

Daniel 4

The Benefits to Affirming God's Sovereignty

And all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing: and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou? – v. 35

By the time you reach chapter 4 in the book of Daniel it seems hard to resist the conclusion that Nebuchadnezzar was a slow learner. I suppose it could be argued as a general principle that pride has a tendency to make slow learners out of sinners – especially proud sinners. Chp. 4 gives us the account of Nebuchadnezzar's second dream and the lesson of his second dream was essentially the same as the lesson of his first dream. And this was the lesson he was slow to learn. And in between his first and second dream he saw first hand something that should have reinforced the lesson of his first dream for he saw how the God of heaven could preserve his followers even in the midst of a fiery furnace heated 7 times beyond its normal capacity. Still he was slow to catch on to the lesson.

And the lesson was really very simple – it's a lesson that Christians need to affirm – it's a lesson that unfortunately Christians too often are slow to acknowledge also. The lesson is simply this: God rules and reigns over the kings of the earth. The reduction of Nebuchadnezzar to a beast was to serve the purpose stated in v. 25 – *till thou know that the Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will*. Now arguably it's better to be a slow learner than to be no learner at all and eventually Nebuchadnezzar would confess that the Lord's dominion *is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom is from generation to generation. And all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing; and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth, and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, what doest thou?* (vv. 34,35).

This simple lesson about the sovereignty of God over the kings of the earth is the key theological lesson in the book of Daniel. Unfortunately many Christians who seem to be more interested in producing their prophecy charts have a tendency to skip over the obvious or at least they fail to draw the benefit that comes from affirming the glorious truth that God rules over all. This to my mind is the great blessing of the book of Daniel.

I believe the same thing holds true for the book of Revelation. *Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy* – John writes in Rev. 1:3. And I believe that the blessing gained does not come by being able to tie in news headlines to Bible verses – the blessing comes in seeing Christ. *The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy* the angel says to John in Rev. 19:10. And in that book we see Christ ruling over all – we see Christ's kingdom prevailing – we see Christ's followers triumphant over the world that despises them because the world despises Christ.

Now returning to the book of Daniel – let me say that I love the fact that it was a pagan king that was eventually compelled to confess that God rules over all. This was not a ruler

that received his education in Jerusalem – it was a ruler that worshiped and served idols – it was a ruler that was steeped in darkness. As slow a learner as he was – and as proud a sinner as he was – his slowness and pride didn't prove to be insurmountable to God. And we can take heart that God is able to humble the pride of any proud sinner – even proud sinners that are world rulers and He's able to make any sinner know who truly rules and reigns.

I find this lesson to be particularly appealing at this time when we have proven to ourselves as a nation through this last election that we are anything but a Christian nation. In terms of where we find ourselves as a country today I think you would agree with me that there's a definite sense in which we find ourselves in exile. We haven't been supplanted but on the other hand there's little if anything around us that resembles our Christian heritage. Prayer has been for the longest time banned from our public schools – creation or even intelligent design theories are banned from our world of academia. Morality has been turned on its head in such a way that sin is sanctioned and virtue is outlawed and there's a great deal of apprehension in the air because the immoral and ungodly pagan religion of secular humanism appears to have been greatly strengthened in our civil government.

Add to this apprehension about our political and our moral climate the immediate worry and anxiety that comes from an economy that is clearly headed in a downward direction. What will the outcome be? – we ask ourselves. Will I have a job tomorrow? Will I be able to provide for my family next month or next week? Will the outlook and planned policies of our newly elected President only make the situation worse?

Amidst such discouragements and worries it becomes essential for the Christian to be able to affirm by faith the sovereign rule of God over every dominion in this world. And so what I want to draw your attention to this morning is:

The Benefits to Affirming God's Sovereignty

Consider with me first of all that one of the benefits to affirming God's sovereignty is that:

I. It Keeps Everything in its Right Perspective

We learn from the example of king Nebuchadnezzar how incredibly short sighted a pagan ruler can be and how hard it is for pride to die. {cf. 4:28-30}. In his dream 12 months earlier the point was emphasized to him that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men – {cf. 4:17 – the actual dream and v. 25 – Daniel's interpretation}.

