

The Essential Issue in the Presidential Election
Daniel 4:19-37

My sermon title this morning is, “*The Essential Issue in the Presidential Election.*”

Pull up an editorial or blog post about the election and you will have someone’s opinion about what the most critical issue in the election is. Opinions abound:

- ✓ The makeup of the Supreme Court and the opportunity to appoint pro-life jurists to it.
- ✓ The importance of issues related to gender, homosexuality, and marriage.
- ✓ Critical decisions related to religious liberty that loom in the next few years.
- ✓ Race and racism and the threat of terrorist attacks against the United States.
- ✓ The moral ability (or inability) of the candidates to lead.

It is no overstatement to say *everyone* has an opinion about the most critical component in this presidential election, and most of those opinions are adamant.

Yet for the believer, there is one issue that supersedes all these issues, and any others that someone might propose. It is that God is sovereign over the election. Whatever happens on November 8 will be God’s will for this country and fully within His power and authority to use as He wills. And that, friends, is of great comfort for the believer. The sovereign control of God over the election and all things means that the believer can rest in the God who is behind all events and not be anxious or fearful.

This doctrine is not a minor issue. It addresses the central claim of God to be God — He is God because He is sovereign. If there exists even one renegade atom that operates apart from God’s hand of guidance, if there is one decision that is made apart from His rulership over it, if Satan can operate outside the authority of God for even the twinkling of an eye, then God is not sovereign and is in fact not God. In fact, if God is not sovereign, then someone — or something — else has greater authority, knowledge and rulership than God, and He is subject to that one.

The theme of the message this morning is:

GOD IS SOVEREIGN OVER ALL GOVERNORS AND GOVERNMENTS.
AND BECAUSE GOD IS SOVEREIGN WE ~~CAN~~ MUST BE CONTENT.

- 1. A Definition of Sovereignty**
- 2. An Overview of God’s Sovereignty Over the Nations**
- 3. An Overview of God’s Sovereignty Over Nebuchadnezzar**
- 4. A Summary of Response to God’s Sovereignty**

GOD IS SOVEREIGN OVER ALL GOVERNORS AND GOVERNMENTS.

AND BECAUSE GOD IS SOVEREIGN WE ~~CAN~~ MUST BE CONTENT.

1. A Definition of Sovereignty

- Sovereignty has been defined in several ways:
 - ✓ “God does as He pleases, only as He pleases, always as He pleases. None can thwart Him, none can hinder Him....God is God in fact, as well as in name...” [A. W. Pink]
 - ✓ “Everything...that happens does so because God wills it to happen, wills it to happen *before* it happens, wills it to happen *in the way* that it happens.” [Derek Thomas]
 - ✓ “God’s providence is His constant care for and His absolute rule over all His creation for His own glory and the good of His people.” [Jerry Bridges]
- When we speak of God’s sovereignty, it means that He has absolute dominion, authority and rulership over all things, and He works all things in accordance with His infinite character and eternal purposes.
- When we speak of God’s sovereignty in history and over nations, we are referring to the truth that God ordains, plans, directs, controls, and rules over all the events of human history and governments. *Nothing* is a surprise to Him, and *nothing* happens apart from His direct control over it.
- So let me combine a couple of those definitions into one larger comprehensive definition: “Everything that happens does so because God wills it to happen, wills it to happen before it happens, wills it to happen the way it happens, and wills it in those ways for our good and His glory.”
- Is there a biblical justification for saying these things?

2. An Overview of God’s Sovereignty Over the Nations

- God is sovereign over His PEOPLE:
 - ✓ God does and will keep His covenant nation Israel — Dt. 7:9; Ps. 121:4-5; Dan. 9:4.
 - ✓ God will keep His redeemed people — 2 Tim. 1:12; 1 Pt. 1:4ff.
- God is sovereign over secular GOVERNMENTS and RULERS: (Is. 44:28 – 45:7)

- Dan. 2:21 “It is He who changes the times and the epochs; He removes kings and establishes kings; He gives wisdom to wise men And knowledge to men of understanding.
- Psa. 75:6-7 For not from the east, nor from the west, Nor from the desert comes exaltation; But God is the Judge; He puts down one and exalts another.
- Ezra 6:22 And they observed the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the LORD had caused them to rejoice, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them to encourage them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

