

God Is In Control

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning once again. If I haven't said it already, it is a real privilege and pleasure to be among you here today.

! It is such a joy to worship among brothers and sisters in Christ. So before I begin, I'm just going to pray one more time.

Lord God, as we hear from your word today, may your word be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.

I pray, God, that through your spirit you would apply your words to our hearts, that we would be strengthened, that we would be encouraged, that we would be convicted, and that we would grow closer to you and become more like your son, Christ Jesus.

In your name we pray. Amen. Psalm 137, verse 4 asks, How can we sing songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?

[1 : 0 9] Is this a question on your heart today? Being a Christian in this world can often feel like being a lone soldier, surrounded by armies and enemy troops, like living in enemy territory.

Maybe you're the only Christian in your workplace or in your school, maybe even among your own family. Maybe the only day each week where you get to see other Christians is today, here at church, on Sundays.

The life of a Christian can be very lonely, a life of exile in this world. I grew up blessed to have Christian parents, and so I grew up surrounded by Christians, whether it was at church or at camps or youth club.

There was even a few Christians in the school I went to, so I was never far from other Christians. But the first time I truly felt like an exile as a Christian, the first time I truly felt that loneliness, was one summer when I went to the Geltacht to work on my Irish skills ahead of the leaving cert.

I was only there for about two weeks, but it was the first time I had spent two weeks without any other Christians nearby, that I knew of at the very least. And that experience really opened my eyes to just how different life in the world is compared to the Christian life.

[2 : 5 3] But it also opened my eyes to how easily I could be sucked into that world, how easily I began to behave like the people around me, how quick I was to gossip or slander or engage in vile speech, how prone I was to forsake Christ in pursuit of worldly things.

So how do we remain steadfast and on the narrow path in a world that is trying to drag us onto the broad road? How do we remain faithful to God?

How do we keep on trusting in him even when all around us, all we can see are the enemy forces? How can we sing songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?

The book of Daniel provides us with an answer to this question. In the book of Daniel, God's people are taken into captivity by a foreign nation and exiled from their homeland.

Yet even in the midst of such a devastating situation, the book of Daniel gives us a message of hope that God is sovereign over all things and the victory will always belong to him.

[4 : 14] Today we're going to be looking at Daniel chapter 1, specifically looking at verses 1 and 2, which were read earlier. But I'd like it if we could use these verses as a window into the rest of the book of Daniel.

And maybe you would be encouraged even this week to read through the book of Daniel following on from this. Daniel is such a timeless and exciting narrative and offers such an encouraging message of hope in light of this question of worshipping and serving God in a foreign land, which is particularly relevant to us in this day and age.

So as we look to our passage today, we're going to see three things. We're going to see that our sin is a very serious matter, that God's sovereignty is a serious matter, and that God's victory is a serious matter.

We are going to see that even when we are surrounded by evil, that God is sovereign, he is in control, and the victory belongs to him.

And we can see that this book starts right in the middle of the action. We are transported to the scene of a battle, if you look with me in verse 1. In the third year of the reign of Jehoiachin, king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem and besieged it.

[5 : 47] So there's a lot of information that's thrown at us right out of the gate. The empire of Babylon, under the rule of king Nebuchadnezzar, has come and attacked the city of Jerusalem, which is part of the kingdom of Judah, under the rule of king Jehoiachin.

We're not given any information as to why Babylon has come, but as you read on in the story of Daniel, you'll begin to see that this king Nebuchadnezzar has a bit of an ego on him.

So expanding his kingdom is certainly fitting for the kind of person he is. But we know that there's more at play here than some egomaniac trying to flex his muscles.

This is the kingdom of Judah we're talking about here. Judah was the southern kingdom of the nation of Israel, which was the nation of God's chosen people.

And the capital of the kingdom of Judah was the city of Jerusalem. This is God's city, the city of his temple, where he chose to dwell among his people.

[7 : 00] Just think about that with me for one moment. the transcendent and eternal God, bound by nothing, chooses to localize his presence there in Jerusalem.

Well, if I were an Israelite at this time, I would be thinking, oh, Babylon wants to take over us? Well, let them come. We have God with us. We have God on our side.

Surely nothing, surely the city could never be defeated. Except that's not how things play out, is it?

We see here that Babylon comes to Jerusalem, lays siege to the city, and ultimately claims the victory. Why would God allow this to happen to his holy city?

Why would God hand his chosen people and his chosen place over to the enemy? To answer this question, we have to realize that this is something God had warned about.

[8 : 04] In the book of Deuteronomy, right before God's people enter the promised land, Moses gives a sermon reminding the people of who they are and where they have come from, but more importantly, who their God is and what he has done for them.

