

The Everlasting Sovereignty of Our God

Daniel 2-4

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Introduction

Please turn with me to Daniel 2.

If you remember Israel's Old Testament history, the nation had been dismantled by the time of Daniel. Years of rebellion and idolatry had been judged by God. First, the ten tribes of Israel were invaded by Assyria and either taken into captivity or dispersed through other parts of the world – never to return. The invader tried to do the same to Judah but God prohibited them in dramatic fashion from doing so.

But 100+ years later, the Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judah and took them into captivity in Babylon. This was around 595 BC. A tragic time for the Jew. And for the outside observer, it likely appeared to the onlooking world that God purposes in Israel had ceased. Not true as we will see in Daniel and throughout the rest of the Bible. God's purposes were working out right on time. And as Christians 2,600 years later, we are testimony to this fact.

Now as was the practice of Babylonian kings, they often took the best and brightest from among a people they had conquered and used them to further their kingdom. So for this purpose, Nebuchadnezzar took Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, and Belteshazzar or Daniel. These young men resolved to honor God first and foremost in a most difficult situation. Immediately, Daniel respectfully pushed back on the eating of the food supplied by the king and in doing so, God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the eyes of the those in authority over the young men. And He gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom – in fact, the king found them to be ten times more effective than anyone in his magician and enchanters department. Daniel was even given understanding in all visions and dreams – a rare skill indeed!

A Troubling Dream (Daniel 2)

With this background, we are brought to a dramatic situation in chapter 2. The king had a most troubling dream – one which caused him not to sleep. His magicians and enchanters could not interpret the dream nor even try since the king would not recount it to them. The king was angry and issued an order that all of them be rounded and executed. Daniel learned of the problem and wisely asked the king for a time when he could appear before him to interpret the dream. The king agreed and Daniel and the young men with him sought God for mercy in the matter. God revealed the mystery of the dream to Daniel in a vision.

Daniel responds with praise beginning in verse 20...

20 Daniel answered and said:

*“Blessed be the name of God forever and ever,
to whom belong wisdom and might.*

21 He changes times and seasons;

he removes kings and sets up kings;

he gives wisdom to the wise

and knowledge to those who have understanding;

22 he reveals deep and hidden things;

he knows what is in the darkness,

and the light dwells with him.

23 To you, O God of my fathers,

I give thanks and praise,

for you have given me wisdom and might,

and have now made known to me what we asked of you,

for you have made known to us the king's matter.”

A Worship Crisis (Daniel 3)

And in chapter three we see we see the king building an image of gold. After setting it up, he called for all the leaders of his kingdom and to fall on their faces and worship it – if they did not, they would lose their lives in the fiery furnace. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to do so. And in a fury the king ordered his furnace heated seven times hotter and for the three young men to bind and cast them into it. God saved them (entering the furnace with them, that is how our God works) unsinged and without even a hint of smoke smell on them. The king was amazed and declared in 3:29 concerning God's power:

29 ...there is no other god who is able to rescue in this way.”

The King's Testimony (Daniel 4)

The narrative of Daniel then turns to a testimony given by the king of God's power and sovereignty in chapter four. We read beginning in verse one:

4 [a] King Nebuchadnezzar to all peoples, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth: Peace be multiplied to you! 2 It has seemed good to me to show the signs and wonders that the Most High God has done for me.

*3 How great are his signs,
how mighty his wonders!
His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and his dominion endures from generation to generation.*

The king, who by this time was enjoying great prosperity in his kingdom, then explains that he had had yet another alarming dream – a dream that again only Daniel could interpret. This dream alarmed Daniel or Belteshazzar for it foretold God’s removal of the king’s sanity and therefore his prosperity.

A Warning Given (4:27)

After explaining the dream, Daniel warned the king in verse 27:

27 Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you: break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed, that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your prosperity.”

His Humiliation (4:28-33)

The king ignored the warning and continued to revel in his prosperity which he believed he had brought about (4:30). And then God’s decree from the dream was fulfilled – mighty King Nebuchadnezzar was *driven from among men and ate grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven till his hair grew as long as eagles’ feathers, and his nails were like birds’ claws (4:33)*. According to 4:17, *God did this that the living may know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will and sets over it the lowliest of men.’*

It certainly changed the king’s thinking as he testified in verses 34-37:

His Change of Mind (4:34-37)

34 At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to 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,
and he does according to his will among the host of heaven*

*and among the inhabitants of the earth;
and none can stay his hand
or say to him, "What have you done?"*

36 At the same time my reason returned to me, and for the glory of my kingdom, my majesty and splendor returned to me. My counselors and my lords sought me, and I was established in my kingdom, and still more greatness was added to me. 37 Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to humble.

God's Sovereignty – A Definition

There may no better comprehensive and straightforward display of God's sovereign characteristics in all of the Bible as there is in these early chapters of Daniel – both in narrative and in testimony given. Before we consider them, let's pause to think about what God's sovereignty means.

God has a multitude of attributes – some only He possesses (such as His unchangeableness and His omnipresence) while others He expects His creatures to display (wisdom, love, goodness, righteousness). God's sovereignty is how He rules His creation as king or sovereign. So His sovereignty can be defined as *God has absolute rule over creation as King and total control and determination over all that happens.*¹

Characteristics

Now from this overview of the early chapters, we can see several characteristics of God's sovereignty:

He is absolutely free to do whatever He pleases (Daniel 4:35)

As Nebuchadnezzar testified in Daniel 4:35, all creatures are considered as nothing when it comes to whose will be carried out. God does what He wants to do in view of all heaven and earth. Psalm 115:3 says, *"Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases."*

In order to do so, He must be all knowing, all powerful, and absolutely free. Lacking even one iota of knowledge would render God a limited ruler and not sovereign because someone at that moment would have power over Him. He must also be absolutely free – a concept we do not understand although we might think we do. To be absolutely free, you must be free of all external forces when exercising your will. In contrast, we are only relatively free.

And there is to be no critique of God. Although critique is an activity which sinful man finds hard to pass up. Everywhere you look in our society, everyone is critiquing others. People make their living evaluating

¹ *ESV Study Bible* (Publish Loc, Publisher, Year), p. 2512

the performance of others (politics, sports, etc). God is not subject to our second guessing or saying from our mouths or in our hearts, "If I were God, I would do it this way". We would never do that, right? Not as long as things are going our way.... but wait until troubles come and we suddenly become infinitely wise!

As the king said in 4:35, man cannot say to God, "*What have you done? Or do you know what you are doing God?*"

God orders the affairs of man

God is involved in the big events of a person's life as well as the smallest details. We see this in the lives of Daniel and his friends and many other narratives throughout Scripture. He sovereignly rules by getting into the story of your life and mine. Note how He entered the fiery furnace with the three men. Note how He came personally to visit Abraham and Sarah and most importantly He came in the flesh as He sent His Son into this world to save His people from their sins.

Acts 17:25-26 says the Lord determines the details of every man's life including the period and durations in which they live and where they live.

He changes times and seasons (Daniel 2:21)

Living in the 20th and 21st centuries we have witnessed many changes in the times and seasons of this world – the rise of the information age, regular changes in styles, worldviews, technological advances which we just come to expect...remember the Cold War?. And throughout history, there have been times of depression and prosperity, war and peace, types of governments or "isms", changes to the calendar, people migrations, changes in language or the dominant language.

World crisis come and go. There have been epidemics, the rise of totalitarian governments which sought to rule the world,....anyone remember Y2K?

All of these times and seasons bring about changes and responses by people and nations which simply serve to further the purposes of God even when we do not realize it.

He gives wisdom and knowledge to those whom He chooses to achieve His purposes (Daniel 4:21)

And God provides critical insight to people when it is needed most. We just read what he did with Daniel. God always seem to raise up key world leaders to shape the direction and outcome of world events...think Winston Churchill during World War II. And he has raised up so many in church history at the perfect time.. key reformers, key theologians who helped turn back error in the church (may He send them today!)

And this happens on the local scene as well. Think of people whom God has placed into your life at just the right time to give you insight and help you to make wise decisions or turn you back from making a life altering error. He is doing these things to achieve His purposes through them and you.

He humbles the proud who oppose His rule and reign (Daniel 4:37, 5:24-28)

God always brings the proud low. Their God opposing agenda will either kneel to Him in this life or when brought to His throne in the end. God was gracious to Nebuchadnezzar and opened his eyes to this truth. King Belshazzar who succeeded him though was shown the handwriting on the wall and promptly lost his life.

And as we see in numerous examples in the Scriptures, if the proud will not be humbled, He will remove them from the scene. Remember Haman in the story of Esther or Herod in the book of Acts.

He directs the rising and fall of nations (Daniel 2:21, 31-45)

Look at how many nations in Bible history alone that God raised up and then let fall. Egypt ruled the world at one time and by the close of the Bible, they were nothing – and are still nothing in terms of power and influence. And as was shown to Nebuchadnezzar in his chapter two dream, the same was true for Assyria, Babylon, the Medes and the Persians, Greece, and the Roman Empire although the West is an extension of Rome. God raised up each to bring about His purposes in time. He used them to bring His judgment, to cause migrations of people, to change languages, and to bring common culture. There is no better example than Rome 2,000 years ago who God used to create a world where the gospel of Christ could spread rapidly through a common language and relative ease and safety in world travel.