- *Rom. 13:1-2 Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves.*

• **God is sovereign over political DECISIONS:**

- *Prov. 16:33 The lot is cast into the lap, But its every decision is from the LORD. (cf. 1 Chron. 24:5; Esth. 3:7; Prov. 18:18; Lk. 1:9; Acts 1:26)*
- *2 Sam. 17:14 Then Absalom and all the men of Israel said, "The counsel of Hushai the Archite is better than the counsel of Ahithophel." For the LORD had ordained to thwart the good counsel of Ahithophel, so that the LORD might bring calamity on Absalom.*
- *1 Kings 12:15 So the king [Rehoboam] did not listen to the people; for it was a turn of events from the LORD, that He might establish His word, which the LORD spoke through Ahijah the Shilonite to Jeroboam the son of Nebat.*
- *Prov. 21:1 The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wishes.*

• **God is sovereign over military BATTLES:**

- *Judg. 7:2-3, 22 The LORD said to Gideon, "The people who are with you are too many for Me to give Midian into their hands, for Israel would become boastful, saying, 'My own power has delivered me.' Now therefore come, proclaim in the hearing of the people, saying, 'Whoever is afraid and trembling, let him return and depart from Mount Gilead.'" So 22,000 people returned, but 10,000 remained....When they blew 300 trumpets, the LORD set the sword of one against another even throughout the whole army; and the army fled as far as Beth-shittah toward Zererah, as far as the edge of Abel-meholah, by Tabbath.*
- *1 Sam. 14:6, 20 Then Jonathan said to the young man who was carrying his armor, "Come and let us cross over to the garrison of these uncircumcised; perhaps the LORD will work for us, for the LORD is not restrained to save by many or by few."...Then Saul and all the people who were with him rallied and came to the battle; and behold, every man's sword was against his fellow, and there was very great confusion.*
- *2 Kings 5:1 Now Naaman, captain of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man with his master, and highly respected, because by him the LORD had given victory to Aram. The man was also a valiant warrior, but he was a leper.*
- *Ps. 33:16 The king is not saved by a mighty army; A warrior is not delivered by great strength.*
- *Ps. 33:17 A horse is a false hope for victory; Nor does it deliver anyone by its great strength.*

- *Prov. 21:31 The horse is prepared for the day of battle, But victory belongs to the LORD.*
- *Psa. 20:7 Some boast in chariots and some in horses, But we will boast in the name of the LORD, our God.*

- **God is sovereign over FUTURE world history:** Dan. 2; Revelation (cf. **Rev. 19:11-16** where Christ will slay the nations simply by speaking a word — “you’re dead?”).
 - ✓ There is no part of history that escapes the sovereign hand of God.
 - ✓ I’m old enough to remember the Cold War and the end of Viet Nam. I have read about WWII and the Civil War and the Revolution and Middle Ages and Rome and Greece; I’ve been to Cambodia (with Jack and Susie) and Uganda where two of the most cruel dictators of the 20th century ruled. I’ve seen and studied about and experienced a variety of governments. And God was over them all.
 - ✓ In 10 days we will elect leaders for our own nation — we don’t know who will win, but we can be fully content that every single one will be the servant of God, unable to act apart from God’s permission...
 - ✓ God is sovereign over the President, Supreme Court, mayors, the decisions of congress, and even the IRS and Wall Street!
 - ✓ Jerry Bridges summarized God’s sovereignty over the nations well when he wrote:

“The so-called sovereign nations of the world are not truly sovereign. They are nothing more than instruments in the hand of God to accomplish His will: sometimes to protect His people; sometimes to open doors for advancement of the gospel, and sometimes to be His instrument of judgment against ungodliness.”
 [Trusting God, 89.]