He tells them that they will have peace and that they will even prosper in the land, but if they turn away from God and if they turn to idols and they start living lives that are pleasing to themselves and not pleasing to the Lord, that there will be consequences.

And as we read in Deuteronomy 28, one of those consequences is that the Lord will bring a nation against you from far away, from the ends of the earth, like an eagle swooping down, a nation whose language you will not understand, a fierce-looking nation without respect for the old or pity for the young.

They will besiege all the cities throughout the land the Lord your God is giving you. So we see that God allowing the Babylonians to capture Jerusalem should not be something that surprises us.

Daniel chapter 1 verse 1 is simply the warning given in Deuteronomy coming to fruition. The reason that we may find this surprising is that God is so patient with his people, giving them hundreds and hundreds of years to repent and turn back to him, sending prophet after prophet to warn the people to come back.

[9 : 47] God is a holy God. He takes sin very seriously. He's also a just God who brings punishment to sin. Brothers and sisters, if we claim to be a new covenant people of God, can we say that we take personal holiness seriously?

Do we have tolerance for sin in our own lives? Do we tolerate, justify, rationalize, or in pride cling to our sin?

Or maybe we look at the people in the world around us and say, well, I'm not as bad as them. I'm doing okay. But this is not a biblical view of sin.

I'm a big fan of the Lord of the Rings, and if you're in any way familiar with that story, you'll know that one of the primary villains are the orcs, who are these evil and corrupted creatures hell-bent on destroying all that is good.

If you're in any way familiar with these stories, do you think anyone has ever read through the Lord of the Rings or watched the movies and came out at the end saying, you know, I think the orcs were treated unfairly in this story?

[11 : 08] I don't think so. Because when you see the depths of their depravity, when you see the evil and the cruelty of the acts they commit, when you see the hatred they are fueled by, you want to see them brought to justice.

You're happy to see them lose, and you rejoice when they are defeated. If only we could see ourselves in this way.

If we only could see our sin from God's point of view. If we could only see the wrath of God that we truly deserve for our sin.

Would we go on in our sin without a care? Or would we come to God, humble and brokenhearted, in true repentance, with a true willingness to change our ways?

Sin is not something that we can afford to take lightly. Sin destroys everything that it touches. Sin destroys our confidence.

[12 : 17] It destroys our relationships. It destroys our marriages. It destroys our ministries. There is no room for compromise when it comes to sin.

Either we are killing sin, or our sin is killing us. And if we are to be a covenant people of God in a foreign land, it is crucial for us to have a clear view of sin and to take our sin seriously.

This way we will not be enticed by its deceptive nature, calling us to partake in it and telling us that no one will find out. We must resolve not to defile ourselves by giving in to sin, just as Daniel resolved not to defile himself, as you'll see in verse 8, by eating the food of the Babylonians.

So what's something that you can resolve not to defile yourself by doing in this coming week? This is probably a question we need to ask ourselves regularly.

And then we need to pray that God will give us the strength to stand firm. As we look now to verse 2, we're going to see one of the major themes of Daniel introduced.

[13 : 38] And that's the theme of the sovereignty of God over all things. Look with me in verse 2. And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim, king of Judah, into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God.

He carried off to the temple of his God in Babylonia. And he put the treasure, and put in the treasure house of his God.

Do you see in this phrase, the Lord delivered Jehoiakim into his hand, how the theme of the sovereignty of God is being introduced?

We see similar phrases all throughout the book of Daniel, such as in verse 9, where God calls the official to show favor and compassion to Daniel. Or how in verse 17, we see God gives Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning.

And of course, in chapter 6, we see that God shuts the mouths of the lions so that no harm would come to Daniel. The mighty hand of God can be seen at work all throughout the book of Daniel.

[14 : 53] There's absolutely nothing that happens that is outside of his control. This is what we call the sovereignty of God. And we can find the doctrine of the sovereignty of God difficult to understand at times.

It's a challenging doctrine. And many Christians have proposed different ways through which we can understand God's sovereignty. But the question we need to be asking ourselves is, how are we going to respond to God's sovereignty?

We can respond in two ways. In stiff-necked pride or in soft-hearted humility. The book of Daniel shows us how not to respond to God's sovereignty through King Nebuchadnezzar.

The story of Daniel starts off with his victory. If you were King Nebuchadnezzar, you would probably think that you have caused to be pretty proud of yourself after winning this battle.

The opening image we see of Nebuchadnezzar is one of power and strength and glory. But by the end, the image we see of Nebuchadnezzar is one of fear and trembling before the one who is truly strong, truly powerful, and truly glorious.

[16 : 16] fear and trembling before the sovereign Lord. And this comes to a head in chapter 4, verse 37, where King Nebuchadnezzar declares, Now I, King Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of Heaven, because everything he does is right, and all his ways are just.