His first dream back in chp. 2 served the same purpose and should have conveyed the same lesson. In chp. 2 God showed this king how history was going to unfold. In that dream he saw an image whose head was gold – typifying the Babylonian empire; the breast and the arms of the image was silver – typifying an inferior empire to follow the Babylonian empire – the belly and thighs were brass (or bronze) typifying yet a third

empire to follow and the legs were iron with iron feet, the toes of which were mingled with clay typifying a fourth empire to come. In that dream Nebuchadnezzar sees a stone cut without hands out of a mountain which smashes this image on the toes and breaks the image into pieces and then grows into a great mountain thus teaching a very clear lesson that it will be God's kingdom that triumphs in the end.

And how did Nebuchadnezzar respond to the lesson? We find him in chp. 3 making a great image – but rather than patterning the image after his dream he makes the entire image out of gold which some Bible teachers feel indicated that he tenaciously held to the view that it would be the Babylonian kingdom which would be the never ending dynasty – hence, not just the head was gold but the entire image.

His pride contributed greatly to his short-sightedness. By the end of chp. 4, however, it seems that he caught on. The last testimony he bears in the book of Daniel is found at the end of chp. 4 where we read his final words: *Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise and extol and honour the King of heaven, all whose works are truth, and his ways judgment: and those that walk in pride he is able to abase.*

I find it interesting and comforting to observe in the book of Daniel how on two different occasions – involving two different pagan rulers you find the beginning of a chapter revealing the passing of an ungodly decree and then you find at the end of those same chapters the issuing of other decrees that call for respect to be shown to the God of Daniel.

The first instance of this is in chp. 3 {**cf. 3:4-7**}. You know the story. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to bow to the king's idol. And when, in his grace, they were given a second chance – they still refused. This provoked the king's wrath all the more. The command was given to heat the furnace to make it 7 times hotter – the 3 Hebrew children were cast into the furnace and yet were unaffected by the flames. And not only unaffected by the flames but the text makes it plain that Christ stood with them in those flames.

The thing I want you to see is that a decree occurs in the beginning of the chapter and another decree occurs at the end of the chapter – {**cf. 3:29**}.

The second instance of this same phenomenon occurs in chp. 6. At the point of time we discover in chp. 6 the Babylonian empire had been conquered by the Medes and Persians (just as God had said would happen). Under king Darius Daniel is set up over all the presidents and counselors. Just like in the realm of politics today this makes Daniel's associates jealous. Through their shrewdness they're able to convince king Darius to approve a law (a decree, if you will) that bans prayers or petitions to any god or man. All prayers and petitions must be directed to the king alone. {**cf. 6:7-9**}.

And again you know the story. Daniel continues his regular practice of prayer. His associates bring charges against him and before the chapter is ended we find Daniel in the lion's den and we find Daniel's life preserved by God. At the end of the chapter we discover yet another decree by another pagan king. {**cf. 6:25-27**}.

Now the lessons that these two events should convey to the followers of Christ today are plain. The Lord rules and reigns from above and is able to overturn the plans of pagan rulers. Ungodly decrees can be turned into decrees that call for respect for the God of heaven. The other lesson that comes readily to mind is the lesson that the people of God can expect fiery furnaces and dens of lions.

The sovereignty of God does not exempt the followers of Christ from the trials of their faith. There is an aim in the trials of your faith. So Peter writes in his first epistle *That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ* (1Pet. 1:7).

When we see paganism seemingly strengthened, therefore, and when we see the increase of our trials either as a result of ungodly rulers and decrees or as a result of providential circumstances – let's keep all these things in their proper perspective. God rules and reigns and there is a purpose to your trials – a purpose of grace that will lead to your faith being found unto praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ.

