

Christ's Ascension

Ps. 45: 1 – 3

Ps. 110: 1, 2, 5

Ps. 24: 1, 4, 5

Ps. 2: 1 – 4

Ps. 47: 2, 3

Scripture reading: Rev. 13: 1 – 10; Daniel 7: 1 – 28

Text: Daniel 7: 13 – 18

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

The prophet Daniel sees in a vision the Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven. He sees how the Son of Man receives dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve Him. His dominion will be an everlasting dominion which shall not pass away, and His kingdom the one which shall not be destroyed – verses 13, 14.

Now, when you hear this – when you hear that the Son of Man will come on the clouds of heaven and receive everlasting dominion and glory – you will most likely think that this is a description of Christ's second coming in glory. Moreover the prophet Daniel makes clear that this event will be Judgement Day.

Is that not enough prove that that he is speaking of Christ's second coming in glory?

He will come on the clouds of heaven.

He will receive glory and dominion.

His dominion will be universal, over all nations; and eternal.

And it will be Judgment Day.

Yes, at first it may seem as if this is indeed a prophecy about Christ's second coming.

However, when we read the chapter carefully it becomes clear that this prophecy describes the history of this world, and in particular church history, from the time in which Daniel lived up to the first coming of Christ. And our text does not say that the Son of Man *descended* on the clouds of heaven, but rather that He *ascended* on the clouds of heaven to the throne of God!

It speaks of His ascension into heaven.

It was with His ascension that Christ received the glory and dominion and everlasting kingdom. And this is what Daniel 7 is about.

Daniel's prophecy, here in chapter 7, is a description of the world's history from Babylon up to the Roman Empire in the time of Christ's first coming and His ascension into heaven.

And yet you were not altogether mistaken if you saw this as a description of Christ's second coming. For this same history, from the Babylonian to the Roman Empire, is a shadow, a picture, of the last days. This becomes very clear when we read the book of Revelation.

We find a parallel description of the world and church history for example in Revelation 13, but then it refers to the last days!

Furthermore, it is indeed true that the second coming of Christ and the final Day of Judgment are indeed described in a similar way as here in Daniel 7.

So then, what do we have here in Daniel 7? First of all we have here a description of the history from the Babylonian to the Roman Empire in the time of Christ's first coming and His ascension into heaven.

At the same time this history is used by the New Testament as an image, a picture, of the last days, so that ultimately this prophecy of Daniel has two fulfilments. The first fulfilment of the prophecy has taken place already. The first fulfilment was complete when Christ ascended into heaven.

But it will also have a second and final fulfilment when Christ will return on the clouds of heaven to Judge the whole earth and to reign in the fullness of His promised glory forever.

There is then the fulfilment of this prophecy in history when Christ ascended into heaven, and at the same time we also await a second and final fulfilment at Christ's second coming.

Within this framework of two fulfilments we will now look at our text.

I proclaim to you the gospel of Christ's ascension with the theme...

The comfort and the glory of Christ's ascension

We will note...

1. The time in which the prophecy was given
2. The two fulfilments of the prophecy
3. The glorious gospel of Christ's ascension

In the first place we note...

The time in which the prophecy was given

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.

Before Judah was taken into captivity by the Babylonians the Lord said to them:

“...After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place.” – Jer. 29: 10

The prophet Isaiah also spoke about Israel's return from her Babylonian exile and gave wonderful promises of redemption. Judah and Jerusalem would be redeemed and restored.

Now, when Judah would call to memory these 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 even another destruction of Jerusalem and of the temple is still to come – Dan.9: 25, 26.

It now 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 this is the very reason why this prophecy was given to the captives in Babylon. The Lord made known to His church that there will still be four world-kingdoms and much tribulation and suffering *before* their promised King will come. With this prophecy the LORD 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.

Daniel saw the four world-empires of the Assyrians, Persians, Greeks, and lastly the Romans. As we said 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 of old for the sufferings that were still to come.

At the same time this prophecy also reassured the captives that the glorious kingdom of their Messiah is indeed coming. When they see the whole world in commotion and turmoil, with great kingdoms rising and falling, and the church being oppressed and almost destroyed, they must know that God is still in control. He is still executing His Word and His purpose. His promise will be fulfilled; His glorious and eternal kingdom is coming. Then the nations will be judged and the oppressed church will reign with their King in glory forever.

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 – of restless nations compared to a stormy sea – is very popular in Scripture.

“...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.

Multitudes of people making uproar are often compared to the roaring waves of the sea, as we read for example in the Psalms:

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

And we find some very clear explanations in the book of Revelation, for example when it says:

“...**the waters** which you saw, where the harlot sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations and tongues.” – Rev. 17: 15.

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, Daniel sees four empires arising one after the other.

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 the nations.

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 from 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 is seated 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.

This reminds us of the vision of the apostle John, in the book Revelation, where he sees God on His throne in heaven. He saw that there were 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.