And those who walk in pride, he is able to humble. What an amazing picture of the sovereignty of God. Brothers and sisters, let's not be like King Nebuchadnezzar.

Many people in this world think they are where they are today as a result of their own skill or strength or intelligence or hard work or maybe even just luck.

If you were to even to suggest to some people that God's, the extension of God's mercy and grace has anything to do with where they are in life, they would be offended by that suggestion.

What has God ever done for me? But that is the epitome of pride. Nothing can happen outside of God's sovereign will.

[17 : 34] We must learn to humbly submit to his will in all things and to recognize his sovereign hand in our lives and not try to take the credit for ourselves.

And to those who do respond humbly to the sovereign will of God, what peace is theirs? Friends, as God's children, the joy and the peace and the assurance of knowing that our sovereign king is in control belongs to us.

We may feel for now that the world belongs to the enemy. Everywhere we look we see devastation and the effects of the fall. We see it in our sin.

We feel it in our pain, in our suffering, in our sickness, in our heartbreaks, when we're let down by others, when we're persecuted. And yet, in all these things, we can have peace because we know that God is in control and that he is working all things together for good for those who love him and are called according to his purpose.

Not just some things, all things. So how can we become a people who submit to the sovereign will of God in all things?

[19 : 05] One observation we can make from the book of Daniel is through prayer. Throughout Daniel's time in exile, he and his fellow Israelites are put in many situations where they have to choose between denying God or facing death.

And one notable example is in chapter 6. You don't need to turn there. I'm just referencing it. Where a law is brought in that for 30 days everyone must worship and pray to the king who at this point is Darius the Mede.

Failure to do so would result in being thrown in a den of lions. So when Daniel hears about this new law, what does he do? His automatic reaction is recorded in verse 10 of chapter 6.

Now when Daniel learned of the decree that had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened towards Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed giving thanks to God just as he had done before.

He didn't make a fuss about it. Without any hesitation, he keeps on praying. This should tell us something about how necessary prayer is to the Christian life.

[20 : 29] Daniel was not willing to skip one day of prayer. He wasn't even willing to change his routine to avoid being caught. Nothing was going to make Daniel compromise his time in prayer.

Why? Was it because God was going to give him his every wish, his every desire? Or maybe it was because he found prayer relaxing or therapeutic?

No. It is because through prayer we learn to humbly submit to the will of God. Now, don't misunderstand me. We absolutely should bring our requests before God.

But the ultimate purpose of prayer is that we will grow closer to God. Not that we would get what we want, but that we would conform to God's will for our lives.

That is why when Christ taught us to pray, he taught us to say, your will be done. Joseph Scriven was a preacher from Ireland born in 1819.

[21 : 36] He lived a life full of trials. When he was just 24, shortly before his wedding, his fiancée tragically drowned. The following year, he left Ireland for Canada where he began to suffer from an illness for the rest of his life.

Later on, he fell in love again and was engaged to be married. But his fiancée fell ill with pneumonia and tragically died. When his mother fell ill, he wrote a poem called Pray Without Ceasing to encourage her.

And the words of this poem ended up becoming a wonderful hymn. They contained the following words. Are we weak and heavy laden, cumbered with a load of care?

Precious Savior, still our refuge. Take it to the Lord in prayer. Do your friends despise, forsake you?

Take it to the Lord in prayer. In his arms, he'll take and shield you. You will find a solace there. Friends, I don't know what you're going through today.

[23 : 00] I don't know what trials you're facing. maybe you're finding it hard to understand what God is doing. We may not always see or understand what he's doing or why he's doing it, but what we can know and what we can set our hope upon is that he is in control and he is worthy of our trust.

When we struggle, when we feel the weight of living as an exile in this world, we can come to him in prayer. Not because he's going to take all the pain away in this life, not because he'll make all the trials disappear, but because he will teach us to trust in his sovereign will and he will teach us to rely on him for strength and for comfort in every situation.

salvation. And not only can we know that our God is sovereign, not only can we have confidence that he is working all things for his glory and for our good, but we can also know that the ultimate victory belongs to him.

In the second half of verse two, we see the Babylonians take the articles from the Lord's temple back to Babylon and place them in the temple of their own God, their own false God.

In ancient times, people believed that victory in battle represented the strength of their own God. So when the Babylonians took the articles from the temple of the Lord and placed them in their own temple, it would have been seen as the ultimate symbol that the God of Israel was no match for the gods of Babylon.

[24 : 53] I'm sure I don't need to explain to you how devastating this would have been for the people of Israel, particularly for those who were holding true to the covenant that God had made with them. As far as they could see and as far as their enemies could see, their God had been defeated.

And we can relate to this feeling, can't we? Our culture has waged war against God, and as far as it's concerned, it's winning. Even in just these last few years, we've seen same-sex marriage and abortion legalized in Ireland.