Interestingly enough we find a statement made by Nebuchadnezzar that shows us the effect of affirming the truth of God's sovereign rule. Note what 4:36 says – *At the same time my reason returned unto me; and for the glory of my kingdom, mine honor and brightness returned unto me; and my counselors and my lords sought unto me; and I was established in my kingdom, and excellent majesty was added unto me.*

Do you see the connection between affirming God's sovereignty and a man's sanity? A follower of Christ who loses the perspective of God's rule and reign is, in a sense, reduced to the level of a beast, a beast that lacks sanity. I'm sure many of you are aware of the maddening strain that presses you sore when you think you're on your own and you're tempted to think that with everything else God rules over He's somehow forgotten you and left you to fend for yourself.

I don't know how a person gets out of bed in the morning who doesn't believe that God rules and reigns over all. So let's affirm in our worship the sovereignty of God this morning. The same One who sets up one and brings down another is the same One who rules today. And His rule extends not only over those that occupy high office – but His rule over extends over you. Indeed, a sparrow cannot fall to the ground apart from your heavenly Father.

We gain the benefit of sanity and stability by keeping things in their proper perspective. Would you consider with me next and finally that the benefit to affirming God's sovereignty is also seen in that:

II. It Strengthens our Resolve to be Faithful

While Nebuchadnezzar was a slow learner, I don't believe the same could be said for Daniel or his 3 friends. There may have been a time when they doubted God's sovereignty and perhaps doubted God's love and loyalty. After all they were in a land of exile – they

were in captivity. Jerusalem had been captured and would be destroyed – the temple had been plundered and we're told in the opening verses of the book that part of the vessels of the house of God had been carried into the land of Shinar and placed in the treasure house of Nechadnezzar's false god.

Even in the midst of such abysmal circumstances, however, I don't believe Daniel ever doubted. His prayer in chp. 9 contains his confession that the Israelites had sinned and that God had been faithful even to His threatenings of judgment. *O Lord, to us belongeth confusion of face, to our kings, to our princes, and to our fathers, because we have sinned against thee. To the Lord our God belong mercies and forgivenesses, though we have rebelled against him; Neither have we obeyed the voice of the LORD our God, to walk in his laws, which he set before us by his servants the prophets (9:8-10).*

And so it appears in chp. 1 that the effect of the adverse circumstances of Jerusalem upon Daniel was not to weaken his faith but to strengthen it. And so we find him as early as 1:8 demonstrating his resolve. We read in that verse – *But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's meat, nor with the wine which he drank.*

This resolution on the part of Daniel is rather amazing when you consider it in its context. Daniel had been uprooted from his home. He had been carried into captivity. How easy it would have been for him in the bitterness of his circumstances to say – the Lord has forsaken me along with His people – why should I bother to serve Him? Why shouldn't I just go with this new flow and indulge in the king's meat and the king's wine?

Do you ever find yourself tempted to ask yourself the same question when your circumstances have taken a terrible turn for the worse? You have it rough while the ungodly seem to prosper. That was certainly the case in Daniel's day. The ones that enjoyed prosperity and took their ease and indulged in the meat and the wine were the same ones that worshiped idols.

The Psalmist complains about this very thing in Psalm 73 – {cf. **Ps. 73:1-3**}. And after describing the prosperity of the ungodly at some length the Psalmist shares the conclusion that he arrived at in his weakness – *Verily I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocency. For all the day long have I been plagued, and chastened every morning (vv. 13,14).*

This is the natural reaction of the flesh to adverse circumstances. And the Psalmist later acknowledges his weakness and his short sightedness. *Thus my heart was grieved and I was pricked in my reins* he says in v. 21. *So foolish was I and ignorant: I was as a beast before thee (v. 22).* And there again we're reminded of Nebuchadnezzar being reduced to a beast – having lost his sanity until he gained the right perspective on God's sovereignty.

