

Humble Yourself Before the Sovereign One

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[0:00] Today we're going to tackle God's sovereignty, which is a big truth for Christians to get our heads around. We're going to understand how sovereignty relates to the governments that we hate.

We're going to see how sovereignty relates and what it has to say to the problem of evil and suffering in the world. It's a huge topic to handle. We've only got one sermon, which is why we're going to do a question time.

And so if anything I say provokes a question, jot it down and raise your hand later or text it in, that would be great. But the person teaching us today is going to be Nebuchadnezzar.

Normally the Old Testament is written by Jewish heroes for Jewish believers, but uniquely today Nebuchadnezzar is the teacher. And that means that chapter 4 is not written in Hebrew, which is the language of the Old Testament, but in Aramaic because that's the language of Babylon and the nations.

You see, in verse 1, Nebuchadnezzar wants the nations and people of every language who live in the earth, they want him to know how God humiliated him.

[1:12] So we're clear that God is the sovereign one. And he repeats himself again and again and again, over and over again, so we're clear on the big points.

I wonder if you spotted the repetition in the passage today. It's there in a poem, which is top and tailed in our passage. I think I cheated by making everything bold, but anyway, a poem, verse 3, how great are his signs, how mighty are his wonders.

His kingdom is an eternal kingdom. His dominion endures from generation to generation. And verse 34, over the page, the author finishes the poem, picking up where he left off.

His dominion is an eternal dominion. His kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth.

No one can hold back his hand or say to him, what have you done? And I wonder if you noticed alongside the poems, there's a constant talk of reaching up to heaven and heaven reaching down.

[2:19] 14 times that's actually mentioned in our story today. Alongside all of that, finally, there is a slogan which is punctuated three times throughout our passage.

I put it in bold. Verse 17, so that the living may know that the most high is sovereign over all the kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes.

That's repeated, verse 25, verse 35. It's a very clear main point, isn't it? God is the sovereign one. It's repeated with poems, with slogans, with a constant talk of heaven.

And it's fitting that Nebuchadnezzar is the one giving us the lesson. If anyone knows something about being most high and being sovereign, it is this king. You see, Babylon was one of the greatest kingdoms of the empire.

Its dominion reached to the ends of the earth. It was the center of the civilized world. It's hanging gardens, one of the ancient wonders of the world. But instead of bragging about how great he was, Nebuchadnezzar tells us how God humiliated him through his dreams.

[3 : 29] And so this is our first point. Speaking of dreams, I don't know, do you ever get recurring dreams? Do you ever wake up in a sweat? Are you one of those loud dreamers? No, no, like this in the middle.

Are you one of those? Well, for Nebuchadnezzar, it's more like nightmares. Look at verse four. I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at home in my palace, contented and prosperous, but I had a dream that made me afraid.

As I was lying in my bed, the images and visions that passed through my mind terrified me. And even though he's surrounded by all the wise men of Babylon, the magicians, enchanters, astrologers, diviners, verse seven, they could not interpret it for me.

Finally, Daniel came into my presence and I told him the dream. The dream is about a tree. Verse 10, its height is enormous. The tree grew large and strong.

Its top touched the sky. And the correct translation there is that the tree reached the top of heaven. You see, the Babylonians are obsessed with trying to reach heaven.

[4 : 37] They first tried with Babel, the tower of Babel in Genesis 11. In chapter two, which we didn't look at in this series, there's a huge statue. Babylon was the head.

Last week, a golden tower, 27 meters high, all of them very tall, very thin, trying to reach heaven. They're Bible pictures of pride and rebellion, of trying to reach God, reach heaven on your own without him.

Here it is represented by a tree. I don't know, what do you think makes a great tree? Maybe one that doesn't put, you know, leaves everywhere, or maybe a tree whose root system doesn't get in under the foundations of your house.

Well, Nebuchadnezzar's tree, verse 11, was visible to the ends of the earth. It was beautiful to look at. Its fruit was enough for all. It provided shelter for every creature.

As far as trees go, this one was the greatest. But in the dream, the tree is humbled. Verse 13, A holy one came down from heaven and ordered it to be cut down.

[5 : 48] And the idea of coming down from heaven, that is the key. Because from an earthly point of view, Nebuchadnezzar seemed taller than anyone, like he might actually reach heaven.

But from God's point of view, he's so small, he's so nothing, that God still has to reach down out of heaven, just to get to his level.

You see, if reaching up to heaven is a picture of pride and rebellion, heaven reaching down, is a picture of God putting him in his place. This tree is humbled.

It's cut down. Its leaves are stripped. The fruit and the animals scatter. It's only good for firewood. And the reason why? Verse 17, So that the living may know that the Most High is the Sovereign One over all the kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of people.

It's a scary dream for tall trees, a scary dream for Nebuchadnezzar, but spare a thought for Daniel, who now has to tell the king that it's about him.

[6 : 57] A king who's not known for his calm and measured responses. Verse 18, Now, Belk de Shazzar, which is Daniel in Aramaic, Belk de Shazzar, tell me what it means, for none of the wise men in my kingdom can interpret it for me, but you can, because the spirit of the holy gods is in you.

And basically, Daniel says, I wish this dream was for someone else, but it's actually about you. You're the tree, you've grown too big for your boots, and now God is going to humble you.

Verse 25, Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over all the kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes.

Nebuchadnezzar's only hope is verse 27. Therefore, Your Majesty, be pleased to accept my advice. Renounce your sins by doing what is right and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed.

It may be that then your prosperity will continue. And this is chapter 4 of Daniel. That means it's Nebuchadnezzar's fourth interaction with God.

[8 : 05] You would think that he would pay attention by now, but just 12 months later, what happens next? It's so tragic that it's almost comical.

Verse 29, As the king was walking on the roof of the palace of Babylon, he said, Is this not great Babylon that I have built as the royal residence by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?

And the drama of what happens next is unbelievable. Verse 31, Even as the words were on his lips, a voice came from heaven.

This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar. Your royal authority has been taken away from you. Verse 33, Immediately what has been said about Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled. He was driven away from people and ate grass like the ox.

His body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair grew like the feathers of an eagle. And his nails like the claws of a bird. It's such a bizarre event that no one would have expected it if they didn't see it.

[9 : 12] You see, Babylon was the most powerful city in the world. It was run by a megalomaniac who loved fiery furnaces and making tall towers of himself. Is this not great Babylon that I have built by my mighty power?

But you could imagine the Jewish exiles, how scary and unstoppable Babylon must have seemed. But in an instant, he is nothing.

The most powerful man is now less than a man and more like a beast. And no one expected him to be undone so quickly and just like that.

But it's just as Jesus said in the New Testament, isn't it? That everyone who exalts themselves will be humbled. Did you notice that it happens? Even as the words were on his lips, the most powerful king in the world is less than nothing, just like that.

And Nebuchadnezzar shares this humiliating story about what God did to him so that the nations and everyone will know that the Most High is the Sovereign One, that he is the one that rules over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes.

[10 : 26] You see, God's sovereignty is supposed to be a comfort for the believer. That even in beastly Babylon, God is in control. That their pride and rebellion will not go unchecked, that he will humble them.

But sometimes, sometimes God's sovereignty is a bitter pill to swallow. And I think it's for two main reasons.

The first reason is human free will. So people believe, especially in the West, we love our free will. We're happy that God is sovereign over some things.

So creation, the times, the seasons, the wind and the waves, we're happy about that. As long as God doesn't step on my free will.

You see, people think free will means being autonomous and in charge of our own lives. But we're not out of God's control, are we? We're not free and separate from God.

[11 : 27] We're not separate from other people. He is ruling over us in control of our lives, even though we make our own decisions. That's free will.

The other issue with sovereignty, the other reason people don't like it, is because when you mention God is sovereign and in control, someone invariably says, what about Hitler?

What about Stalin and Mao? Was God responsible for the millions of people that were killed in the 20th century? And so to make it an easier thing to grasp, what people do is they fence off areas of the world where God is and isn't in charge.

And so over creation, no problems. Over Christians, no worries. In control in the church, fine, no worries. But when it comes to hostile rulers and evil regimes, we fence off those areas and say, look, a loving God would love to help, but he's not in charge over that part of the world or over that regime there.

He's given them free will and he can't step on their toes. And so evil and suffering go unchecked. That's how they explain things like Germany in the 1930s.

[12 : 46] You see, God's sovereignty, it seems to suggest that he is to blame for evil and suffering in the world. And so it's vital that we realise that just because God's in control of the world doesn't mean he's responsible for everything that happens within it.

Hitler, Stalin, Mao, they obviously are wicked and do terrible things. Not every law passed by the state and federal government honours God.

He doesn't approve of everything, even though he's in control of everything. Just because God is sovereign over evil doesn't mean he's the author of evil.

We have to hold those two things together to have the Bible's understanding of sovereignty. And the place you see that most clearly is the cross.

Obviously, God is not happy with Judas, with the trial and what they're doing to his son, but he is in control at all times. He foretold it in scriptures, remember?

[13 : 50] Right down to the very details. Judas, Pilate, the Pharisees, they are playing out the script that God has written for them. It is more comforting for God to be in charge of evil and suffering than if it is left unchecked and in the world.

If those things are fenced off and God can't interfere, then what is the point of our prayers in our grief and suffering? God can't do anything about your grief and suffering because he's fenced off that part of the world and it's free will and evil that is in control.

God's sovereignty is more comforting. God being in control of evil is more comforting than if those parts of the world were fenced off and allowed to run unchecked by themselves.

In fact, God is so in charge of evil and suffering that he can flip it and make it serve his purposes. Remember Genesis? Joseph's brothers intended to harm him, but God intended it for good, to accomplish the saving of many nations.

Jesus, he is the stone the builders rejected, but God took their rejection and made him the cornerstone, a new building where everyone can have access to God.

[15 : 13] Every place where Christians are persecuted for their faith, the church grows and flourishes. You see, God's sovereignty means he's so in control, he can take his enemies' attacks, the persecution we face, and he can flip it and use it and make it serve his purposes, which are just and right and good.

Here is Nebuchadnezzar, a man who last week was throwing believers into fiery furnaces, but God has spun him around in dramatic fashion and made him an author in his Bible so that everyone will know in the language of the whole empire that God is the sovereign one and that free will is not ruling and that evil and suffering are not left unchecked in the world.

And even though we've begun to sort of apply this as we've been going, I want to close with five quick applications. One application for the non-Christian and four quick applications for the Christian.

So one and four. Firstly, for the non-Christian. At the end of the story, twice Nebuchadnezzar says that my sanity was restored.

So in other words, his pride and rebellion was insane, not sanity. And so for people here who are not Christians, please come to your senses and repent, which means verse 26.

[16 : 49] Acknowledge that the most high is sovereign in your life. And then do verse 27. Renounce your sins. Clearly, none of you have thrown any Christians into fiery furnaces, but even if you had, that is still not enough to not be forgiven and restored by God.

Please come to your senses and join us. Leave Babylon and join the living God and his people. Please come to your senses and repent.

Here's four quick applications for the Christians, which is most of us in the room. The poem, the first application is this. God will outlast the enemies that we fear.

God will outlast the enemies we fear. The poem that bookends this chapter, the one line it repeats in both the beginning and the end is that God's dominion is an eternal one.

And that's what you need to know when the leaders you dislike, the leaders we fear, seem scary and unstoppable. It could be a politician.

[17 : 58] It could be a manager. It could be a wicked regime. It might seem like we'll never be rid of them, but it's God's dominion that lasts and not theirs.

If Nebuchadnezzar is undone in an instant, then God can do the same thing to the leaders that we hate or fear or are wicked.

But even if they remain in power, remember verse 37, that God's ways are just and right. And so please trust that he's using their schemes, their policies, please trust that he's using their things to serve his just and right and good purposes.

That's leaders. The next application is about being passive. You see, if God can use good and bad alike to serve his purposes, lots of people think, well, what's the point of doing anything?

I might as well just sit with my hands in the air and let God do as he was going to do anyway. But sovereignty is not an invitation for Christians to be passive or inactive.

[19 : 07] Daniel doesn't sit back. He interprets dreams. He tells the king to repent. He opts for vegetables over meats. His three friends refused to bow down last week.

God being in control gives us the confidence not to be intimidated, not to conform to the regimes and the assimilation of Babylon, of Melbourne.

And when it comes to whether we assimilate or not, our guidance comes from the book of Acts where Peter says we must obey God and not men.

We submit to earthly rulers. We submit to their legitimate authority over us. Daniel, he was the prime minister of Babylon for 50 years. That means he furthered the cause of a pagan nation for 50 years.

If Daniel can do that, we can submit to our worldly leaders. But only until they ask us something that would be sinful. And then we should politely refuse because we obey God and not man.

[20 : 14] And so when it comes to assimilating or not, we need to be clear whether what we're being asked is something sinful or just something we disagree with for personal or political reasons.

The last application is about timing. Please don't confuse God's timing with ours. Just because God still hasn't humbled the Taliban doesn't mean he doesn't care about the Afghan people.

The same God who's in control of evil and suffering is the same God of love and mercy and kindness that you know. The same goes for our personal suffering. Just because God hasn't ended the hostility we face or that he allows something to happen doesn't mean that he's unfeeling or uncaring about it.

Please give God the time to work out our evil and suffering for his good purposes. The evil and suffering we face it will probably have to give an answer certainly the evil but also probably the suffering will have to give an answer to him on judgment day.

Just a story to finish. On Friday I met with a member of our congregation who's quite elderly and they're quite sick and after a long life they really want to go and be with the Lord and I told we had a conversation about sovereignty because we're doing that today and they said that 50 years ago they experienced a terrible personal tragedy that devastated them that made them suicidal and they pointed to me and said you Vijay you can't know this fully just yet because they pointed to my age and they said only now at the end of their lives can they look back and see how that one terrible event there how God used that here and here and here and here and now here at the end of their lives for his good purposes please be patient and be on the lookout for how God for how your grief and suffering fits into his purposes which are good and right and just

[22 : 34] I think that's enough for now please ask questions which is coming up in a moment let me pray Father God we praise you you are the eternal one you are the most high and we're so grateful that you're the sovereign one and not wicked people like Nebuchadnezzar we're so grateful that we are not sovereign Father thank you that you are in control even over our evil and suffering thank you that our prayers mean you can actually do something about it Father thank you that you will humble all wickedness all regimes and so Father please do that please humble and end the Taliban ISIS the situation in Myanmar please humble and end them Father please end opposition to you opposition that we face please would we be patient for your timing please Father help us to be on the lookout for how you're going to flip these things and make them serve your purposes just to humiliate them

Father help us to trust in you and your sovereignty in Jesus name Amen