These felt like devastating losses to God's people in Ireland. But those were just two symptoms of a culture throwing aside the true God and making the self the new God.

God, do you find it hard to hold on to hope when it seems like you're on the losing side of the battle? Can you feel the pull into the world at times?

It can be so easy for us to become disheartened. Brothers and sisters, can I encourage you today that God has made a habit of snatching the victory from the depths of defeat?

[26 : 18] We all love a good plot twist, don't we? My favorite would be the Battle of Helm's Deep in The Lord of the Rings where Gandalf comes in at the end with the army and turns the battle around.

Another great one is when Aslan is put to death in Narnia and all seems lost and you're losing on to hope. You're finding it hard to hold on and yet somehow against all the odds good finds a way to triumph over evil.

Well, there's no greater plot twist writer than our God. Even in this book of Daniel, the articles that were taken from the temple of God that represented the triumph of Babylon over Judah, it is those very articles that lead to the overnight collapse of the Babylonian empire.

when Belshazzar, son of Nebuchadnezzar, orders them to be taken out so that he can use them for his party while praising false gods. In chapter five it says, that very night, Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom at the age of 62.

The victory belongs to the Lord. The victory belongs to the Lord. The book of Daniel teaches us that God is never defeated and that he even turns losing battles into great victories.

[27 : 56] The plot twists in the book of Daniel are fantastic, which is one of the reasons I'd encourage you to read over the book if you haven't looked at it in a while. but these plot twists are just a little foretaste of the great plot twist of scripture.

There is a greater victory claimed from the clutches of defeat and it is this victory that is the reason we're all gathered here today. Nearly 500 years after Daniel, a man named Jesus was born.

He lived a perfect life. He never once gave into temptation. He performed miracles and preached the good news of the forgiveness of sin.

And yet although he was innocent, he was bruised and beaten and hung up on a cross to die an agonizing death and then buried.

Even his closest followers abandoned him because they thought he had been defeated. And who wouldn't have thought he had been defeated? But that's not the entire story, is it?

[29 : 10] He rose again, claiming the victory over sin and death. His tomb is empty and he is now seated at the right hand of the Father.

He has been given all authority, glory, and sovereign power. people of every nation worship him and his kingdom will never be destroyed.

And the best part of this victory is that his victory is now our victory for whoever would believe in him will not perish but will live forever free from the chains of sin as children of the most high God.

Christ as our champion has won this victory for his glory and for our good. Let me finish with this.

Why do happy endings appeal to us the way that they do? When you reach the end of a good book like the Lord of the Rings or Narnia or the book of Daniel and Good has finally had the last say over evil against all odds, what is it about this that is so appealing to our hearts?

[30 : 34] The writer of The Lord of the Rings, J.R.R. Tolkien, answered this question with these words. It is not difficult to imagine the peculiar excitement and joy that one would feel if any specially beautiful story were found to be true.

its narrative to be history without losing the mythical or allegorical significance it had possessed. The joy would have exactly the same quality, if not the same degree, as the joy which the turn in a story gives.

Such joy has the very taste of primary truth because it looks forward to the great joy, the Christian joy, joy, the gloria, is of the same kind, but it is preeminently high and joyous.

This story is supreme and it is true. Why do happy endings touch us the way that they do? Because they in some way point us to the great happy ending that Christ has achieved by his death and resurrection for us while we were still hopeless.

It is this great story that you and I are one small part of today. This great story that you are invited to be a part of if you put your faith and your hope in Christ.

[32 : 07] It is for this beautiful story that we can sing songs to the Lord while exiled in a foreign land for now. Who else is worth becoming an exile for?

Nothing in this world could ever offer or could ever compare to knowing him. Jesus says, for whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life from me will find it.

If you hear his voice calling you today, don't harden your heart. Christ chose to lay aside his place in glory, to come to this world to live as one of us and yet so completely like us.

He was a stranger in this world. He was an exile. And because of what he has done for us, we too can live as exiles in this world, just as he did.

But not as exiles who wander aimlessly through this life. We are exiles who know that our king is coming back again to reign.

[33 : 23] We are exiles who serve and sing to the great God who redeemed us from the clutches of this world, out of the clutches of sin and death.

that we would have the great honor of sharing in his great victory. Let me finish in prayer.

Lord God, what a privilege it is to share in your victory. What a privilege it is to know you, to be part of this amazing story, this amazing history that you are weaving together with your sovereign hand.

Lord God, help us. We need your help. We need your help to resolve not to sin. We need your help to see your sovereign hand even when it feels impossible.

We need your help to know that you are the one who is victorious. That there is nothing in this world that surprises you, that can overcome you.

[34 : 42] You are the one who is great. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen.