

God is Supreme (even when life seems beyond control)**Daniel 2:1-49**

Daniel's generation lived in perilous circumstances, perilous for life and perilous for faith. The brutal conquest of their country not only led to the death and deportation of tens of thousands, but also threatened their faith. How could their God truly be sovereign, if he was unable to prevent such suffering? Daniel 1, to review, addresses that question: God's sovereignty is evidenced – not contradicted – by their suffering. And it is evidenced in two ways. First, his sovereignty is evident in that he is the one who caused it. God was not impotent to prevent Israel's suffering; he was omnipotent to cause it. God brought in the Babylonian army to punish his own people for their sin. Which is to say, that God is sovereign even over the army of a superpower that does not worship or acknowledge him. Secondly, divine sovereignty is not entirely bad news: it also ensures the survival – in fact, the spectacular success – of his true people, even in the most disadvantageous circumstances. Daniel and his faithful friends prosper, even as aliens in a foreign land. God is sovereign both in judgment and in mercy, both in suffering and in success.

Day 1: Daniel 2:1-49 God of gods, Ruler of kings

Daniel 2 addresses another question that inevitably arises from the conquest and destruction of Judah: How can the Jewish God YHWH truly be supreme, if another nation (under its deity) conquers Judah? The ancient world assumed a patron-client relationship between a deity and the nation: provided they are properly fêted, gods reciprocate by blessing their subjects. By that logic, then, the most powerful nation evidently has the most powerful god. Since Judah was defeated by the Babylonians, Marduk (otherwise known by the title Bel), patron deity of Babylon, must be stronger than YHWH, patron deity of Judah. So the central point of this chapter comes in verse 47: "The king [Nebuchadnezzar] said to Daniel, "Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings."

This testimony is dramatic for two reasons. First, as in many ancient cultures, the king is considered to be the 'son of the gods', the human with the closest relationship with the gods, the recipient of their special benefactions (the means by which he became king in the first place). Secondly, even though his personal and national patron was Marduk, Nebuchadnezzar affirms the superiority of YHWH. This does not mean that he is converting to Jewish religion. This is 'henotheism': the worship of a particular god as one's own patron without the denial of the existence of

other gods. Nebuchadnezzar continues to worship Marduk, yet he acknowledges that YHWH is God supreme over all other gods, and rulers over all kings.

In ancient logic, such respect is the proper and necessary reciprocation from Nebuchadnezzar for the interpretation of his dream. All the same, it is a striking concession, contrary to all expectation, that the patron deity of the conquered might be more powerful than the patron deity of the conqueror. Clearly, the book of Daniel intends the message to the Jews in exile: though *you* have been conquered, *your God* has not been. The leading worshipper of Marduk concedes as much, so they can take confidence in the supremacy of YHWH. As can we.

Day 2: Daniel 2:1-11 Nebuchadnezzar the dreamer

It may seem a little odd to us that Nebuchadnezzar places such importance in a dream ... perhaps it was just the result of eating pepperoni pizza too close to bedtime ... perhaps the dream arose simply from his own anxious subconscious. In many cultures, however, dreams are considered to have premonitory force, a way that the god(s) communicate with humans. In the ancient world, the interpretation of dreams and various other portends was a special prerogative of the Babylonians, particularly of the ethnic Chaldeans who ruled Babylon. This explains and underscores Nebuchadnezzar's response: YHWH's supremacy is proven by his superiority over the Chaldean's particular religious specialty.

What are we to make of dreams and their interpretation today? We see the spiritual significance of dreams at decisive moments within the Old Testament. For example, Joseph's entire life trajectory was both predicted and precipitated by his dream as a youth. Moreover, we see the spiritual significance of dreams (or visions) within the New Testament. The inclusion of gentiles in a then-Jewish church was precipitated by Peter's vision of unclean animals (Acts 10). And almost the entirety of the book of Revelation is one long vision. Additionally, story is told today of occasional Muslims who, without access to a Bible, come to faith in Christ through dreams about him. While affirming that God may still speak in dreams today, however, this does not mean that routine dreams are spiritually significant. Moreover, it is Scripture which provides us the clearest, and most reliable, revelation of God. So we do well to expend our efforts on understanding and living out Scripture, rather than on seeking revelatory dreams.

Day 3: Daniel 2:12-19a Daniel the role model

The Bible is first and foremost about God, and only secondarily about us. In this case, Daniel 2 centers on God's supremacy; Daniel himself is only a secondary character. So we do well, first, to ask what any passage tells us about God. Human examples are, at best, a secondary focus in Scripture; correspondingly, drawing moral lessons should be, at best, a secondary focus in reading Scripture. That acknowledged, the book of Daniel clearly intends its namesake to serve as a role model.

The overall lesson we can learn from the man Daniel is that the work of God is not accomplished by God alone. In Daniel 1, we meet a sovereign God, yet Daniel does not sit back and let God handle everything; he uses his God-given wisdom and social skills to negotiate an acceptable lifestyle. In Daniel 2, we meet a supreme God, yet Daniel does not sit back and let God handle everything. God's sovereignty and supremacy do not justify human passivity; to the contrary, his sovereignty and supremacy are what fortify the young man to act boldly.

In chapter 2 particularly, we note at least two commendable spiritual traits in Daniel. For one, he has the courage and confidence to speak up, and negotiate an alternative (2:14-16). For another, he seeks help, turning both to his comrades for support, and to God for mercy (2:17-19). God is supreme, yet we play strategic and crucial roles. In both ways, Daniel is obviously a role model for us in how to respond to crisis.

Day 4: Daniel 2:19b-23 Daniel the pray-er

To be sure that his advisors were not simply blowing smoke, the king sets them a verifiable challenge: they must not merely interpret his dream, they must recount it. The king's advisors were helpless before his test. In despair, they complain: "What the king asks is too difficult. No one can reveal it to the king except the gods, and they do not live among humans" (2:11). In direct contradiction, YHWH reveals both the dream and its meaning to Daniel. In response, the prophet lauds two attributes of God. For one, he is supreme: in wisdom and power, over times and seasons, over kings and rulers. For the other, he beneficently shares his knowledge with his people: he imparts wisdom and secrets, and answers prayers (2:20-23). So while Daniel plays a necessary role, this story is primarily about God, the God who is supreme in wisdom and in kindness.

Day 5: Daniel 2:24-30 Daniel the witness

This account highlights Daniel's refusal to take credit for the work of God. The king's commander lauds Daniel: "I have found a man ... who can

tell [you]" (2:25), and the king speaks similarly: "Are you able to tell me...?" Daniel shifts the credit to where it belongs: "No man – neither wise man nor enchanter, neither magician nor diviner – can explain these things, only God" (2:27-28). Such modesty is remarkably rare today. In a culture marked by self-promotion, the church too seems to take on this character. Daniel explains, "This mystery was not revealed to me, because I have greater wisdom than anyone else alive" (2:30). Today, however, even in the church we celebrate celebrities. Preachers with special charisma, leaders with particular dynamic, pastors with big churches, authors of compelling books, musicians with great voices: we may sing, "It's all about you, Jesus," but too often our adulation tells our celebrities that it is really all about them. And they seem remarkably reluctant to redirect our devotion to God: "I have no greater wisdom / nor skill / nor voice than anyone else alive!" Maybe as followers, we should reconsider our devotion; maybe we should expect our leaders to decline our praise. Maybe as Christians we should renounce the celebrity culture which rules both contemporary society and contemporary Church.

Day 6: Daniel 2:31-45 The kingdom that reigns forever

Among human rulers, Nebuchadnezzar was the greatest of his time, and of all the kingdoms to follow: his gold is succeeded by empires of silver, bronze, iron, and clay. Daniel even goes so far as to call him 'king of kings' (2:37). Yet no matter how great he may be, his kingdom and all those that follow will fall before the rock. This rock – not any human kingdom, but divine – strikes the statue, and pulverizes all its parts into a powder so fine that the wind blows it away (2:34-35). Then God will set up a divine kingdom, one that will never be destroyed, nor conquered by others. It will crush all kingdoms, and end all human rivals, enduring supreme forever (2:44-45).

Daniel does not say when exactly all this will happen, but Jesus does. For when Jesus comes, his central message is 'the kingdom (or 'reign') of God.' Jesus' core claim is that the reign of God predicted in Daniel has now come in him. Not in its fullness yet, until he returns. Nevertheless, the reign of God has begun, and it is an authority which crushes all competitors and conquers all rivals. It reigns supreme forever.

This promise of a future kingdom sustained the ancient Israelites in exile. The announcement of kingdom begun in Jesus sustains the suffering Church today. Whatever opposition we ever face, and however brutal rulers may be toward the people of God, they will all, sooner or later, bow before him, the king of kings and ruler of rulers.