

Daniel's Big Message of a Big God Who is Infinitely Sovereign

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on September 26, 2010

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“What comes into our mind when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”¹

“Safe? ... Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King.”²

“My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: That I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior.”³

The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things ... in Him we live and move and have our being...” (Paul, Acts 17)

“His dominion is an everlasting dominion, And His kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, But He does according to His will in the host of heaven And among the inhabitants of earth; And no one can ward off His hand Or say to Him, ‘What have You done?’ (Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel 4)

That last statement sounds like it could have been written by King David, the most godly and humble king of Israel, the man after God’s own heart. But those words are from arguably the most proud and ungodly king in biblical history, the heart most against God’s own heart, one some have argued was the most powerful absolute dictator in *world history*: Nebuchadnezzar. The most sovereign human ruler in the most supreme kingdom of ancient times, we find knee bowed and tongue confessing Jesus alone is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. From the strongest pagan monarch comes one of the strongest statements in all of the Bible on the sovereignty of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

What is God’s sovereignty? The rule of God, exercising His power over His kingdom or dominion. It’s not *just over believers*, but as Daniel 4:35 says “*all the inhabitants of the earth*” – middle of v. 35 gives a good definition: ***He does according to His will in the host of heaven And among the inhabitants of earth; And no one can ward off His hand Or say to Him, ‘What have You done?’***

God does (*continually all things* is the idea) His sovereign will in heaven *and on earth*, and it is unstoppable and unalterable by man. The invisible hand of God is working even in the darkest of times and hearts, Nebuchadnezzar saw. Let’s see how that happened in this story:

Daniel 1¹ *In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. [context: 605 BC, Jeremiah, Ezekiel still prophesying]*

1. God is sovereign over bad things (1:1-5)

Without this first point, the hope of Rom. 8:28 falls flat. God's not only working "**good things together for good**" (He doesn't need to do that if they're already good). What does it say? "**all things.**" God's working in all things includes both His giving and taking:

² *The Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the vessels of the house of God; and he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god [Neb's], and he brought the vessels into the treasury of his god [Bel or Marduk].*

Nebuchadnezzar thought it was *his own hand* that captured Judah and its king and people and possessions but v. 2 shows an invisible hand at work: "*the Lord gave ... into his hand.*" Was that a 'bad thing' that vessels from the true God's temple were now in a pagan temple? Absolutely. Did Job experience bad things in his life? Yes. And yet it was also right for him to recognize the Ultimate Giver and Taker: "*The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away*" (Job 1:21)

<App: Trust His hand even when you can't see it and don't know why>

2. God is sovereign over **good things** (v. 6)

⁶ *Now among them from the sons of Judah were Daniel ...*

Behind a frowning providence God has a smiling face as Daniel is led into captivity, because Nebuchadnezzar was actually in greater bondage and Dan is the man who can set *him free*. This King who wants Jews to bow and offer incense before his throne and feet, before ch. 2 ends the King bows with incense before Daniel the Jew. This teenager being brought into Babylon like a lowly slave will soon have thousands of slaves *under his authority*, and neither liars or lions dens can thwart God's sovereign plan. In chapter 6, don't focus on the lions, focus on the Lord, because there was a greater Lion in Daniel's den. The Lion in Daniel's Den is the One Who C.S. Lewis called Aslan, the One Genesis and Revelation call "the Lion of Judah." The Lord is in Daniel's den, the Lion in his corner.

²⁶*I make a decree that in all the dominion of my kingdom men are to fear and tremble before the God of Daniel; For He is the living God and enduring forever, And His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed, And His dominion will be forever.* ²⁷*“He delivers and rescues and performs signs and wonders In heaven and on earth, Who has also delivered Daniel from the power of the lions.”*

<App: To God be the glory when great thing He has done>

3. God is sovereign over **man's sinful intents** (1:7)

⁷*Then the commander of the officials assigned new names to them; and to Daniel he assigned the name Beltshazzar, to Hananiah Shadrach, to Mishael Meshach and to Azariah Abed-nego.*