3. An Overview of God’s Sovereignty Over Nebuchadnezzar

- **The PURPOSE** (4:1-2, 17b; cf. also vv. 3, 25, 32, 34ff) — to demonstrate superiority of God as Most High.
 - ✓ The title, **Most High God** appears 31x in the OT and 9x in the NT. Interestingly, this is a title that non-Jews often use of God (e.g., Gen. 14:19; Num. 24:16; Is. 14:14).
 - ✓ This title is in contrast to the title Nebuchadnezzar uses for himself — **the king of all the peoples** (v. 1). He may have considered himself to be the king of all the peoples, but God as the Most High is over Nebuchadnezzar, and Nebuchadnezzar does not have the sovereignty he ascribed to himself.
 - ✓ God is great; Nebuchadnezzar is not, and he would be humbled until he came to that admission.
 - The word **great** is dominant in this passage (cf. vv. 3, 11, 20, 22, 30). Men may be said to be great; ultimately, only God is great.
 - God is great in His actions — cf. Ps. 145:3, 6 (miracles); 2 Sam. 7:21 (covenant); 2 Sam. 7:23 (removing obstacles to taking the land). God is great in Himself — Josh. 7:9; 1 Sam. 12:22; 1 Kings 8:42; 2 Chron. 6:32; Ps. 76:1; 99:3; 145:3, 6; Jer. 10:6; 44:26; Ezk. 36:23; Mal. 1:11. His name stands for His character and reputation (Ex. 3:15), His doctrine (Ps. 22:22; Jn. 17:6), His ethics (Mic. 4:5), and His attributes (Ps. 139).

- Nebuchadnezzar is not great in any of these ways.
- ✓ And as Nebuchadnezzar is the author of this account (4:1a; the only portion of Scripture written by an unbeliever) he writes this to his own condemnation! He has come to realize that his own kingdom, as vast as it is, cannot compare to God's kingdom.
- ✓ The story of Nebuchadnezzar is an exemplary illustration of the reality that God is sovereign over every nation and every ruler. No one can escape his authority.
- ✓ This account demonstrates that it is God who chooses who will wear earthly crowns; sometimes He will exalt the lowly, and sometimes he will humble the exalted for His purposes (cf. 2:20-23).
- To demonstrate His authority, God gave Nebuchadnezzar a dream that neither he nor his interpreters (*magicians*) understood (vv. 11-17). [Someone has aptly titled vv. 18-35 of Nebuchadnezzar's story, "From Caviar to Crabgrass"!]]

- The **INTERPRETATION** (vv. 18-26)

- ✓ 18 — Daniel was called in only after Nebuchadnezzar's magicians were of no help.
- ✓ 19 — **Daniel was appalled for a while** (lit., "an hour") — what would he say!!!!? Neb. was the king that took Daniel and Israel into captivity from Israel to Babylon, yet he still wanted good for him (notice, *if only the dream applied to those who hate you...*). Daniel found no pleasure in the looming humiliation of Neb. [Was that because he frequently prayed for Neb. (6:10)?] There is a good lesson for us as we contemplate life under rulers we don't love or respect.
- ✓ 20 — **the tree** — at least 9x in the OT, a tree was used to refer to rulers and their leadership and authority (Is. 2:12-13; 10:34; Ezk. 17:22-24; 19:10; 31:1-9; Amos 2:9; Is. 6:13; 11:1; Dan. 4).
 - The tree provided food (21) & protection/lodging (21) for people and that was what Neb. did.
 - The height and expanse of the tree pictured influence and authority (22). The fact that Neb's branches **reached to the sky and your dominion to the end of the earth** indicated that influence. There was no earthly ruler greater than Neb. (Don't forget the theme of this passage — to exalt God as **the Most High**.)
 - But when the tree was cut down (v. 23) it pictured, "The king who delighted in cutting down trees would himself be cut down." [Showers, 44.]
- ✓ 23 — **leave the stump**, i.e., the taproot. While incapacitated, it/he is not dead! The **bands** indicated the protection of the stump — Someone beside himself protected Neb's life. And notice that Daniel personalizes the dream; with the pronouns **he...him**, Daniel's not talking about a tree, but Neb.
- ✓ 24 — **The interpretation** is not Daniel's interpretation, but it comes from **the Most High** — a reminder that God is sovereign and Neb. is not.
- ✓ 25 — **you will be given grass to eat** is translated better as, "you will be made to eat..." Neb. not only wasn't sovereign over the nations or his empire, but he wasn't even sovereign over his next meal.
- ✓ 26 — **your kingdom will be assured** = i.e., no one else would usurp his throne; that was highly unusual, given the prominence of Babylon and the length of Nebuchadnezzar's incapacity. Some suggest that perhaps Daniel assumed prominence. We don't know.

