

The Kingdom of God Daniel

From John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Daniel*, trans. Thomas Myers (Edinburgh, Scotland: Calvin Translation Society, 1843), Vol. II, 33-78, emphasis added; English updated.

At the coming of Christ, God chiefly displayed His supreme power, as Paul cites a passages from the Psalms (68:8, in Ephesians 4:8): "You have ascended on high." When the subject treated is the first coming of Christ, it ought not to be restricted to the thirty-three years of His sojourn in the world, but it embraces His ascension and that preaching of the gospel which ushered in His kingdom; this will be said again more clearly and copiously.

Daniel appropriately relates how God was seated when the first advent of Christ is depicted, since the majesty of God shone in the person of Christ; for which reason He is called "The express image of God and the brightness of His glory" (Heb. 1:3); that is, of the substance or person of the Father. God, therefore, who had seemed for so many ages not to notice the world nor to care for His elect people, ascended His tribunal at the advent [coming] of Christ. To this subject the Psalms, from the 95th to the 100th, all relate—"God reigns, let the earth rejoice"; "God reigns, let the islands be afraid." In truth, God had not dwelt in complete privacy before Christ's advent; but the empire which He had erected was hidden and unseen, until He showed forth His glory in the person of His only begotten Son. *The Ancient of days, therefore, was seated* (Daniel 7:9).

Daniel 7:13 "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."

After Daniel has narrated how he saw God [the Ancient of Days] on the throne of judgment, openly exercising His power and laying open to the world what was formerly hidden from it, namely, His supreme authority in its government, he now adds the second part of the vision, *As it were the Son of man appeared in the clouds*. Without doubt this is to be understood of Christ

But the object of the vision was to enable the faithful certainly to expect the promised Redeemer in His own time. He had been endued with heavenly power, and was seated at His Father's right hand. Hence Daniel says, *He was intent on these nightly visions*. And this repetition is by no means superfluous, as it informs us of the Prophet's alertness when God shows Himself present. Daniel expresses this fully in his own words, for he roused himself when he perceived important, and rare, and singular matters set before him. This attentive disposition of the Prophet ought to stir us up to read his prophecy without listlessness, and with awakened minds earnestly to derive from heaven **true and sincere intelligence**.

I was, then, says he, attentive in visions of the night, and beheld as it were the Son of Man. I have already said this passage cannot be otherwise taken than concerning Christ. We must now see why he uses the word "like" the Son of Man

The Prophet says, *He appeared* to him as the *Son of man*, as Christ had not yet taken on Him our flesh. And we must remark that saying of Paul's: When the fullness of

time was come, God sent His Son, made of a woman (Galatians 4:4). Christ then began to be a man when He appeared on earth as Mediator, for He had not assumed the seed of Abraham before He was joined with us in brotherly union. This is the reason why the Prophet does not pronounce Christ to have been man at this period, but only like man; for otherwise He had not been that Messiah formerly promised under the Law as the son of Abraham and David. For if from the beginning He had put on human flesh, He would not have been born of these progenitors.

It follows, then, that Christ was not a man from the beginning, but only appeared so in a figure. As also Irenaeus says: This was a "prelude," he uses that word. Tertullian also says: "Then the Son of God put on a specimen of humanity." This was a symbol, therefore, of Christ's future flesh, although that flesh did not yet exist. We now see how suitably this figure agrees with the thing signified, in which Christ was set forth as the Son of Man, although He was then the eternal Word of God.

It afterwards follows, *He came to the Ancient of Days. This, in my judgment, ought to be explained of Christ's ascension; for He then commenced His reign [as King], as we see in numberless passages of Scripture.* Nor is this passage contrary to what the Prophet had previously said—he saw the Son of man in the clouds. For by this expression he simply wishes to teach how Christ, although like a man, yet differed from the whole human race, and was not of the common order of men; but excelled the whole world in dignity.

He expresses much more when he says, in the second clause, *He came even to the Ancient of Days.* For although the Divine Majesty lay hid in Christ, yet He discharged the duty of a slave, and emptied Himself, as Paul says (Philippians 2:7). So also we read in the first chapter of John (John 1:14), Glory appeared in Him as of the only begotten Son of God; that is, which belongs to the only begotten Son of God. Christ, therefore, thus put off His glory for the time, and yet by His miracles and many other proofs afforded a clear and evident specimen of His celestial glory. He really appeared to Daniel in the clouds, but when He ascended to heaven, He then put off this mortal body, and put on a new life.

Thus Paul also, in the sixth chapter to the Romans, says, He lives the life of God, (Romans 6:10); and other phrases often used by our Lord Himself agree very well with this, especially in the Evangelist John, "I go to the Father." "It is expedient for me to go to the Father, for the Father is greater than I" (John 16:7; John 14:28); that is, it is expedient for Me to ascend to that royal tribunal which the Father has erected for Me by His eternal counsel, and thus the whole world will feel the supreme power to have been entrusted to Me. Now, therefore, we understand the full meaning of the Prophet's words. . . .

He now arrives at the Ancient of days, that is, when He ascends to heaven, because His divine majesty was then revealed. And hence He says, It is expedient for you, for Me to go to the Father, because the Father is greater than I (John 14:28). Christ here detracts nothing from His deity, but as His nature was not known in the world, while His divine majesty lay hid in the form of a servant, He calls the Father simply God; as if He had said, If I remain with you upon earth, what would the presence of My flesh profit you? But when I ascend to heaven, then that oneness which I have with the Father will become conspicuous. When, therefore, the world shall understand that I am one with the Father, and that the Deity is one, the hope of all the pious will become more firm and unconquered against all temptations; for they will know themselves to be equally under the protection of both God and man.

If, therefore, Christ were always dwelling upon earth, and had borne witness a thousand times to His being given to us by His Father as the guardian of our salvation, yet there always would have been some hesitation and anxiety. But when we know Him to be seated at His Father's right hand, we then understand Him to be truly God, because all knees would not be bent before Him, unless He had been the eternal God.

We must hold that passage of Isaiah (Isaiah 42:8), As I live, says the Lord, my glory I will not give to another. As, therefore, God's glory can never be transferred to either man or any other creature, the true unity and nature of God necessarily shines forth in the human nature of Christ, for every knee is bent before Him. Now, therefore, we understand the sense in which the Prophet says, Christ *came as the Son of Man*, that is, like a man, *even to the Ancient of days*.

For after Christ had passed through the period of His self-abasement, according to Paul, (Philippians 2:7), He ascended into heaven, and a dominion was bestowed upon Him, as the Prophet says in the next verse. This passage, then, without the slightest doubt, ought to be received of Christ's ascension, after He had ceased being mortal man. He says, *He was represented before God*, namely, because He sits at His right hand.

Daniel 7:21-22 "I beheld, and the same horn was making war against the saints, and prevailing against them, until the Ancient of Days came, and judgment was given to the saints of the Most High; and the time came for the saints to possess the kingdom."

. . . Why, therefore, does the Prophet say—*the little horn waged war with the saints*? Antiochus certainly made war against the Church, and so did many others; the Egyptians, we know, often broke in and spoiled the Temple and the Romans too, before the monarchy of the Caesars. I reply, this is spoken comparatively, because no war was ever carried on so continuously and professedly against the Church, as those which occurred after the Caesars [of the Roman Empire] arose, and after Christ was made manifest to the world; for the devil was then more enraged, and God also relaxed the reins to prove the patience of His people. Lastly, it was natural for the bitterest conflicts to occur when the redemption of the world was carried out; and the event clearly showed this.

We know first of all, by horrid examples, how Judea was laid waste, for never was such cruelty practiced against any other people. Nor was the calamity of short duration; we are well acquainted with their extreme obstinacy, which compelled their enemies to forget clemency altogether. For the Romans desired to spare them as far as possible, but so great was their obstinacy and the madness of their rage, that they provoked their enemies as if devoting themselves to destruction, until that dreadful slaughter happened, of which history has sufficiently informed us. When Titus, under the auspices of his father Vespasian, took and destroyed the city, the Jews were stabbed and slaughtered like cattle throughout the whole extent of Asia. Thus far, then, it concerns the Jews.

When God had inserted the body of the Gentiles into His Church, the cruelty of the Caesars embraced all Christians; thus the little horn waged war with the saints in a manner different from that of the former beasts, because the occasion was different, and the wrath of Satan was excited against all God's children on account of the manifestation of Christ. This, then, is the best explanation of *the little horn waging war against the saints*. Thus he says, *It must prevail*. For the Caesars and all who governed the provinces of the [Roman] empire raged with such extreme violence against the Church, that it almost disappeared from the face of the earth. And thus it happened, that the little

horn prevailed in appearance and in general opinion, as, for a short time, the safety of the Church was almost despaired of.

It now follows, *Until the Ancient of Days came, judgment was given to the saints of the lofty ones*. No doubt the Prophet says God came in the same sense as before; namely, when He erected His tribunal and openly appeared as the judge of the world in the person of Christ. He does not here set before us the Son of Man, as he did before, but yet a fuller explanation of this passage is to be sought in the former one.

God then is said *to have come*, when he put forth His power in supplying the needs of the Church, as by common figure He is said to be at a distance from us, and to sleep or to be reposing, when He does not show Himself openly as our deliverer. So, on the other hand, He is said to come to us, when He openly proves His constant care of us. Under this figure Daniel now says he beheld the appearance of God Himself. *The Ancient of Days then came*.

If we ask when, we have the reply at hand; **it was immediately after the promulgation of the gospel**. Then God stretched forth His hand for His Church, and lifted it out of the abyss. For since the Jewish name had been for a long time hated, and all people desired to exterminate the Jews from the world, Christ's advent increased this hatred and cruelty; and the license to injure them was added, as they thought Christ's disciples were plotting a change of government, and wished to overthrow the existing state of things; as in these days all the pious suffer grievously under this false imputation.

God, therefore, is said to have come, where the doctrine of the gospel was more and more promulgated, and some rest granted to the Church. Thus, by this repose, *the saints received the kingdom* which had been taken from them; that is, **the kingdom of God and of the saints obtained some fame and celebrity in the world, through the general diffusion of the doctrine of piety, in every direction**. Now, therefore, we understand what Daniel wished to convey by the phrase, *The Ancient of Days came, and judgment was given to the saints of the lofty ones*. The remainder tomorrow.

PRAYER

Grant, Almighty God, since You prove our faith and constancy by many trials, as it is our duty in this respect and in all others, to submit to Your will: Grant, I pray, that we may not give way to the many attacks by which we are tossed about. For we are assailed on all sides by Satan and all the impious, and while their fury is ever burning and raging cruelly against us, may we never yield to it. May we proceed in our warfare, in reliance on the unconquered might of the Spirit, even though impious men prevail for a season. May we look forward to the coming of Your only-begotten Son, not only when He shall appear at the last day, but also whenever it shall please You for Him to assist Your Church, and to raise it out of its miserable afflictions. And even if we must endure our distresses, may our courage never fail us, until at length we are gathered into that holy rest, which has been obtained for us through the blood of the same, Your only-begotten Son—Amen.

We, yesterday began to explain how *judgment was given to the saints* at the commencement of the gospel era. For we know how very partial even in those times was the Church's tranquility. Because when it was free from external persecution and the shedding of blood, domestic enemies arose who proved far more injurious. Thus the kingdom of Christ never flourished in the world, so as to have anything in common with those empires, in which great splendor and pomp were apparent. But God wished to propose this solace to His Prophet, by showing him the future reputation of the Church

and its elevation to some degree of honor after emerging from obscurity, so that the elect dared openly to give homage to Christ, and to profess true and sincere piety. Hence by judgment being given to the saints, the Prophet means the restoration of the right of which they had been deprived, and their obtaining the kingdom at the same time, as the Church no longer lay prostrate as before the advent of Christ. For the promulgation of the gospel was at length free, as we shall immediately see.

Daniel 7:27 "Then the kingdom and dominion, And the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven, Shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High. His kingdom *is* an everlasting kingdom, And all dominions shall serve and obey Him."

This verse assures us how these predictions concerning the destruction of the beast regard the Church's safety. Thus the faithful might know themselves noticed by God, and how the changes which successively happened tended to the same end, the acknowledgment on the part of the pious of their continuance under the care and guardianship of God. For any discussion of the four monarchies would have been cold and useless, unless there had been added God's peculiar care of His own Church, and His conducting the affairs of the world for the safety of His people. As we have said in other places, God's elect people are of more consequence than all the kingdoms which are conspicuous in the world (Isaiah 43:3).

This, then, is the sense of the words. If we separate this verse from its context, the prophecy will still have its use. We may elicit from it how all things which seem stable in the world are yet perishable, and nothing is so firm as not to be subject every moment to constant variation. But the chief intention of this prediction is, as I have said, to show the relation of all events to the safety of the pious. When, therefore, all things seem carried away by the blind impulse of chance, we ought always to contemplate God as watching for His Church, and tempering all storms and all commotion to the service and safety of the pious, who rest upon His Providence.

