some memes floating around saying Jesus saves us from sin and hell but not from injustice. But if Jesus saves us from sin, then he also saves us from injustice, because injustice is the result of sin. Wouldn’t it be ridiculous if we said Jesus saves people from sin, but he doesn’t care about domestic abuse? Well what’s the use of a Jesus who claims to save us from sin, but who doesn’t care about the family system?

But here’s another way to make the case. Whenever the people of Israel had to serve under foreign Empires, they cared for the poor, and they influenced the powerful to do that very thing. Joseph, Daniel, and Esther were the highest ranking Israelites whenever Israel was under the rule of the Gentile Empires. And they all cared for the poor, and told those in power to do that. And does Jesus do any less? Does the church do any less? Back in Egypt, Joseph rose to be the advisor of the Pharaoh of that time, and he turned Egypt into a version of the garden of Eden. Everyone in the Middle East came to Joseph because everywhere else was a famine. The highlight of Joseph’s accomplishment was that he cared for everyone’s children: “the little ones” of Israel (Gen 47:12) and “the little ones” of Egypt (Gen.47:24) alike. There were no children locked in cages on the border of Egypt. Then, centuries later, the people of Israel were taken captive to Babylon. Daniel rose to power and told the king to show mercy to the poor. He said to King Nebuchadnezzar:

<sup>4:27</sup> Therefore, O king, may my advice be pleasing to you: break away now from your sins by doing righteousness and from your iniquities by showing mercy to the poor...’

When Persia took over from Babylon, Esther was an Israelite who became queen of all Persia. She saved her people from a genocide. So from the Old Testament, God commissions His people to counteract Empire by doing three things: (1) caring for everyone’s children, not just your own; (2) caring for the poor and vulnerable; and (3)

stopping genocide. Ask yourself this: Does Jesus care less than Joseph about all children? Does Jesus care less than Daniel about the poor? Does Jesus care less than Esther about stopping genocide?

Third, I'd like you to discuss children, the poor, and genocide. Who are in those categories today in the U.S.? I'm going to set up some Zoom breakout rooms so you can discuss that. And

In the coming weeks, we will look more carefully at how Jesus and John the Baptist addressed the Roman Empire. They had special instructions for tax collectors, because tax collectors were part the wealth extraction class. And we will look at the United States as a system of wealth extraction, and what to do about it. We will also look at how Jesus and John the Baptist gave special instructions to soldiers, because they were the military and police class. We will look at the United States as a military state of racial control, including with our gun culture. So, we do not separate Jesus and social justice.