We see the same here in the vision of Daniel 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 proceeded 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 may refer to the Caesars of the Roman Empire in the time of Christ's first coming, but different possibilities are mentioned by commentaries.

However, 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 Revelation.

“...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.

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 the time of 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 in Scripture, 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.

The same theme returns in the book Revelation.

Also the troublesome history of Judah when they had to rebuild Jerusalem, in the midst of much opposition, becomes a shadow of the church in the latter days.

In fact, the whole history of Israel in the Old Testament is a shadow of the church in the last days.

And so the basic theme of our text returns in the New Testament. 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 last of these rulers, the proud horn who spoke blasphemy against God “shall persecute the saints of the Most High...then the saints shall be given into his hand for a time and times and half a time.”

Some time ago we saw in Revelation chapter 12 that the three and a half years of oppression in that chapter refer to the total time of the New Testament era. But Revelation chapter 11 also tells us that *after* the three and a half years, three and a half days will follow – that short time in which the devil will be released; that short time just before Christ's return when the true church will seem to be wiped out.

So then, there are a symbolic 3 ½ years that will be followed by a symbolic 3 ½ days – a short period directly before Christ's second coming.

The parallel with Daniel 7: 25 is unmistakable, for here we read:

“He shall speak pompous words against the Most High, shall persecute the saints of the Most High, and shall intend to change times and law. Then the saints shall be given into his hand for a time and times and half a time.”

The “time and times and half a time” in Dan. 7: 25 does not refer to the symbolic 3 ½ years, but to the symbolic 3 ½ days – that short condensed time of most severe persecution and deception in which it will seem as if the church is wiped out – Revelation 11.

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.

It is now within this context that 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.

But what exactly is the connection between Christ's ascension and His second coming?

We find the connection when we look at the two fulfilments of this prophecy. We note that in the second place...

The first and the second fulfilment of the prophecy

Dear congregation, 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. And these passages do indeed refer back to the words of our text.

But, we have to note that **that** description of Christ's second coming is **rooted** in His ascension – 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”

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 before their eyes.

And that is exactly 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.

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. Christ, at His ascension, received 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 the Son of God is now described to us as the Son of Man **in His office as the Son of Man**. He is described as God in the flesh. He is described in His office as our 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? In order to represent His people!

When He ascended into heaven, we ascended. When He received dominion, we received dominion. What happened to Him, happened to us!

When Christ ascended into heaven something happened which happened never before: there is now a Man seated at the right hand of God! A man on the throne of God! A Man representing us.

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 also 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 is eternal, while the Son of God existed 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 asked the angel to interpret the vision to him, the whole vision was 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 kingdom shall be given to the saints.

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.

The connection between the two fulfilments of this prophecy is clear. Christ's second coming will be the consummation of everything that He received already at His ascension. And what we already received in Christ in principle at His ascension, we will receive in full glory at His second coming. And both events are described with "the coming of the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven". And the angels make this connection clear to the apostles when they told them:

“...This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.” – Acts 1: 11

And so we will now note in the third place...

The glorious gospel of Christ's ascension

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).

Christ's 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.

His ascension is both the start of His kingdom **and** the link to the consummation of His kingdom.

Now, if we look at Christ's ascension into heaven, as described by Daniel, we can hardly see how this event could have been described by Daniel as the moment in which **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.

Our Lord Jesus Christ did not only die on our behalf, and He did not only rise from the dead on our behalf; He also ascended into heaven **on our behalf!**

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 flowed 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 Nebuchadnezzar's image on its feet – Daniel 2. Christ dashed the kingdoms of this world 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 – at least: it will seem as if the antichrist has the complete victory and as if the true church is destroyed.

But we 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.

This 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 we experience and which still awaits us.

But someone may ask whether this kind of comfort is actually relevant for us in our day, for we do not experience severe persecution, do we? We do not find ourselves in Babylon, do we? And we do not have a difficult time laying ahead of us to rebuild Jerusalem, do we?

Well, in fact we do! That history of Israel also applies to us. This history of Israel serves as a shadow, a picture, of the church in the last days – the time in which we are living!

In this regard we have to remember that the persecution of the church and the war against the church does not come from some worldly empire – not in the first place – but as we learn also from the book of Revelation the persecution in the New Testament era proceeds most of all from the harlot, the false church. We see this also in church history. The fiercest struggles of the church have not been against heathen empires, but struggles within the church when the truth of God's Word was attacked by a false gospel and by deception.

The fiercest battles are fought there where the truth is upheld over against the lie.

And in that light we do indeed find ourselves in the midst of a spiritual war – a war in which it may sometimes seem to us as if the false church, the harlot, is having the upper hand.

This prophecy is meant for us, to comfort and to strengthen us in this warfare, which is indeed a spiritual warfare not with fleshly weapons.

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 on our behalf, to the benefit of His church.

Let us then in the midst of trials and strife lift our eyes up to heaven and see our Mediator, our priestly King, Jesus Christ, at the right hand of the Father.

Take courage and be glad, for the Son of Man is seated on the throne of God.

Amen.