Most refer these prophecies to Christ's Second Coming. Calvin differs and explains the correct interpretation. The kingdom is already but not yet. It began with the preaching of the Gospel when Christ ascended into heaven and was seated at God's right hand as the King of kings and Lord of lords. He is reigning now over His church and kingdom. The full manifestation of God's kingdom awaits His second coming.

These two things, then, are mutually in accordance, namely, *the slaying of the fourth beast, and the giving of the kingdom and authority to the people of the saints*. This does not seem to have been accomplished yet; and hence many, no, almost all, except the Jews, have treated this prophecy as relating to the final day of Christ's second coming. All Christian interpreters agree in this; but, as I have shown before, they pervert the Prophet's intention. . . .

We know how magnificently the prophets speak of Christ's kingdom, and adore His dignity and glory with splendid eulogies; and although these are not exaggerated, yet if judged of by human perceptions, you would surely think them exceedingly extravagant, and find neither solidity nor firmness in their words. And no wonder: for Christ's kingdom and His dignity cannot be perceived by carnal eyes, nor even comprehended by the human intellect. Let those who appear the most sagacious of men combine together all their clear-sightedness, yet they can never ascend to the height of Christ's kingdom, which surpasses the very heavens. Nothing is more contrary to our natural judgment than to seek life in death, riches in poverty and want, glory in shame and disgrace—to

be wanderers in this world, and at the same time its heirs! Our minds cannot naturally comprehend these things. No wonder, then, if mortals judge erroneously of Christ's kingdom, and are blind in the midst of light.

Still there is no defect in the Prophet's expressions, for they depict for us the visible image of Christ's kingdom, and accommodate themselves to our dullness. They enable us to perceive the analogy between things earthly and visible, and **that spiritual blessedness which Christ has afforded to us, and which we now possess through hope in Him.** For while we only hope, our happiness is concealed from us; it is not perceptible by our eyes or by any of our senses. Let us now return to the passage.

Daniel first of all says, *A kingdom, and power, and extensive dominion, shall be given to the people of the holy ones.* **This was partially fulfilled when the Gospel emerged from persecution: then the name of Christ was everywhere celebrated and held in honor and esteem, while previously it had been the subject of the greatest envy and hatred.** For nothing had been more hated and detested for many years than the name of Christ. **God, therefore, then gave the kingdom to His people,** when He was acknowledged as the Redeemer of the world throughout its many changes, after having been formerly despised and utterly rejected.

I may here remark again, and impress upon the memory what I have frequently touched upon, namely, the custom of the Prophets, in treating of Christ's kingdom, to extend their meaning further than its first beginnings; and they do this while they dwell upon its commencement. Thus **Daniel or the angel does not predict here occurrences connected with the advent of Christ as Judge of the world [Christ's second coming], but with the first preaching and promulgation of the Gospel, and the celebration of the name of Christ.**

But this does not prevent him from drawing a magnificent picture of Christ's reign, and embracing its final completion [at Christ's second coming]. It is sufficient for us to perceive how **God begins to give the kingdom to His elect people, when, by the power of His Spirit, the doctrine of the holy Gospel was everywhere received in the world.** The sudden change which it occasioned was incredible, but this is a customary result; for, when anything is predicted, we think it a fable and a dream, and when God performs what we never would have thought of, the events appear to us trifling, and we treat it as of no importance.

For example, when the preaching of the Gospel commenced, no one would have thought its success could have been so great and so prosperous; no, two hundred years before Christ was manifest, when religion was almost blotted out, and the Jews were execrated by the whole world, who would have thought the Law would spring from Zion? Yet God erected His scepter there. The dignity of the kingdom had vanished; the offspring of David was extinct. For the family of Jesse was but a trunk, after the simile used by the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 11:1). If anyone had asked all the Jews one after another, no one would have believed the possibility of those events which accompanied the preaching of the Gospel; but, at length the dignity and virtue of the kingdom of David shone forth in Christ. Yet it vanishes before our eyes, and we seek new miracles, as if God had not sufficiently proved Himself to have spoken by His prophets! Thus we observe how the Prophet keeps within bounds when he says, *A kingdom, and a power, and a magnitude of empire was given to the people of the saints.*

Christ's Kingdom is in the world but not of the world; it is not of the same nature as this world's kingdoms.