- ✓ And the final aspect of the interpretation is that Neb. had to acknowledge that ***it is Heaven that rules***. “Heaven” refers to God (the only time it is used that way in the OT). Given that Neb. found his identity in his kingdom, Daniel was affirming that another Kingdom (and King) was greater.

- The **WARNING** (v. 27)

- ✓ 27 — ***break away now...*** (rip out your sins; e.g., Ex. 32:2) the interpretation was followed by a plea for repentance (had he repented, God would have relented; cf. Jonah).
- ✓ We can identify Neb’s sins by noticing what he was called to do instead of the sin:
 - ***doing righteousness*** — the word denotes not only morality in opposition to wickedness, but suggests charity and liberality in giving. It indicates that what Neb. had been doing was a self-indulgent gratification of the flesh rather than serving his people for their benefit.
 - ***showing mercy to the poor*** indicates that Neb. had oppressed the poor, likely in his quest to build a powerful empire and city. Instead of oppressing them, he is to grant mercy to them.
 - Both of these sins again affirm the pride and arrogance of Neb. He believed himself preeminent above all people. And Daniel warned him that if he didn’t change it would all be removed.

- The **RESULT** (vv. 28-33)

- ✓ 29-30 — ***twelve months later...“Is this not Babylon the great...?”*** Babylon indeed was great:
 - Few monarchs in history have reached the heights of power and glory of Nebuchadnezzar.
 - Babylon was a marvel of urban planning...
 - ... The city was laid out in rectangular patterns with wide connecting streets.
 - ... A bridge across the Euphrates River connected eastern (new) city with western (old) city
 - Stone piers on each side of the river were 600 feet apart, anchoring the bridge
 - The bridge had a 30-foot wide footpath made of wooden planks taken up each night to prevent inhabitants from the other side from coming across and stealing
 - ... Houses varied in size from 60 ft by 60 ft, up to 130 ft. by 130 ft. (8-26 rooms in each)
 - ... The city was protected on east by an outer wall at least 11 miles long (perhaps 55 miles???) and entire city surrounded by a series of walls that was virtually impenetrable. Inner wall was 21’ thick (wide enough for several chariots to ride side-by-side) and outer was 11’ thick, with 360 watch towers along the wall — as much as 90’ tall, providing opportunity to entrap and destroy any invaders between the two walls. All this was further surrounded by moat.
 - ... One could enter the city through eight gates; the most famous was Ishtar Gate (north of city) — it was 47’ tall and constructed from lapis lazuli glazed bricks with motifs of a bull and dragon, symbolizing two of the Babylonian gods. That gate opened onto a 1000-meter long road called the Processional Way (73-1/2 ft. wide), paved with imported stones and lined with a wall embossed with 120 enameled lions (symbol of goddess Ishtar) every 64’ and 575 more bulls and dragons.

... Along this Processional was “the House of the Foundation of Heaven and Earth,” a 300 foot structure made of as many as 58 million bricks and likely visible for miles around the city.
... Nebuchadnezzar’s palace was inside the city and was the place of the famed Hanging Gardens — one of the ancient world’s seven wonders.

- Babylon was a marvel of architectural planning and construction — the greatest city in the world in its day. The accomplishments there were staggering and spectacular, with the culture reaching its pinnacle both in battle and culture. “The empire had reached its zenith, not only on the battlefield, but also in its cultural and architectural achievements.” [Kaiser, 41]
- ✓ 31 — ***While the word was in the king’s mouth...“sovereignty has been removed...”*** — He hadn’t even finished bragging when God interrupted and told him the kingdom was gone... “Unlike God the eternal King with an infinite kingdom (vv. 2-3) and unlimited sovereignty, your kingdom is taken away and the emptiness of your authority will be made clear!!!” Everything he built exalted himself and it was all removed in an instant (like what happens to all men at death).
- ✓ 33 — ***Immediately*** = there was *no* lapse of time. He went from overseeing his kingdom to eating like a cow with hair like feathers and nails like a bird’s claws. Some have suggested that this is the rare disease “boanthropy” (“cow-man”), but it is better to see it as a historically unique judgment of God. The point isn’t that this was a common disease, but the uncommon action of a sovereign God. God was doing something unique and distinct to make His point that He is ***Most High***.