Their Hebrew names end with *el* (Dani-*el*, Misha-*el*, *el*=*God*: ex: *el shaddai*, *elyon*) and *yah* (Hanani-*yah*, Azari-*yah*, *yah*=*Lord*, ex: Halleluia). What's going on with the re-naming of these men? It's something like Cassius Clay being renamed Mohammed Ali ("beloved of Allah"). It's a *religious re-naming* to a new god and new identity, and in v. 4-5 it seems there was other brainwashing and indoctrination, too:

- Daniel=*God is judge*-> Belteshazzar=Bel protect the King
- Hananiah=*Yahweh is gracious*-> Shadrach=command of Aku
- Mishael=*who is like God?*->Meshach=who is what Aku is
- Azaria=*Yahweh is my Helper*->Abednego=servant of Nego

But God's sovereignty would override the negative intention of the Babylonians. It's hard not to think of Joseph in Genesis (cf. 50:20). And the true meaning of those 4 Heb. names prevails in this story. The God Nebuchadnezzar tried to erase he would later be on his face before. Taking "under God" out of our pledge won't erase His sovereignty.

<app: take comfort that God overrules and overrides sin>

4. God is sovereign over how people respond to us (v. 8-9)

⁸*But Daniel made up his mind that he would not defile himself with the king's choice food or with the wine which he drank; so he sought permission from the commander of the officials that he might not defile himself.* ⁹Now **God granted Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the commander of the officials** ...

Notice Daniel's responsibility was to do what he knew was right. He wasn't in charge of the results. That's up to God. And verse 9 makes clear Who granted Daniel favor and compassion: GOD. If people respond favorably *or unfavorably*, God is sovereign in it.

<app: if your will isn't done trust God's better will>

5. God is sovereign over our physical health and body (v. 11-16)

¹⁵*At the end of ten days their appearance seemed better and they were fatter than all the youths who had been eating the king's choice food.* ¹⁶*So the overseer continued to withhold their choice food and the wine they were to drink, and kept giving them vegetables.* [point is not pros of veggies but providence of God]

We should be good stewards of our physical bodies and not blame God when we haven't but also recognize what Paul said in Acts 17

<app: we live, move, have being, life, breath, all things from Him>

6. God is sovereign over our mental and spiritual state(v. 17-21)

¹⁷*As for these four youths, **God gave them knowledge and intelligence** in every branch of literature and **wisdom**²⁰*As for every matter of wisdom and **understanding** about which the king consulted them, he found them ten times better than all ...**

Our responsibility is to learn and study, but whatever we learn or gain mentally or spiritually (the Heb. terms here can include both), God is the ultimate source (as v. 17 says "*God gave them*") of all understanding, wisdom, insight, intelligence, knowledge. God is sovereign in our abilities and disabilities and even over the fact some find His sovereignty harder to understand than others

<app: recognize the source and praise God for whatever we do understand>

7. God is sovereign over what troubles us (2:1-13)

2:1b ... *his spirit was troubled and his sleep left him.*

What troubles us may be different than what troubled King Nebuchadnezzar in this chapter, but this story makes clear this was by God's doing and design, and that God's sovereignty extends even to thoughts (v. 29). The thoughts and hearts of kings are in the hand of the Lord turned wherever God wishes just like water in our hand (Prov. 21:1), even seemingly subconscious dreams and thoughts aren't outside His control. If He does that with kings, don't assume you're exempt. Sleep is a gift from God (Ps 127:2), and when we don't receive that gift *sometimes* it's because we're trying to do the role only God can do, worrying about tomorrow, rather than trusting God and resting in the only One who never slumber nor sleeps (but we do because we're not God!). God's sovereignty let Daniel sleep with a lion's mane as his pillow while the King was up all night.

It may be a relatively small thing like how much sleep we get at night (God has determined that and may have something to teach us or to turn over to him in prayer, and His grace will be sufficient even for the next day if we trust Him even if our sleep wasn't good). It may be something big troubling us, like Nebuchadnezzar considered his dream to be, and was unwisely willing to kill all his wise men if they didn't tell him his secret dream and interpret its secrets.

<app: whatever troubles you, turn over to the Lord, 1 Pet. 5:7>

8. God is sovereign over our prayers (v. 14-23)

¹⁷Then Daniel went to his house and informed his friends, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, about the matter, ¹⁸**so that they might request compassion from the God of heaven ...**

What a great description of prayer: *requesting compassion from the God of heaven!* What a great example of 1 Timothy 2:8 and James 5:17! Men, you can apply these Scripture at the men's prayer group tomorrow night at Ed's house, brothers coming together to request compassion from the God of heaven in prayer (or in your family).

It is *because God is sovereign* (in control as all-powerful King) that we pray to the God who also reveals Himself also as a good and compassionate and prayer-answering Sovereign who responds with what's best to our requests (*you have not because you ask not*). Having a big view of God should also lead to big praise to God:

2:20 Daniel said, "Let the name of God be blessed forever and ever, For wisdom and power belong to Him. ²¹"It is He who changes the times and the epochs; He removes kings and establishes kings; He gives wisdom to wise men And knowledge to men of understanding... ²³"To You, O God of my fathers, I give thanks and praise, For You have given me wisdom and power; Even now You have made known to me what we requested of You..."

<app: praise God from whom all blessings flow!>

9. God is sovereign over governments and rulers (v. 21, 25-38)

²¹"It is He who changes the times and the epochs; **He removes kings and establishes kings** ...[i.e., and every lower authority, both in dictatorships and democracies, prime ministers and presidents]

... ³⁷"You, O king, are the king of kings, to whom **the God of heaven has given the kingdom, the power, the strength and the glory;** ³⁸and wherever the sons of men dwell, or the beasts of the field, or the birds of the sky, He has **given them into your hand and has caused you to rule over them all ...**

Do we American Christians believe this? Do we think ultimately that our government and rulers are purely “of the people, by the people, and for the people” or is every authority actually in reality in an ultimate sense, “of God, by God, and for God”? The Bible is clear, not only here but in Romans 13 and many places: every level of leadership and authority on earth is sovereignly ordained by the God of heaven who gives to whomever He wishes, however He wishes, whenever He wishes, for as long as He wishes, and it is all part of His superintending providence that uses sinful pagans over sinful people to accomplish the sovereign plan of Almighty God!

God gives. God takes. God establishes rulers. God removes them. The results of man’s elections do not trump God’s sovereign plan. Has our current president or congress or senate caught God off-guard and caused Him to retreat to His Trinitarian chambers for Plan B and Plan C strategy meetings to react to how we may act? Or is He in fact the God that these verses say He is?

App: we get to vote and should vote our conscience and values, but when all is said and done, our hope and focus cannot be in politics, it must be above all on the Providence of God (who may have bad things in store so His godly ones will shine, like in Daniel’s day).

10. God is sovereign over the rise and fall of nations (v. 39-43)

...³⁹ “After you there will arise another kingdom inferior to you, then another third kingdom of bronze, which will rule over all the earth.”⁴⁰ “Then there will be a fourth kingdom as strong as iron; inasmuch as iron crushes and shatters all things, so, like iron that breaks in pieces, it will crush and break all these in pieces.

Conservative Bible scholars agree that these are precise prophecies of 4 consecutive empires that ruled the world: Babylon, followed by Medo-Persia, then Greece, and fourthly, the Roman Empire. If you study the book you see the astonishing fulfillment of prophecy in history, so striking that liberal critics argue Daniel couldn’t have written this, someone must have written it hundreds of years later. There are over 100 prophecies already fulfilled just from chap. 11. But Imperial Aramaic and archaeology have demonstrated an early date for this book and the critics who have tried to throw this book into the flames have instead been burned and embarrassed. God’s Word can hold its own in any critic’s den. Spurgeon said the Bible is like a lion, you don’t have to defend it, just let it out, it’ll do alright. It can handle itself, we just need to let it out ...