He adds, *one empire under the whole heavens*. . . . We know the reign of God and of Christ, although existing in the world, not to be of it (John 18:36); the meaning of the two expressions is exactly the opposite. God, therefore, still exercises His heavenly reign in the world, because He dwells in the hearts of His people by His Spirit. While God held His seat at Jerusalem, was His kingdom merely an earthly and corruptible one? By no means, for by the possession of an earthly habitation He did not cease to be in heaven also.

Daniel's prophecies have been largely fulfilled already. At Christ's ascension, He was seated as King of His kingdom.

Thus the angel instructed the Prophet concerning the saints who are pilgrims in the world, and yet shall enjoy the kingdom and possess the greatest power under heaven. Hence also we correctly conclude, that **this vision ought not to be explained of the final advent [second coming] of Christ, but of the intermediate state of the Church. The saints began to reign under heaven, when Christ ushered in His kingdom by the promulgation of His Gospel.**

Another point must be noticed—what belongs to the head is transferred to the body. There is nothing new in this, as the supreme power is constantly promised by the Prophets to the Church, especially by Isaiah, who often predicts its complete supremacy.

The Papists seize upon such testimonies to clothe themselves in the spoils of God, as if God had resigned His right to them! But they are immersed in the same error with the Jews, who swell with pride whenever such dignity is promised to the elect people, as if they could remain separate from God and yet obtain the right of treading the whole world under foot. The Papists also do exactly the same.

We, however, must be guided by a very different rule, namely, in consequence of the intimate union between Christ and His Church, the peculiar attribute of Christ Himself is often transferred to His body. Not that the Church reigns by itself; but Christ, as its only supreme head, obtains dominion in it, and not for His own private advantage—for what need has He of this dominion? but for the common safety of all its members.

Wherefore **Christ is our King, and He designs to erect His throne in the midst of us;** He uses nothing for His own advantage, but communicates all things to us, and renders them useful to us; hence, we are deservedly called kings, because He reigns, and as I have already said, language which is exclusively appropriate to Him, is transferred to us in consequence of the intimate communion existing between the head and the members.

This is also the sense of the phrase here added by the Prophet, *All powers shall serve and obey it*. I have no doubt the angel here confirmed Isaiah's prophecy, as the Holy Spirit, the better to confirm and strengthen the faith of the pious, often reconciles one Prophet with another, and thus their mutual agreement becomes the seal of their truth. It is said in Isaiah, The kingdom and the land which will not serve You, shall be destroyed. Kings shall come and adore You, the people shall offer you gifts (Isaiah 60:12). In the Psalms, it is said, "Kings shall assemble together, to serve God" (Psalm 102:22).

And Isaiah treats very fully on the empire of the Church. The angel now repeats the same thing, to add, as I have said, greater confidence and authority to the prophecy of Isaiah. Meanwhile, we observe how completely all the Prophets agree, and at the same

time we interpret these words of **the kingdom of Christ, from the period at which the teaching of the gospel was rendered remarkably conspicuous**; for then God's royal scepter went forth from Jerusalem, and shone far and wide, while the Lord was extending His hand and His authority over all the regions of the world.

As all these important events tended to the common salvation of the Church, it is said, *The kingdom shall belong to the holy people*. As to the phrase, *The saints of the high ones*, I have already explained why the Prophet applies this phrase to the faithful, and why the angel also does the same; namely, because **God separated them from the world, and they were always looking upwards and drawing all their hopes from above**.

From what the Prophet Daniel stated before about the Son of Man, his subject is evidently changed in this verse. He stated there, power was given to the Son of Man after He had arrived at the Ancient of Days, and the Son of Man, or at least His likeness, appeared in the clouds. First of all, we must notice this likeness, as it were the Son of Man, as we have already explained the vision. Surely Abraham's posterity were really men, but the vision offered to the Prophet was but a similitude; as Christ had not yet put on our flesh, this was only a prelude to His future manifestation in the flesh. Here he speaks openly and without a figure of *the people of the saints*, and this prophecy depends upon the former one.

Christ's kingdom is now.

For unless Christ were seated at His Father's right hand, and had obtained supreme dominion, causing every knee to bend before Him, the Church could never exercise its power. Thus we observe how all things mutually agree among each other.