• The **GRACE** (v. 34) This is a story of God’s judgment and of God’s grace.

- ✓ ***But*** — don’t you love the word “but” in Scripture (e.g., Eph. 2:4)? But God intervened. And it took the gracious intervention of God to change Neb. He could do nothing different for himself. He was dependent on God to change his circumstance; and God did.
- ✓ ***I raised my eyes toward Heaven*** needs to be taken as a form of repentance. He is in submission to God. (Likely was in rebellion all those seven years!)
- ✓ And as a result of his repentance, his sanity was restored. This is God’s grace!
- ✓ The story is filled with God’s grace. Nebuchadnezzar himself understands this to be a story of God’s grace (v. 3). What if grace was removed from the story? What if every element that includes God’s unmerited kindness and favor was removed?
 - There would have been no dream (dreams! cf. ch. 2) to warn Nebuchadnezzar.
 - Nebuchadnezzar would not have been unsettled by the dream (cf. v. 15 — pronoun change)
 - Nebuchadnezzar’s magicians would have deluded him with false interpretations.
 - Daniel would have not been unavailable or unwilling to interpret.
 - Daniel would not have warned Nebuchadnezzar to repent (v. 27).
 - Nebuchadnezzar would have not had 12 months to repent (v. 29).
 - Nebuchadnezzar would have been left in his judged condition & unawakened
- ✓ In the midst of warning and judgment there was still tremendous grace from God.

4. A Summary of Response to God's Sovereignty (vv. 35-37)

- Whatever else we learn about Nebuchadnezzar in this story — the story is not about him. The story is about God and His sovereignty. This is not even Nebuchadnezzar's story about God; it's God's story about Nebuchadnezzar, and even more, it is God's story about God. Here are four lessons...

1. Learn to honor God for His sovereignty

- Notice all the references to God's sovereignty in this story —
 - ... 24 — *this is the decree...*
 - ... 25 — *you will be driven away...be given grass to eat...7 periods of time over you...Most High is ruler...*
 - ... 26 — *it was commanded...Heaven rules*
 - ... 28 — *all this happened to Nebuchadnezzar...*
 - ... 31-32 — *sovereignty has been removed...*
 - ... 34 — *my reason returned to me* — i.e., even his reason was a gift of grace!
 - ... 17, 25, 32 — *He bestows it on whomever He wishes...* — the theme of the passage!
- Notice everything Neb. says about God's sovereignty in vv. 34-35.
- The whole eight-year event is designed by God to compel Nebuchadnezzar and Israel and us to see that God is ordering all the affairs of that day to accomplish His purposes.
- And just as the first thing Noah did when getting off the ark was to build an altar, the first thing Nebuchadnezzar when coming to His senses was to acknowledge God's supremacy & authority.
- The verbs in v. 37 indicate continued action — Nebuchadnezzar's continual action was to praise, exalt, and honor the King (sovereign)!
- God humbled him for *seven* (!) years and his response was to respect, honor, admire, & worship!
- What lesson was this for the readers of this book who were in captivity to Nebuchadnezzar? A pagan king worshipped and thanked God for an intense and bizarre humiliation!

2. Learn to honor God for His *eternal* sovereignty — *His dominion is an everlasting dominion* (34b)

- cf. 1-3. God is sovereign — eternally.
- God is right and sovereign and He is always right and sovereign.
- Can you — like pagan Nebuchadnezzar — honor God for all His activity in your life?
- Everything in our lives is there by the decree of God (even the sin of others). Honor God.

