

***God is in Control (even when life is harder than we'd like)*****Daniel 1:1-21**

Daniel's generation lived in perilous circumstances, perilous for life and perilous for faith. The death of thousands in war and famine negated the very possibility of life, while the deportation of many survivors undermined its continued viability. The destruction of national temple – where the people worshipped the God who had sworn to protect them – undercut faith. Harsh experience underscored divine impotence or apathy. Daniel 1 insists, to the contrary, that the God of Israel remains sovereign over both Israel and its enemies. At the same time, Daniel corrects misconceptions of what divine sovereignty entails, whether for his generation or for ours.

**Day 1: Daniel 1:1-7 The Lord gave ... Judah into the hand of Babylon**

In striking understatement, Daniel references the first act of divine sovereignty: God brought in a pagan superpower to conquer his people and to destroy their nation and temple. This should have come as no surprise to the nation. Moses warned them about the consequence of disobedience 1,000 years earlier (Deuteronomy 28), and subsequent prophets had warned them in every generation. Scarcely 150 years earlier, the northern half of the nation was conquered by the Assyrian empire, as an act of divine judgment for sin, according to the prophet Isaiah (Isa 10:5-7). Still the South would not heed the lessons of Scripture or of history, and refused to honor and obey the sovereign God. So they met their fate.

God reserves the right to punish both the nations and his people. At the same time, Scripture never reverses this correlation, as though all national or personal hardship is punishment for sin. So the main application of this text is to avoid drawing an erroneous conclusion from the correlation here between divine sovereignty and human suffering: when a nation suffers – or if you and your family are currently suffering – do not jump to the conclusion that you are under divine judgment. (Unless, of course, you are engaging in some particularly egregious sin, such as adultery or unbridled greed, in which case judgment is possible, and you should see an elder, pastor, or church leader to assist you in the process of repentance.)

**Day 2: Genesis 45:1-11 Daniel's forerunner ... Joseph**

We take a brief aside from the Daniel story in order to substantiate the point of yesterday's reflection, that national disaster or personal suffering may be – but need not be – the act of God intended to punish sin. In

several details, Daniel's experience mirrors his predecessor Joseph, and the latter is a clear example of someone who suffered under divine sovereignty and for the redemption of others, not as punishment for his own sin.

The Joseph narrative demonstrates that sometimes the sovereign God uses suffering not to punish but to deliver (Gen 37-50). Sold into slavery by jealous siblings, dragged into a foreign land, falsely accused of sexual impropriety by a spurned seductress, forgotten by a state official who owed him a huge favor, Joseph is finally delivered through divine intervention. Only later does he realize the purpose of all his suffering: "It was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you" (Gen 45:5); "God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance" (Gen 45:7).

Sometimes God sovereignly brings suffering to punish those whose behavior is particularly heinous. Other times, he sovereignly uses suffering to redeem. So we do ourselves – and God – wrong to infer from any suffering that God is displeased with us (unless we know ourselves to be committing some particularly offensive sin). What we can legitimately infer is: (a) even when we or the people of God suffer, God remains sovereign; and, (b) he is cognizant of our suffering, and with us in it.

**Day 3: Daniel 1:8-16 The Lord gave Daniel favor in the eyes of the official** God's second sovereign act is in striking contrast to his first: while in his sovereignty God punishes the nation, he also blesses the faithful. As an refugee within a culture that worshipped other gods, Daniel finds himself in a predicament: he is willing to compromise his culture but not his faith. So while he accepts deportation, a name change, and training in a foreign culture, along with its language and literature, he draws a line at consuming food and drink that was offered to pagan gods. In response to his faithfulness, the sovereign God blesses him with sympathy from the official overseeing his training for government office.

At the same time, the sovereignty of God does not absolve Daniel of all responsibility. Instead, Daniel cooperates as fully as possible with a foreign culture and training, and when he finally must resist, he does so in conciliatory fashion, seeking a mutually agreeable compromise. Given the confrontational demeanor of many American Christians today when dealing with our secular culture, we do well not only to entrust ourselves to the sovereignty of God but also to imitate Daniel in his 'conciliatory whenever possible' stance.

**Day 4: Daniel 1:17-20 The Lord gave Daniel knowledge and**

**understanding.** God's third sovereign act is to bless Daniel and his colleagues with spectacular success: in learning and understanding, they were ten times as wise as all other government officials and advisers. We can expect that God will continue to exercise his sovereignty this way today. At least, occasionally. From time to time, perhaps only rarely, we may come across faithful Christians who inexplicably excel in school or career, not because they are smarter, or harder working, or more clever, but in a way attributable only to divine intervention.

Though, we again guard against false inferences from divine sovereignty. For one, God's sovereignty and blessing never meant that these Jewish heroes could sit back and take life easy. Instead, in the common experience of all immigrants, they devoted themselves to the study of a new language and culture. The Lord *gave* them knowledge and understanding in response to their diligent *study*. For another, nothing in this text promises that God will always bring spectacular success to his devoted followers. Sometimes we will succeed not because God is rewarding our devotion, but simply because we are naturally gifted and/or work hard. And sometimes we will fail, even though we are devoted to God and work hard. God never promises that the correlation evident in this instance is guaranteed in all cases.

At the same time, he does hold out this promise: we are not alone as we navigate an alien culture, left to our own devices as we face apathy, ignorance, or antagonism from the dominant majority. Instead, he is with us, and sovereign over any who would oppose us. His presence and sovereignty provide the possibility of intervention when needed, and the guarantee of vindication at the end.

**Day 5: Acts 4:23-31 Reading Daniel through the lens of the cross**

After the ascension of Christ, as the apostles faced the threat of persecution, they reassured themselves with the doctrine of divine sovereignty: no one could do anything to them that God had not determined to permit. This was not just an abstract doctrine for them; it was their experience of the crucifixion. As they reflected on Psalm 2:1-2, they found six elements: (1) gentiles, (2) Jewish peoples, (3) kings, (4) rulers, (5) God, and (6) his anointed one. They realized that all six converged in the crucifixion of Jesus: (1) gentile soldiers, (2) Jewish religious leaders and populace, (3) king Herod, (4) the Roman ruler Pilate, and (5) God, who anointed (6) Jesus. Given the convergence, they drew the obvious conclusion: even in crucifying Jesus, the wicked people "did

what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.”

The recognition of divine sovereignty in the crucifixion of Jesus gave them confidence, not that they would be rescued from death, any more than Jesus had been, but that, with God’s help, they could face whatever the opposition threw at them. So their plea was not for safety, but for boldness and courage in standing for Jesus in an adversarial context.

### **Day 6: Revelation 6-7 Reading Daniel through the lens of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming.**

As I write this devotional, yet another fool is claiming that Christ will return, this time, Saturday, May 21. For some reason best known only to itself, a mocking media has picked up the story and given it front-page attention (along with recent and distant histories of other fool-hardy predictions of the 2<sup>nd</sup> coming of Christ). Fair enough: if we Christians cannot police our own fools, let the world do it for us.

Still, while avoiding date setting, the book of Revelation has something to teach us about the sovereignty of God. In chapter 6, the Lamb opens six seals, and all manner of horrors are released: conquest, war, famine, plague. In a brief interlude, Christian martyrs cry out to God: “How long, Sovereign Lord ... until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” God’s reply: “They were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed” (6:10-11). Then, chapter 7 jumps ahead, anticipating the time when God will wrap up all history, and bring peace to the earth and salvation to his people.

So we hear three further lessons from this text. First, God is sovereign over both his people and their persecutors. Second, that sovereignty does not prevent their suffering or even their deaths; to the contrary, it actually determines how many must die. Third, God will set all things right in the end. Revelation 7 offers the same promise as Revelation 21: “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (7:17; 21:4). So while the sovereignty of God may not ensure us all the safety, success and prosperity that we prefer in this life, we take hope and confidence in the promise that it will eventually put an end to all our suffering, and recompense any misfortune in the age to come.