

“God Is in Control”
Daniel 11:2-45
May 8, 2016

INTRODUCTION:

Throughout our study of Daniel we have noted that the theme of the book is God’s control of all things. It is easy to affirm that when things are going well, but another matter altogether when everything seems to be falling apart. It is that latter category that was the case for Daniel and his fellow exiles. Life as they had known it in Israel had ended. The fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple and the carrying off even of the sacred furnishings of the temple to the pagan nation of Babylon all led Israel to wonder if God had lost control.

Some of you know exactly what that feels like. A routine physical turns up a tumor that looks to be cancerous. One marriage ends in divorce and another through the death of a spouse. A well-paying job is lost due to economic changes that have made your skills and experience obsolete, resulting in a permanent loss of income for you and your family. A new normal is forced upon you that is not what you would have chosen. This book was written to reassure Israel that God had not lost control, and it reassures us of the same.

One of the ways this reassurance comes is through the repeated prophecies of the future. Today’s chapter is another of those. Remember that Satan didn’t want Daniel to be able to hear this. When Daniel began praying at the beginning of the previous chapter, God sent his angel to Daniel to comfort and reassure him through this prophecy of the future. Satan sent one of his demons, referred to as the “prince of the kingdom of Persia,” to stop this angel from coming to Daniel. But God’s purposes can never be thwarted, and the angel prevailed and was able to come to Daniel. What he revealed is found in our current chapter. The comfort brought to Daniel wasn’t from knowing the details of the future, but from knowing that God is in control of that future. He can be trusted. That was the battle for Daniel, and it is the battle for us as well. I invite you to receive the comfort God offers to you by remembering and believing that God is in control of all things. Let’s explore that now more fully.

I. God Is in Control of all Events

Much of this chapter is a prophetic description of events that happen in the second through fifth centuries B.C., many years after Daniel died. The prophecy is so detailed and accurate that many commentaries have concluded that the real author of the book wasn’t the sixth century B.C. prophet, Daniel, but someone writing in the second century and pretending to be Daniel. The

claim is made that he is writing history in the genre of prophecy. The primary argument used for this is simply that such an accurate rendering of these events would only be possible by a historian. The assumption, of course, is that God either doesn't control the future, or, if he does, he doesn't communicate that to his prophets. But the Bible itself claims that both of these assumptions are false. God does control the future and he does at times choose to communicate that future to his prophets.

We don't have time to do anything more than sample some of these prophecies of future events. Verses 2-4 describe the quick rise and then demise of Greece under the leadership of Alexander the Great. As verse 4 indicates, his kingdom was divided into four different kingdoms, each of which was given to one of his generals. The rest of the chapter follows two of those four kingdoms, referred to as the "king of the south" and the "king of the north." The reference point is Israel, since God's work in the Old Testament was centered on this land. The king of the north refers to the Seleucid rule of Syria and the king of the south refers to the Ptolemaic rule of Egypt. These two kingdoms fought with one another for several centuries, with Israel caught in the middle between them. The king given the most attention in this passage is a Seleucid king known as Antiochus Epiphanes, a king who ruled in the middle of the second century B.C. He was something of the Hitler of his day, murdering many Jews in his hatred. Listen to the description of him in verse 31. **"Forces from him shall appear and profane the temple and fortress, and shall take away the regular burnt offering. And they shall set up the abomination that makes desolate."** That is referring to his action of sacrificing a pig on the altar of the temple and erecting a statue of Zeus there.

Let's return, though, to the central point. God is in control of all events, as evidenced by the fact that he is sovereign over the future. God doesn't just know what's going to happen in the future, but actually controls future events. This counters, among other things, the false teaching known as deism. Deists believe that God has merely created the world and established certain laws by which his world works. He is like the clockmaker whose hands build the clock but are then removed from its regular operation. That is not the Bible's view of God's role. If it were, how could he know the future with any certainty? Instead, the Bible teaches that every event that takes place in the universe comes at the direct command of God. Consider that amazing story in Matthew 17 when Jesus tells Peter how to acquire the temple tax for the two of them. **"Go to the sea and cast a hook and take the first fish that comes up, and when you open its mouth you will find a shekel. Take that and give it to them for me and for yourself"** (Matt. 17:27). Jesus didn't just create the fish and let it swim wherever it wanted. The only way Jesus could have done this is to direct the actions of the fish in a place that was unseen by human eyes. God directs the fish of the sea and he directs the birds of the air. Every single one of

the thousands of birds that you sometimes see flying together, in a form that seems chaotic to our eyes, is directed by the command of God.

God never loses control of his world and of our lives. He is very much in control. We must admit that there is some mystery here. This doesn't make robots of us all. We still have a will and the capacity to choose, but it is not possible with our limited understanding to know how God is completely sovereign over all things and yet we still are free to make choices. It is also something of a mystery how this doesn't make God the author of sin. Antiochus Epiphanes sinned against God in what he did, and God was sovereignly in control of those events. Yet God is a holy God and cannot sin. Once more, however, I am unable to put those things together. That's okay. God has told us what we need to know, and since he hasn't told us how these things all fit together and make sense, we don't need to know that. What he has told us, and something we desperately need to know, is that he is in control of all events in our lives.