- Ps. 115:3 *"Our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases."*
- Gen. 50:20 *"As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive."*
- Is. 45:6 *"That men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun That there is no one besides Me. I am the LORD, and there is no other, The One forming light and creating darkness, Causing well-being and creating calamity; I am the LORD who does all these."*

- ✓ We may not always be able to determine the difference between a judgment and gift — but we can be sure that every act of God is an act of grace designed to compel us to love and trust Him more.
- ✓ Whatever government we are given in two weeks may be a blessing from God or it may be a judgment from God, but we can know that it is *God's* government and He has not lost authority.

3. Learn to be humble before God's sovereignty

- Learning from his own circumstance, Nebuchadnezzar makes the principle for us (v. 35). God is sovereign in Heaven and on earth. No one on earth has any power to be considered of any account before God; everywhere there is any form of life — in Heaven and on earth — God fully accomplishes all His purposes.
- No one can stop Him. His sovereign will is infinitely irresistible.
- And even more, no one can accuse Him of inappropriate actions. No one can rightly question God (Job 33:12b-13; Is. 29:16; 45:9; Rom. 9:19-20).

- *Job 33:12b-13 "Behold, let me tell you, you are not right in this, For God is greater than man. Why do you complain against Him That He does not give an account of all His doings?"*
- *Is. 29:16 You turn things around! Shall the potter be considered as equal with the clay, that what is made would say to its maker, "He did not make me"; Or what is formed say to him who formed it, "He has no understanding"?*
- *Is. 45:9 "Woe to the one who quarrels with his Maker — An earthenware vessel among the vessels of earth! Will the clay say to the potter, 'What are you doing?' Or the thing you are making say, 'He has no hands'?"*
- *Rom. 9:19-20 You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?" On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, "Why did you make me like this," will it?*

- Remember that Daniel tried to teach this lesson to Nebuchadnezzar 8 years earlier (v. 27).
- God will not share a throne with anyone. He will not share it with presidents and He will not share it with your or me. Acknowledge His authority and rest and trust in it —

4. Learn to trust God's sovereignty

- Good kings will be deposed; bad kings will rule. Gracious gifts will be received and gracious gifts will be lost ("the Lord gives and the Lord takes away..."). In all God is still ruling, controlling, guiding, to accomplish His purposes.
- Nebuchadnezzar is right — ***all His works are true*** and ***all His ways are just*** (righteous). Whatever He does is in accord with His truth and His righteousness. We may trust Him...
- Every event that God uses to draw us to Him — whether severe or kind, is an act of grace when it is used to compel us to love Him. That is true of both individuals and nations.

CONCLUSION:

Eighteen years ago I had a friend tell me about an impending disaster that was coming soon. He painted a picture that was frightening:

- ✓ All the infrastructure of the country would be undermined and destroyed. Computers would fail, cars wouldn't run, power plants would be incapable of producing energy, water plants would shut down, stores would have to close because their registers wouldn't work, banks would be vulnerable because security systems would fail, and on the tale went.
- ✓ The result of all the infrastructural problems would be anarchy. The one with the largest stockpiles of food and ammunition would survive.

I refer to the threat of Y2K (remember that?). And on 1/1/2000, everything was just fine. Cars ran. There was water in our faucets, the lights turned on, and no stores closed.

What was grievous to me in the midst of those two years was that many of the most fearful and anxiety-producing people were believers. We who have a secure future were often the most afraid. And while I haven't come across many happy people in this election cycle, some of the most anxious, fearful, and angry people I've heard and read are believers. Brothers, it ought not to be that way.

Our God is sovereign. We may be discontent with the lack of holiness we see in the political process and candidates, but we may be content that God is exactly in control of every part of this election and government. He is accomplishing and will accomplish exactly what He wants for our country. And in the midst of what He is producing, He gives us all the grace we need to stand strong and holy:

- *Prov. 3:34 Though He scoffs at the scoffers, Yet He gives grace to the afflicted.*
- *Prov. 16:18 Pride goes before destruction, And a haughty spirit before stumbling.*
- *Prov. 29:23 A man's pride will bring him low, But a humble spirit will obtain honor.*
- *James 4:6 But He gives a greater grace. Therefore it says, "GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE."*

We serve a sovereign God who is *the Most High* and that's the most essential issue in this election.

BENEDICTION: Jude 24-25