Daniel, however, saw the whole matter from the right perspective from the outset. He knew that even in his captivity the Lord ruled and reigned in heaven and so his focus became sharpened on his obligation to be faithful to his God and so we read that he purposed in his heart not to defile himself.

Our knowledge of God's rule and reign should have the same effect on us. Our resolve should be strengthened to be true to our God and King. Oh that we might be delivered from the easy flow of this world – the easy flow of immorality and marital infidelity and a lack of personal responsibility. *Why not go that way?* – the flesh asks. *It's the way all the world is going and obviously God must not be too concerned for He has allowed men to come into high office that will make sin easier. Sin is acceptable and the world understands – so go with the flow and spare yourself the hardship and vanity of serving God.* May God help us to avoid such beastly insanity.

I must say that if this recent election has had any positive effect upon me it would be that it's made me sharpen my focus to the truth that our nation's problems are spiritual before they're political. And spiritual problems must be confronted through the use of spiritual means which means in turn that we need to seek the Lord our God as never before.

And this leads to my next sub-point about Daniel's resolve. He was resolved to seek the Lord in prayer even when prayer was illegal. Da 6:10 *Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house; and his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforesaid.*

The prayer life of Daniel is worth a study by itself. Let me just point out here that Daniel would not be denied his time in prayer. He went to prayer knowing the writing was signed v. 10 tells us. This would indicate to us that he also knew the penalty for violating the signed writing was being cast to a den of lions.

I have often marveled at Daniel's resolve especially as I compare it to the way we are so easily distracted from the place of prayer. What does it take to keep you from seeking the Lord? Is it a busy schedule? Is it worldly entertainment? Is it the weakness of the flesh? How I would that you would draw from Daniel's example and devote yourselves to seeking Christ.

How else will hearts be turned? How else will ungodly decrees be overturned? How else will the child of God protect himself from caving in to anguish and despair? These are days that call for the strengthening of our resolve – not for making excuses for prayerlessness – no matter how valid those excuses may seem.

I shouldn't pass from this point of increased resolve without mentioning those 3 Hebrew children who also showed their resolve in chp. 3. When the decree was given to bow to the king's idol – Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego would not comply. And when they were arrested and stood before the king they stated their resolve in no uncertain terms – So we read in vv. 17,18 *If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up.*

Their assertion reveals that they had no certain assurance in the temporal realm that they would be delivered. They did know that they would be delivered from Nebuchadnezzar if

it meant death. That's the amazing thing about death, you know. Once you've been put to death, your tormentors have no more power over you. Once you've crossed Jordan, so to speak, you are entirely in God's hands. This is why Christ instructs His followers not to fear them which kill the body but are not able to kill the soul. But rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell (Mt. 10:28).

Those 3 Hebrew children recognized something that they viewed as being of much greater importance than their own survival. They viewed the honor of God as being the most important thing. How they stand in contrast to the mindset of our day which subordinates God Himself to the happiness of man.

Those Hebrew children had the right perspective on God. And so I hope you can see the importance of establishing and maintaining the right perspective yourselves. Take heart, believer – God rules and reigns and His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom that will never be destroyed. He sets up one and brings down another. He rules and overrules the decrees of men. And this ruler over all nations happens to be also your Savior and Lord.

He orders all things for your good and His glory. And so long as you can affirm by faith His sovereign rule you will also be enabled to view every circumstance in life from the right perspective – from the higher perspective of His rule and from the eternal perspective of His purpose. Your sanity and stability and confidence and peace depends on you being able to make such an affirmation.

Your steadfast resolve to be true to Him depends upon you holding an exalted view of Him. And so I hope and trust that you will, with the eye of faith, see seated on His throne – the One who gained His kingdom by virtue of what He accomplished in His atoning death. May your confidence in Him be strong and as you strive to honor and serve and know Him then may it become your privilege to do great exploits in His name and for His glory.