

The Everlasting Kingdom

Daniel 7:1–28

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Archaeological Moment: The World Between the Testaments

When you watch the news or scroll your phone these days, it can feel like the world is being run by beasts, not by human beings. Nations rise and fall, leaders grasp for power, and ordinary people get crushed in the middle. And if we are honest, sometimes we look at all of that and quietly wonder: where is God in the middle of history? Is He really in control, or are we just at the mercy of whatever empire happens to be in charge?

The Bible answers that question — not with vague comfort, but with a very specific claim: history is not random. God is not reacting to events; He is ruling over them. He is so sovereign that He can tell us in advance what kingdoms will rise, how they will act, and how they will fall — and then show us that every human kingdom, no matter how powerful, is temporary. Only His kingdom lasts.

In our study of the intertestamental period, I have generally followed the pattern of looking first at prophecy and then at how history fulfilled it. Today I am going to reverse that order. We will start with the history and then turn to the prophecy that foretold and interpreted it.

Thus far in our study, we have made it down to 164 BC. The Old Testament closes roughly around 430–400 BC. The New Testament opens with the birth of Jesus around 4 or 5 BC, and His death and resurrection in AD 33. Along the way, we have looked at the fall of Babylon in 538 BC, the slow decline of Persia leading to Alexander the Great around 330 BC, and after Alexander, the rise of four Greek successor kingdoms — two of them fighting for control of Jerusalem and Judah over the next century. That struggle culminated in the reign of the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who sought to destroy the Jewish faith in 167 BC by desecrating the temple. The Jewish revolt that followed — led by a family known as the Maccabees — resulted in the recapture and rededication of the temple in 164 BC, an event the Jewish community still celebrates today as Hanukkah.

This is where our story begins today. Before we go further, let me define three terms that will appear throughout this morning's study.

The first is *Hellenization* — the cultural process of adopting Greek ways of life. Think of it the way we talk about Westernization or Americanization today.

The second is *Maccabees*, which means roughly “the Sledgehammerers” — the name given to the Jewish rebels who fought against Greek cultural pressure and political domination. Something like “the Sons of Liberty” during the American Revolution.

The third is *Hasmonean* — the family name of the Jewish dynasty that will rule the land of Israel from approximately 140 BC to 36 BC.

The Hasmonean Dynasty: From Hammers to Tyrants

The story of the Maccabees begins in response to Hellenization. When Antiochus IV forced Greek customs upon the Jewish people, a rebellion arose under an old priest named Mattathias and his sons, who waged a guerrilla campaign against both the Greek rulers and the Hellenized Jews who had accommodated them. It was simultaneously a cultural battle and a political one.

After Mattathias died, his son Judas led the revolt from 167 to 160 BC. Then another son, Jonathan, carried it from 160 to 143 BC. It was under a third son, Simon, that something remarkable happened. The Greeks, worn down by years of fighting, finally relented. They stepped back and said, in effect: the land is yours; rule it. Under Simon, the Jewish people were self-governing for the first time in four hundred years. Out of gratitude, the people chose him to serve as both ruler and High Priest. This was the founding of the Hasmonean dynasty.

Simon died in 134 BC, and his son John Hyrcanus I took the throne. Here the story begins to change. The original Maccabean goal had been the purification of Israel — a restored Jerusalem, a cleansed temple, a faithful people. Under John Hyrcanus, the ambition shifted. He wanted an empire. He pushed north, nearly to the Sea of Galilee, and south through all of Idumea, and he required the peoples he conquered to convert to Judaism if they wished to remain in the land. It was also during his reign that a significant group of devout Jews broke with him publicly. They were called the Pharisees — Jews devoted to the Torah who objected to Hellenizing tendencies and who saw Hyrcanus’ assumption of both the kingship and the high priesthood as a violation of the law, since the Hasmoneans were not of the proper priestly lineage. In their eyes, he was beginning to rule and live like the very Greek kings they had just overthrown.