II. God Is in Control of Evil

Most commentators agree that there is a change in the text beginning at verse 36. It had been talking about Antiochus Epiphanes, but the language seems to broaden at verse 36 and speak of someone else. I think it is a second appearance in the book of Daniel of the one referred to in the New Testament as the Antichrist or the "man of lawlessness." He made his first appearance back in chapter 8. It is recorded of him that **"He shall exalt himself and magnify himself above every god, and shall speak astonishing things against the God of gods"** (v. 36). The antichrist is the full expression of the sin that began in the Garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve sought to become as God. He is what happens when God removes his hand of restraint and lets sin take its natural course.

God sometimes lets evil run its course, and that looks to us as if God is losing control. That's what had happened with Israel during the exile. Babylon was a pagan, evil nation. But the good news of the book of Daniel is that God is in control even of evil, using it for his good purposes. We see this throughout the Bible. Consider the well-known story of Samson, one of Israel's judges. He was a self-centered, evil man, never doing anything if it wasn't in his best interests. But God's sovereignty over evil could be seen in the fact that whenever he acted in his best interests, he ended up doing damage to Israel's enemies, the Philistines. For example, he once acted selfishly and sinfully by marrying a Philistine woman. When her father ended up giving her to another man, Samson responded in anger by burning their crops and killing many Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey. When the Philistines finally captured him and put out his eyes, he ended up killing many Philistines, not out of a

concern for Israel and the glory of God, but purely from a motive of vengeance. Yet God used this evil man to bring about his good purposes. That's what he will do with the antichrist as well. The Antichrist will be allowed to gain power only to bring about the return of Christ and the full and final establishment of his kingdom.

There is another lesson the Antichrist teaches us. The Bible says that though there is one ultimate Antichrist, there have been many antichrists, those with the spirit of the ultimate Antichrist. The spirit of the Antichrist is present in us all, at least in seed form. It is seen in that desire to be the center of all things and to govern our lives independent of God and his law. That's why Paul calls the Antichrist "the man of lawlessness" (2 Thess. 2:3-4). The main character in the great Russian novel *Crime and Punishment* is a man by the name of Raskolnikov. He is convinced that he is a superior human being who shouldn't be required to keep the same rules as everyone else. Believing himself superior over the laws of both man and God, he brutally murders a pawnbroker and her sister just because he feels he has the right to do so. That is just an advanced case of the disease within us all. What do you want to do when a sign says, "Wet paint—Don't touch"?

God asserts his control over evil in only two ways—through judgment or through mercy. It is said of the Antichrist, **"Yet he shall come to his end, with none to help him"** (v. 45). But he also does so through mercy. If the Antichrist asserts his own will as supreme, the true Christ, whose will really is supreme because he is God, gives up himself in order to bring life to others. The Antichrist takes life to gain a higher position, while the true Christ gives up life in order to grant a higher position to others. What is that higher position Christ grants in his mercy? It is to live in a way that is like Christ instead of the Antichrist, to live in self-forgetfulness. Instead of exalting ourselves, we forget ourselves. In his little booklet, *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness*, Tim Keller describes this by asking some questions.

Wouldn't you like to be the skater who wins the silver, and yet is thrilled about those three triple jumps that the gold medal winner did? To love it the way you love a sunrise? Just to love the fact that it was done? For it not to matter whether it was their success or your success? Not to care if they did it or you did it? You are as happy that they did it as if you had done it yourself—because you are just so happy to see it.

I read an example of this kind of self-forgetfulness lately in a story about the NBA basketball star Steph Curry, the leader of the NBA champion Golden State Warriors. Curry has not had to endure many injuries in his NBA career, but that changed two weeks ago when he slipped on a wet spot on the court during the last play of the first half of game 4 in their series against the Houston Rockets. He ended up having a Grade 1 MCL sprain in his right knee

and would have to sit out at least two weeks. The final game of the series ended up being the very next game, when Curry's team was able to defeat the Rockets in game 5. Curry sat on the bench in street clothes during the game. Was he sullen and morose, filled with self-pity at his injury and being denied a central role in the outcome of the game? No. In fact, he looked like the happiest person in the arena. FoxSports called him "a cheerful cheerleader." ESPN posted a video montage of him smiling, laughing and rejoicing throughout the game. This "anti-Antichrist" spirit of self-forgetfulness is God's triumph over evil in our lives.

III. God Is in Control of His People

Throughout the book of Daniel we have seen God's provision for his people. He blessed the inferior diet of Daniel and his three friends with superior results over their peers. He gave to Daniel the knowledge and interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dreams. He walked with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the fiery furnace, protecting them from its destruction. He stopped the mouths of lions when Daniel was in the lions' den, and opened the mouths of the same lions when Daniel's enemies were cast into the den. God uses his sovereign control to care for his people.

Verses 32-33 of our passage are something of a summary statement of Daniel's whole life, as well as a summary statement of our lives in the midst of evil. **"The people who know their God shall stand firm and take action. And the wise among the people shall make many understand."** We need to know God, to know his sovereign control and his love for his people. And we need to stand firm in the midst of a world where at times everything is turned upside down. Evil seems to prosper and good to fade away. But, like Daniel, we stand firm in the faith, being faithful to God and leaving the outcome up to him. And then we take action. I love that description. As God's faithful people, we don't sit around feeling sorry for ourselves. Even when we are victims of the evil of others, we renounce the victim mentality because we know that God is sovereign even over evil. We make choices and act. What God does with our actions is up to him. And finally, the wise make many understand. They make them understand that God is good, that he has his purposes, that he is sovereign and can be trusted.

CONCLUSION:

In this fallen world in which we live, the times come to us all when everything feels like it is falling apart. When that happens, may God fill you with the faith of Daniel, faith in a God who is both sovereign and good!