<app: You can trust this Book. It has power, so use it!>

11. God is sovereign over when and how His kingdom comes (v. v. 44-46, 7:13-14, 21-27)

...²⁸ “However, **there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and He has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will take place in the latter days** [Daniel then explains the dream which covers the time of Neb’s reign through the end of time / last days – “the latter days” in NT can refer to time between Christ’s comings]

*Daniel 2:44-46*⁴⁴ “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.**”⁴⁵ “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.”⁴⁶ Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell on his face and did homage to Daniel, and gave orders to present to him an offering and fragrant incense. [my new favorite verse]

The leader of the greatest empire in history is brought to his knees before the spokesman of the real King of Kings and Lord of Lords. This is a prophecy about Jesus Christ (spoken of in NT often as a Rock, also associated with His church and His kingdom). The final expression of this kingdom will consummate or culminate in every knee bowing and every tongue confessing that Jesus is Lord. If you have not done that yet, don't wait till the final day—trust Christ now

James Boice argues that what Christ inaugurated during His earthly ministry and even NT church in 1st century doesn't fully fulfill this.⁴

<app: pray “Thy kingdom come ... on earth as it is in heaven”>

12. God is sovereign over man's promotions and persecutions (2:47-3:15)

⁴⁷*The king answered Daniel and said, “Surely your God is a **God of gods and a Lord of kings** and a revealer of mysteries, since you have been able to reveal this mystery.”⁴⁸ Then the king promoted Daniel and gave him many great gifts, and he made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon and chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon.⁴⁹ And Daniel made request of the king, and he appointed Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego over the administration of the province of Babylon ...*

We rightly praise God for promotions ... but biblical saints also recognize God's sovereign control over their persecutions, too (ex: book of Acts). The ungodly don't always like the godly.

<app: recognize God's control in persecution and thank and trust Him>

3:8 *For this reason at that time certain Chaldeans came forward and brought charges against the Jews ...¹² “**There are certain Jews** whom you have appointed over the administration of the province of Babylon, namely **Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego**. These men, O king, **have disregarded you; they do not serve your gods or worship the golden image which you have set up.**”¹³ Then Nebuchadnezzar in rage and anger gave orders [bring ‘em and the King says in v. 15]... “Now if you are ready, at the moment you hear the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery and bagpipe and all kinds of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, very well. **But if you do not worship, you will immediately be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire; and what god is there who can deliver you out of my hands?**”*

13. God is sovereign over the day we die (3:16-30)

¹⁶*Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego replied to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this matter.¹⁷ “If it be so, **our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king.**”¹⁸ “**But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.**”*

You can play all the music you want and make your furnace as hot as you want but we're not gonna do it, we're not gonna bow – so bring it on now. It's no big deal for our big God to deliver us from your hand but whether He does or not, our life is in *His* hands (so is yours, Neb)

That didn't make the King too happy, you can imagine. He's a ballistic Babylonian now, no one speaks to the Most High ruler of earth like that and lives, we're cranking this heater up 7x, boys!

But they understood that God was in control of the day they died. They understood what Jesus would later explain, that none of us can add a single hour to our lifespan. When a man dies, there's no profit in second-guessing or seeking to change what we can't or to control what we can't control or know what we're not to know. If we believe Jesus and Psalm 139:16 (the very days of our life are all in a book that God wrote before we were born) and that not even a little sparrow can fall down dead apart from the Father's will ...

<App: we need to let God be God, be still and know He's God not us>

3:25 *He said, "Look! I see four men loosed and walking about in the midst of the fire without harm, and **the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods!**" [must be King Jesus, John 1:18] ²⁶Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the door of the furnace of blazing fire; he responded and said, "**Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, come out, you servants of the Most High God ...**"*

The Lord was with His people through the trial, in the furnace. What a beautiful picture of what most don't get to see with their physical eyes, but that many believers have known spiritually, the Son of God Himself walks with us in the midst of it. A hymn says:

When through fiery trials thy path-way shall lie,
My grace all-sufficient shall be thy supply
The flame shall not hurt thee – [God] only designs
Thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine

Footnote: It *may be* that these 3 men were aware of what Isaiah wrote 100+ years earlier in a prophecy about the Babylonian exile: *Fear not...when you walk through the fire you shall not be burned, nor shall the flame scorch you. For I am the LORD your God ... I have declared and saved ... there was no foreign god among you* (Isa 43:2, 12-13)