When John Hyrcanus died, he stipulated that his wife should rule after him. His oldest son, Aristobulus I, had other ideas. He imprisoned his mother, where she would starve to death, killed one of his brothers, and jailed the rest. He ruled for only a single year, from 104 to 103 BC. When he died, his wife released the surviving brothers and married the eldest, who became king.

Alexander Jannaeus — note the very Greek name — ruled from 103 to 76 BC and extended Hasmonean territory to a size exceeding even the kingdom of David, perhaps surpassing

Solomon's, and larger than the modern state of Israel. He despised the Pharisees, and that hatred sparked a brief civil war in which fifty thousand Jews were killed. He had eight hundred Pharisees crucified in Jerusalem and, while they hung dying on their crosses, slaughtered their wives and children before their eyes.

When Jannaeus died, his wife Salome Alexandra took the throne, and her reign from 76 to 67 BC is remembered as the golden age of the Hasmonean kingdom. She made peace with the Pharisees by establishing a ruling council — the Sanhedrin — in which they held real authority. She appointed her eldest son, Hyrcanus II, as High Priest and positioned him to succeed her as king.

When Salome died, the younger son refused to accept his brother's succession, and another civil war erupted. Hyrcanus II surrendered and stepped aside for Aristobulus II, who became king and High Priest from 66 to 63 BC. But then an Idumean political operative named Antipater convinced Hyrcanus to take up arms again — “The kingdom is rightfully yours.” Thousands died. Both brothers eventually appealed to Rome for resolution, and in 63 BC, the Roman general Pompey happened to be encamped at Damascus. Both Hyrcanus and Aristobulus appeared before him to plead their case. A third group also arrived — a delegation of Pharisees asking Pompey to be rid of both brothers entirely. *We are done with the Hasmoneans. Take them away.* Pompey reinstated Hyrcanus as High Priest and client ruler, Aristobulus resisted, Pompey marched on Jerusalem, and Aristobulus was captured and taken to Rome, where he eventually died.

Hyrcanus II served once more as High Priest and client king under Roman authority from 63 to 40 BC, with Antipater the Idumean installed by Pompey as a kind of prime minister — Rome's man on the ground to ensure the taxes were collected.

Then Aristobulus' son, Antigonus II Mattathias, made one final play. He went to the Parthians — Rome's great eastern rival — and offered them an alliance: *You hate the Romans, I hate the Romans; let's go fight them together.* With a Parthian army, he invaded and captured Jerusalem. When his uncle Hyrcanus was brought before him, Antigonus deliberately bit off his uncle's ears, disqualifying him from the high priesthood by disfigurement, then sent him into exile in Babylon.

When Antigonus and the Parthians invaded, the pro-Roman Antipater fled to Rome with his family — including a son named Herod. Herod the Idumean stood before the Roman Senate and made his case: *Give me the title “King of the Jews” and I will drive the anti-Roman forces out of Jerusalem for you.* The Senate agreed. With the support of Marc Antony, Herod returned to Judea, besieged Jerusalem, and took it. He found Antigonus II and had him crucified.

Herod then sent word to John Hyrcanus II, aging in Babylonian exile: *It is safe to return. I love you. Come home and I will honor you.* The Jewish community in Babylon warned Hyrcanus it was a trap. He did not listen. He returned, and Herod had him killed.

One Hasmonean prince remained — Aristobulus III, grandson to both of the brothers who had torn the kingdom apart. He was 17 years old, pure Hasmonean by blood, and the people adored him. His mother Alexandra negotiated a remarkable arrangement with Herod — partly with pressure from Marc Antony and Cleopatra — that if Herod married her daughter Mariamne, a Hasmonean princess, he would install young Aristobulus as High Priest. Herod agreed, calculating that a 17-year-old could be managed. What he could not manage was how much the people loved the boy. That love became a death sentence. Herod had Aristobulus III killed in 36 BC, and with him, the Hasmonean line came to an end.

In the span of a single century, this dynasty had produced ten rulers. Herod, in consolidating his power, had put down the last three of them. The hammers of God's people had become the tyrants of God's people.

The Prophecy That Interprets This History

The year is 36 BC. Herod is king. Now let us turn to the prophetic word — not just to see how prophecy was fulfilled, but to see how prophecy *interprets* this period of history.

There are two key prophecies in the book of Daniel that illuminate the Hasmonean dynasty. The first is in Daniel 2, where the prophet interprets Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the great statue. In that dream, the king sees a towering image: its head is gold, its chest and arms silver, its midsection and thighs bronze, its legs iron, and its feet a mixture of iron and clay. A stone cut without human hands strikes the statue and shatters it, then grows into a great mountain filling the whole earth. Daniel interprets the head of gold as Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon. The other metals represent successive kingdoms, and the stone uncut by human hands is the kingdom of God, which shall never be destroyed.

In our study we have already traced our way through the head of gold — Babylon, 606 to 538 BC — and the chest and arms of silver, which is Persia and its slow decline from 536 to 330 BC, and the midsection and thighs of bronze — Greece, Alexander and the four kingdoms that succeeded him.

But what about the legs of iron and the feet of iron and clay? If this statue represents the successive powers that controlled the land of Judah and Jerusalem, then the iron corresponds to the Jewish Hasmonean kingdom — strong, aggressive, iron-toothed — and the feet of iron mixed with clay correspond to Herod and the Herodian dynasty: an Idumean king ruling Jewish subjects under Roman authority. Iron and clay, pressed together but never truly bonding.

That fits. And it fits with something else: the stone uncut by human hands arrives precisely at this moment. The birth of Jesus — whether one places it at 4 or 5 BC or the traditional 1 BC — falls squarely in the reign of Herod the Great.

If this reading of Daniel 2 is correct, it opens up an important interpretation of Daniel 7. Let us turn there now.

Daniel 7: Beasts, the Ancient of Days, and the Son of Man

“And four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another. The first was like a lion and had eagles’ wings. Then as I looked its wings were plucked off, and it was lifted up from the ground and made to stand on two feet like a man, and the mind of a man was given to it.” (Daniel 7:3–4)

This is Babylon, and it corresponds to Daniel 4, where Nebuchadnezzar himself becomes like an animal before being restored to human reason. This is the gold of the statue in animal form.

“And behold, another beast, a second one, like a bear. It was raised up on one side. It had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth; and it was told, ‘Arise, devour much flesh.’” (Daniel 7:5)

Persia follows Babylon. The three ribs in its teeth are the kingdoms it has consumed on its way to dominance. This is the silver.

“After this I looked, and behold, another, like a leopard, with four wings of a bird on its back. And the beast had four heads, and dominion was given to it.” (Daniel 7:6)

This is Greece — the speed of Alexander’s conquest captured in the image of a leopard with wings, and the four heads are the four kingdoms that arose out of his empire after his death. This is the bronze.

And now we arrive at the iron.

“After this I saw in the night visions, and behold, a fourth beast, terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong. It had great iron teeth; it devoured and broke in pieces and stamped what was left with its feet. It was different from all the beasts that were before it, and it had ten horns. I considered the horns, and behold, there came up among them another horn, a little one, before which three of the first horns were plucked up by the roots. And behold, in this horn were eyes like the eyes of a man, and a mouth speaking great things.” (Daniel 7:7–8)

Now, the standard interpretation of this fourth beast is that it represents Rome. I want to respectfully disagree with that reading, because it does not fit Rome nearly as well as it fits the Hasmoneans. Consider the internal evidence. When verse 23 says this kingdom “shall devour the whole earth,” the Hebrew word is *aretz* — land, not world. The whole *aretz* is the whole promised land, and yes, the Hasmoneans do conquer and control the whole *aretz*. The description of iron teeth, of devouring and stamping and breaking, is a fitting portrait of the Maccabees — the Sledgehammerers. There were ten Hasmonean rulers in all, which corresponds to the ten horns. And the “little horn” that arises and puts down three of them corresponds precisely to Herod, who destroyed the last three Hasmonean rulers — Antigonus II, John Hyrcanus II, and Aristobulus III — in consolidating his power.

If the fourth beast is the Hasmonean kingdom, the prophetic timeline fits naturally with our historical survey, and it gives us something more than chronology: it gives us a theological interpretation of what the Hasmoneans actually were.

The Beast That Wore the Face of God’s People

Daniel is told that this fourth beast is “different from all the beasts that were before it.” What made it different? Not its brutality — all the beasts were brutal. What made the Hasmonean kingdom uniquely terrifying is that *this beast wore the face of God’s people*.

Babylon, Persia, and Greece were openly pagan. No one was confused about what they were. But this beast claimed to be fighting for Yahweh while acting like Satan. The Maccabees began as heroes of faith — and within one generation, their descendants had become the very thing they fought against.

They began by purifying the temple but ended by defiling the high priesthood itself, installing non-Zadokite priests for political gain. They began by resisting Hellenistic corruption but ended by embracing Greek culture — building gymnasia, adopting Greek names, living as Greek tyrants. They began by defending religious freedom but ended by forcing conversions at swordpoint. They began as brothers fighting side by side but ended with brother murdering brother.

The Maccabean rebellion began with the cry, *For the Torah! For the temple! For Yahweh!* It ended with Jews standing before a pagan Roman general, pleading: *Please, come take these men away from us. We don't want them anymore.*

This is the horror of internal corruption. This is why Daniel says his spirit was troubled and the visions alarmed him. Not merely that a kingdom would be brutal — but that God's own people would build a kingdom that looked righteous on the outside while rotting from within.

And this leads us to a deep theological truth that the Hasmoneans illustrate with painful clarity: kingdoms made by human hands always fail.

The Hasmoneans had everything a human kingdom could ask for. They had the right ancestry — descendants of priests. They had the right cause — defending the faith. They had the right victories — God gave them military success against overwhelming odds. They claimed religious legitimacy, covenant faithfulness, and national restoration. On the surface, it all looked very spiritual. But underneath, it was built on the same foundation as every other human kingdom: pride, power, and self-preservation.

Human kingdoms, no matter how noble their beginning, no matter how religious their claims, no matter how impressive their victories, will always come to an end.

But There Is a Kingdom Not Made by Human Hands

And then the vision shifts.

Picture the imagery — and the stunning contrast. For six chapters we have watched empires rise and fall. For seven verses we have seen beast after beast: devouring, destroying, trampling, breaking. A lion with wings, a bear with ribs in its teeth, a four-headed leopard, and finally this terrifying iron-toothed monster. Each beast more violent than the last. Each kingdom more corrupt than the one before. And now we are watching the final horn speak arrogant words against God Himself.

We brace ourselves. What comes next? What final beast will God send to defeat this one? What greater power will crush this corrupted kingdom?

But then — verse 13:

“I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him 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 one that shall not be destroyed.” (Daniel 7:13–14)

Not another beast. Not a greater monster. Not a more powerful empire. A person. A human being. One like us.

Do you see what God is doing? The Kingdom of Heaven comes not as another beast, but as a Son of Man. Not through domination, but through incarnation. Not through the brutality of iron teeth, but through the humility of human flesh. And to this Son of Man is freely given everything the beasts tried to seize through violence — dominion, glory, a kingdom, the worship of all peoples, nations, and languages. An everlasting dominion. A kingdom that shall not be destroyed.

Everything the beasts grasped at through bloodshed is simply *given* to the Son of Man by the Ancient of Days.

“I Am”

When Jesus stood trial before the Sanhedrin — the ruling council composed of Pharisees, Sadducees, and the chief priests — they asked Him directly: *Are you this Son of Man?* These were people who knew their Scriptures. They knew Daniel. They understood the weight of the question. And Jesus did not hedge. He did not speak in parables. He did not leave room for misunderstanding.

“And Jesus said, ‘I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.’ And the high priest tore his garments and said, ‘What further witnesses do we need? You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?’ And they all condemned him as deserving death. And some began to spit on him and to cover his face and to strike him, saying to him, ‘Prophesy!’ And the guards received him with blows.” (Mark 14:62–65)

Let us be clear about what just happened. Jesus claimed to be the fulfillment of Daniel 7. He claimed to be the Son of Man to whom all authority is given. He claimed that He is the one before whom every knee will bow. The Sanhedrin understood exactly what He was saying — this was not a misunderstanding, not a failure of communication. For six hundred years their

people had been waiting for this prophecy to be fulfilled. They knew who the Son of Man was supposed to be.

And here stood this carpenter from Nazareth — beaten, bloodied, bound with ropes — claiming to be Him.

And they condemned Him to death.

But here is the great reversal, the cosmic irony that Daniel’s vision contains: the Son of Man receives His kingdom *precisely through His death*.

Listen to how Paul describes it:

“*And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*”
(Philippians 2:8–11)

The beasts conquered through violence. Jesus conquers through voluntary suffering. The beasts seized power. Jesus receives authority through submission. The beasts built their kingdoms on the corpses of their enemies. Jesus builds His kingdom on His own death.

And in that death — in that moment when it looked like the beasts had finally won, when Herod’s sons and Rome’s governors and the corrupted priesthood all conspired to execute God’s Anointed — in that very moment, Jesus was receiving His kingdom.

So What Does This Mean for Us?

First: Whose kingdom are you building?

The Hasmoneans fell to a temptation that is not unique to them. They used the language of God while building a kingdom for themselves. The same drift happens to us. Churches can begin with a heart to reach the lost and quietly slide into protecting traditions, preferences, and comfort. Ministries can begin as service and slowly become platforms. Families can begin with a desire to raise children in the Lord and drift into raising children who simply make us look good. Individual Christians can talk about serving Jesus while really serving their own name, their own security, their own control.

So whose kingdom are you really building? If the honest answer is your own, you need to repent.

Second: Beware of trusting in earthly power and earthly kingdoms.

The Hasmoneans teach us that even when God's people gain political power, human kingdoms still fail. Our hope is not in the right ruler sitting on the right throne. Our hope is in the Son of Man who sits at the right hand of Power and is coming with the clouds of heaven.

Practically, this means we should not be shocked or paralyzed when we see politicians acting in their own self-interest — that is what human kingdoms do. It means we engage the world around us wisely: we vote, we obey the law, we seek the flourishing of the communities God has placed us in. But we do all of that without placing our ultimate trust there.

It also means we should not be devastated when we see hypocrisy, compromise, and failure among God's people. Salvation was never in the hands of human kings or human priests. It is in the pierced hands of the Son of Man. When faith is placed in a human being, that faith will eventually be disappointed. Only Jesus deserves your ultimate trust.

Third: If you are a believer in Christ, you are a citizen of an unshakeable kingdom — so live like it.

Your identity is not ultimately what school you attend, what team you cheer for, what political party you support, or what race or nationality you belong to. If you are in Christ, your deepest identity is a child of God and a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven. That is not a metaphor. That is the most concrete fact about you. Live according to it.

As we close, I want to leave you with three questions to carry into the week.

Where are you building your own kingdom instead of seeking first His? Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal the places where pride, power, and self-preservation have taken root — in your heart, your home, your ministry.

Are you trusting in human structures, leaders, and institutions, or in the Son of Man whose dominion will never pass away? Take whatever disappointment or cynicism you are carrying and lay it at the feet of the One whose kingdom cannot be shaken.

Have you truly bowed the knee to Jesus as King — given to Him your life, your decisions, your priorities, and your deepest allegiances?