He delegates dominion to achieve His purposes (Daniel 2:21)

God has decreed various authority structure in our world. We see them in governments, businesses, schools, the church, and in our families. These structures are ordained by God to achieve His purposes. Nebuchadnezzar finally came to understand this in Daniel 4. Until then, he thought his rule over the earth in his day was his accomplishment rather than something God had given for a time.

Yet this can bring about a crisis because man is sinful. Those holding earthly authority can place themselves above God and if required by them to sin, God's people must obey God instead. We see this in the account of the fiery furnace.

His sovereignty is limitless in scope and will last forever (Daniel 4:3, 34)

Job 25:2-3 says,

2 *“Dominion and fear are with God;
he makes peace in his high heaven.*

3 *Is there any number to his armies?*

Upon whom does his light not arise?

There is no creature in heaven or earth or aspect of creation that lies outside of God’s sovereign rule. If there was such a thing, God would no longer be God. No, God’s rule is comprehensive and absolute. And this is a good thing. Speaking of Christ, Colossians 1:16-17 says,

“16 For by[a] him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. 17 And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

If there was something outside the reach of God’s sovereignty, God’s power is limited and all things would not hold together.

And His sovereign is everlasting.

Nebuchadnezzar bookends his testimony in Daniel four with this truth:

*His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and his dominion endures from generation to generation. (Daniel 4:3b, cf. 4:34b)*

Never has there been a time and never will there be a time where God is not sovereign, exercising absolute rule over all things. Unlike the rulers of this world who come and go, our God sovereignly rules forever. This is comforting...

God rules according to all His perfect attributes

Which brings us to one more characteristic of God’s sovereignty. He rules in a way that is governed by His other perfect attributes. Unlike flawed earthly government, God’s rule can be trusted for it is right and just.

Psalm 103:6-19 tells us God is a just, righteous, and good sovereign, merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He is compassionate, knowing our frailties and our great need to have our sins removed. Every aspect of His rule is for our good – even when we do not understand. We can be sure that as His subjects we are in good and perfect hands – every detail in our life carefully watched over and He brings aid and comfort when needed.

Difficulties

So God has absolute rule over creation as King and total control and determination over all that happens. ²But many ask, "If God is sovereign, why did He not then prevent evil, pain, and death from entering the world? By the way, the Bible teaches that God has nothing to do with evil and spiritual darkness..." It is a common question. How did sin and evil slide under the door? Did God not notice? Did He not account for it in eternity past as He planned a world of creatures He would create?

The Bible does not give us a complete explanation of how sin came about. It does tell us clearly though that God does not participate in sin and darkness. He is holy and dwells in light. It would be impossible for God to take part in sin because it would betray His character.

But we do know from the Bible that God has permitted sin to enter the world and His activity in time is to restrict and limit it. In His infinite wisdom and goodness He is doing so to achieve His purposes. The examples are many; the plot by Joseph's brothers to kill him, Job's severe trial, etc

And the ultimate example is how God ordered the events in the days leading up to the crucifixion of Christ; actions taken by the religious leaders, Judas, and government leaders like Pilate which resulted in the Lord's crucifixion. Did they alter the plans of God? No! Acts 2:23 says, *Jesus was delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God.* Why? To die for the sins of God's people. Man was responsible but God achieved His purposes.

You see God has permitted sin, evil, and death into this world. But He restrains and redirects it for His good and wise purposes.

And in this process, God's attributes are then revealed more fully. Why? Because sin produces miserable and guilt filled creatures. To meet their need here comes the mercy, grace, lovingkindness, and longsuffering of God. These attributes are put on full display before all His creatures and the spiritual world (Romans 9:23, Eph 3:10). And God's glory is what is of primary importance, not us.

This is all that God has revealed to us and we must conclude like Job that there is much more behind the curtain that we do not know. But God is not the author of sin and evil nor does He participate in it.

People also ask, *"If God is sovereign, how can man have free will or exercise free choice? And if He does not have free will, how can he be held responsible?"*

The answer is rather simple. We have a free will because God sovereignly gave us one. He has ordained a free will for us. With it we exercise a relative freedom which is an amazing thing. Every day we make numerous decisions in our local part of the created world – decisions which truly have consequences and for which we bear responsibility.

² *ESV Study Bible*, p. 2512.

Now only an absolutely sovereign God can produce such a thing. Because if He was not absolutely sovereign, He could not be absolutely sure of the outcome. He could not be absolutely sure that His creatures would fulfill the purpose for which they were made.

Completely free? No, the concept of free will is overrated actually. To be absolutely free, we must have no limits – no external forces acting upon us. But there are so many limits upon us – we are finite creatures. The biggest limit was our inability to choose God because we were spiritually dead (Eph 2:5). It was not an option until He made us alive together with Christ.

So the Bible makes it clear repeatedly that God is absolutely sovereign yet man is responsible to obey and to submit to Him. When man obeys God, he is acting consistent with God's character and therefore brings God glory. So God's Word calls us to humbly receive this truth. Romans 9:19-24 tells us to remember He is the potter and we are the clay.

Sovereignty of God in Jesus Christ

But we also need to consider the sovereignty of God in Jesus Christ. We know that Jesus:

- Has been given the kingdom from the Father. Daniel 7:14 says, *"to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him."*
- Exercised authority to forgive sins, to command creation and the demons, and heal sickness and disease
- Has authority over all life and death – He raised people from the dead and controlled the time of His own death. And the grave had no hold on Him. Most importantly He grants spiritual life.
- Is sovereign over His enemies. We saw throughout the gospels that many wanted to kill Him but Jesus controlled the day and the hour.
- Is sovereign over the ultimate confession of every tongue; *"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."* (Phil 2:10-11)
- Is the image of the of the invisible sovereign God, the firstborn of all creation (Col 1:15)
- Is the sovereign agent and sustainer of creation (Col 1:16-17); *16 For by[a] him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. 17 And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.* When we see that Jesus holds all things together at the sub-atomic level, it is easier to see how He is involved in the very details of our lives.
- Is sovereign over the future (Rev 1:17-18); *17 When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, 18 and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. 19 Write*

therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this.

And Jesus truly brings together this question of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. Jesus as God is sovereign. However, the Father gave Him responsibility as a man to obey His will which was to come to earth, take on flesh, suffer and die upon a rugged and shameful cross, and then be put into the grave for three days – all to save His people from their sins.

Now in eternity past and in time, God has seen fit to place some of His creatures in situations where they must obey to receive blessing, a reward, and a right standing with God. And unlike the angels who fell from heaven, Adam in the garden, and national Israel, Jesus did not fail. He obeyed perfectly the Father's will for Him – even under the most difficult circumstances.

As a result, God's people are not given conditions to meet in order to merit God's favor and receive eternal life. No, Christ fulfilled our responsibility to pay for sin and worked out a righteous standing for us – one that is perfect and eternal. And who gave Christ such a responsibility? Our Sovereign God appointed Him. God's sovereignty and man's responsibility come together in Jesus Christ.

So we can say with the king of Babylon, *"there is no other God who is able to rescue in this way!"*

Implications

Understanding God's sovereignty:

Helps us process the world today

There is much to alarm us in this world; wars and rumors of wars, natural disasters, political strife, violence, a breakdown in marriage and in the family. But none of this is outside the control of our sovereign God – in fact, He promised these things will occur until the end and even intensify as the end approaches. We need not be afraid. What is the worst thing this world can do to a child of God? Take our life, right? But then we go to be with the Lord!

Helps us process the trouble we face

Every trouble, every fear, every tear, every failure, every question is under the sovereign control of our God. Remember He is involved in the intimate details of our lives – His eye is on us continually and He stays not at a distance but is in the midst of our lives. God brings about all afflictions in our lives from the light to the most heavy but intervenes at just the right time to limit and overrule such afflictions – all with the purpose of making the needed changes in our lives.

If you do not believe this, listen to the stories in this room..stories of what God is doing in the lives of others. He is here! Be encouraged! And share your stories to encourage others.

Assures us of the future

God's sovereignty is everlasting and His promises never change. What a great assurance we possess in the present.

Calls us to obey and submit to Him

The unbeliever despises the sovereignty of God. In his or her mind, He should be everywhere I am giving me everything I want. But do not climb onto your throne God! I am not submitting to anyone. If this is you, then turn from it. Repent of your sins and place your trust in Jesus Christ, the Sovereign Lord for salvation before it is too late.

The believer praises and thanks God for His sovereignty. Comfort is found in this attribute of God. And the believer is compelled by the love of Christ and the indwelling Holy Spirit to greater obedience and submission.

So pursue Him in obedience. Forsake those areas where your submission is divided and tugging you away from Christ. Trust Him. Tell the world about Him and His gospel. Love one another sacrificially and those around you. And give Him all the glory in everything.

Let's pray...

Such dominion commands a paradox for us:

25 But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. 26 It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant,[c] 27 and whoever would be first among you must be your slave,[d] 28 even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matt 20:25-27)

A paradox for which our sovereign King modeled for us in Christ. A paradox that only a absolute sovereign can create.