14. God is sovereign over those who think they are (4:1-34)

³⁰*"The king reflected and said, 'Is this not **Babylon the great, which I myself have built** as a royal residence **by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?**'* ³¹*"While the word was in the king's mouth, a voice came from heaven, saying, 'King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is declared: **sovereignty has been removed from you,*** ³²*and you will be driven away from mankind, and your dwelling place will be with the beasts of the field. You will be given grass to eat like cattle, and seven periods of time will pass over you **until you recognize that the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind and bestows it on whomever He wishes.**'* ³³*"Immediately the word concerning Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled; and he was driven away from mankind and began eating grass like cattle, and his body*

was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair had grown like eagles' feathers and his nails like birds' claws.³⁴ ***“But at the end of that period, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever; For His dominion is an everlasting dominion, And His kingdom endures from generation to generation.”***³⁵ ***“All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, But He does according to His will in the host of heaven And among the inhabitants of earth; And no one can ward off His hand Or say to Him, ‘What have You done?’”***

That's better theology than many Christian church members have, and it comes from the lips of King Nebuchadnezzar, blessing and praising and honoring the sovereignty of the Most High. His eyes are now lifted to heaven, away from this little temporary earthly kingdom that is nothing in light of the coming kingdom of heaven. The Sovereign of sovereigns who does His will not only in heaven but among all who live on earth, all the time, whose almighty hand is unstoppably unquestionably unbendingly unendingly sovereign.

<App: take a theology lesson from this Nebuchadnezzar>

15. God is sovereign over saving and humbling man (4:37)

...³⁷ ***“Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise, exalt and honor the King of heaven, for all His works are true and His ways just, and He is able to humble those who walk in pride.”***

It may be we'll see Nebuchadnezzar in heaven someday, a trophy of amazing grace that turns history's greatest pagan sovereign to be praising, exalting, and honoring the true and only Sovereign God. This is the big message of Daniel about a big God who is infinitely sovereign, who opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble, and has His sovereign ways of humbling those who don't humble themselves.

May His sovereign saving grace reach your heart today if it hasn't before; bow your knee in humble repentance, confess with your tongue that Jesus alone is Lord, and believe in your heart that He died for your sins on the cross and that God raised Him from the dead, turn from your sins and trust Him alone, you can be saved!

If you're a believer, Boice applies God's sovereignty this way: 'So let us be confident ... and be strong [like Daniel and his friends]. Let us stand for the right and do it. Let us refuse to compromise. Let us stand with unbowed heads...before the golden statues of our godless, materialistic culture. Let us declare that there is a God [in heaven] ... Let us shout that we are determined to receive God's prize, which is far greater than the world's tinsel toys and that we are servants of Him before whom every knee will bow.'⁵

¹ A.W. Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, p. 1

² Mr. Beaver, speaking of Aslan in C.S. Lewis' *Lion, Witch, and Wardrobe*, chapter 8.

³ John Newton, quoted in Jonathan Aitken, *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace*, Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007, p. 347

⁴ James M. Boice, *Daniel*, p. 39-40 : "The dream ... suggests that the fourth empire, Rome, would be divided into

two parts (the legs) and then into ten affiliated but separate kingdoms (the toes) [v. 41-43]. This happened. The empire divided into two parts, its eastern and western halves, and later it disintegrated even further. But this happened *after* the [time] of Christ, not before, which is what the dream requires. Again, although it is true that the church of Christ has expanded to fill the whole world in some sense, it has not destroyed the world's kingdoms, which is what the dream demands. The empires of the world have not fallen; they have not broken into pieces and been scattered like chaff [in the words of v. 35 "*crushed all at the same time ... not a trace of them was found.*" Rome is still around and traces found of others but Boice says the 2nd coming and kingdom of Christ in Rev. 19-20 match this better] ... If Christ is actually to rule on earth, establishing an earthly and not merely a spiritual kingdom, then other kingdoms obviously must be overthrown ...

The weakness of this view is [this] dream fails to account for the intervening years of church expansion... a 'gap' in prophecy ... something like a stopping of the 'prophetic clock' until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled [and other OT prophecies of Messiah that don't clearly distinguish 1st coming vs. 2nd coming timeline] ... In my opinion [this particular] view of the dispensationalists is the best interpretation of Daniel 2—though I am not a dispensationalist. But I want to emphasize that the main point made by Daniel's interpretation of this dream is not the precise period in which the kingdom of Christ will grow and fill the earth [1st century or 2nd coming or both], or how that will happen, but rather that it *will* happen and that the kingdoms of this world will be scattered...

⁵ Boice, 47.