

“Doing Things God’s Way”

Daniel 1

July 1, 2007

God is sovereign. Regardless the circumstances, God is sovereign.

That will be the theme of our sermons for the next few Sundays. We are turning our attention to the Old Testament prophet, Daniel, and the sovereignty of God. I tell you this so that you understand a little bit of my thinking: why it is I select the preaching series as I have.

This marks the anniversary of my call to fill this pulpit. For the nine months, the sermons focused on the gospel of Mark, so that we might share a foundation of understanding regarding who is Jesus Christ. After Easter, we moved into our series looking at the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Now, as we begin this summer, God will be our topic – I was going to say “subject”; but taken out of context, that’s really blasphemous: there is no question that we are *God’s subjects!*

A little bit of background before we begin: The Book of Daniel records events and prophetic visions between 605 B.C. to approximately 537 B.C. Let me go back and give you a brief time-line. David became king roughly 1000 B.C. Solomon followed. After Solomon, the kingdom split into two: Israel, the Northern Kingdom; and Judah, the Southern Kingdom. Jerusalem was within Judah. In 722, Assyria lay siege to Israel and took it captive. The Northern Kingdom was no more. Then, the empire of Assyria began to fade and the Babylonians – or Chaldeans – began to build their empire. Daniel was written at the time when Judah, the southern kingdom, was captured by the Chaldeans.

Daniel was a Jew from Jerusalem taken into exile by Nebuchadnezzar. He rose to prominence within the king’s court. The Book of Daniel is included in Scripture as the beginning of the “minor” prophets; they are considered minor because they are much shorter – not less important – than Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. The first half of the book is historical narrative. The second half of the book is a series of prophetic visions.

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God is sovereign

The first thing we have to see in Daniel is that there is absolutely no question in the mind of the writer about who is in charge – and it is not Nebuchadnezzar. Verse 2 makes it clear: “The LORD *let* King Jehoiakim of Judah fall into his power, as well as some of the vessels of the house of God.”

To the human eye, this seems to be a little suspect. Nebuchadnezzar had the army lay siege to Jerusalem. It fell. Nebuchadnezzar raided the city *and* the temple.

What this goes to show is that human perspectives and witness are not always accurate. We do not know the big picture. Things may be very different than how they appear.

With that understanding, there is a humility that overcomes us. Armies, money, power: none of these things offer real security. None of them offer real peace. None have ultimate authority over our lives – only one does, and that is God.

This week, we celebrate the birthday of our nation. We will grill out, we will play games, we will fly flags, and we will watch fireworks. We will remember the sacrifices so many have made in order that we can enjoy this freedom.

And we will do all of that here on this property. We are grateful for the blessings we have received as Americans. We are grateful for the opportunities we have. We are thankful for the men and women in the military serving to protect us. It is important – and right – for us to honor their service and sacrifice on our behalf.

But make no mistake: the technology, the economic strength, the power that our military possesses is not why we have this freedom. It is because God allowed it, God has sustained it and God has blessed it. Please do not hear that as being idolatrously patriotic or politically naïve – my point is not that God loves America more than other nations or that our military might is a direct result of God’s blessing. My point is simply this: we fool ourselves if we believe that anyone or anything is sovereign besides God. Nothing and no one compares to God.

If God is powerful enough so that it is only in his discretion Nebuchadnezzar is allowed to take Jerusalem, God also is sovereign over you and me. This is God’s world.

Yet, just because God is sovereign, it does not mean God always acts in obvious ways. God does not always act in big splashy ways. Sometimes God acts small and quiet; yet God is always fully sovereign. Look again at Chapter 1; God has allowed Nebuchadnezzar to capture Jerusalem. Then, in verse 9, after Daniel had resolved not to defile himself with the royal rations of food and wine, it says, “God allowed Daniel to receive favor and compassion from the palace master.”

Daniel’s request to the palace master should have resulted in Daniel’s death. The purpose of the program was to make Babylonians out of the exiles; Daniel’s request was a request to be exemption – in defiance of the purpose of the king. Granted, the request does not pose a great physical threat to the king, but the palace master points out, “I am afraid of my lord the king: he has appointed your food and your drink.”

As the story progresses, the boys who are allowed to only eat vegetables and not partake in the royal rations look better than those who had. The subtext is: God knows better than the king. The primary text is: Daniel belongs to God, not to the king.

God calls his people to be different.

There was nothing wrong with the king's food. Those who ate the king's food are not condemned. They also did not get sick or perish. But note what was happening: the king had taken the best and the brightest of the conquered people, had brought them to his palace, to teach them the language and the literature of the Chaldeans. He gave them new names; names that reflected the Babylonian supremacy. The king's idea was to transform the leaders of the conquered people into loyal citizens; thus reducing the potential for insurrection or revolution.

The desire to conform to worldly standards is something we continue to face. Often times, these are the things we do without too much thinking – what to eat, what to wear, where we work, how we entertain ourselves.

Growing up, the big thing on Monday mornings in junior and senior high school was to replay what had happened on Saturday Night Live. This was always a tough thing for me because I had not stayed up to watch. We went to church on Sunday morning, staying up that late on Saturday night was just not going to happen. So each Monday, I would try to melt into the background and just listen so that no one would really know that I was different.

It is a silly little example, but that desire to not stand out and not be thought “different” is powerful. We all like being affirmed for things we do well. However, being different is not the same thing. Faith, we fear, will come across as weakness. We fear that our friends will think us weird or will lose respect for us. We are afraid that we will lose invitations or opportunities. We will not belong anymore.

Our desire to not be “different” is rooted in fear. It is fear that we will be alone. It is a fear that we will be mocked for being weak, for “needing” God, for relying on an imaginary friend. A popular book right now is “God Is Not Great” by Christopher Hitchens. Hitchens mocks believers and argues that faith is the root cause of evil and problems in the world today; that if we simply relied on human goodness, things would be much better. Such is the intimidation feared by believers.

Contrast fear and intimidation with the invitation of God: the desire to be faithful to God is rooted in love. It is to stake our life on the one who has accepted us, the one who has loved us, the one who is faithful to us. God's call for us is “to be holy, even as I (the LORD) am holy.”

It is the difference between “what if” and “what then.”

“What if?” asks the person who is trying to play out the possibilities that they need to control in order to be happy. If you are the lord of your own life, you always have to prepare for the contingencies. You always have to be scanning the horizon for danger and for opportunity – you need to be prepared to take whatever steps necessary to protect yourself. Often times, the “what if” person is seeking to maintain the status quo (things are

ok right now; how can I make sure they do not change). Emotionally and spiritually, asking “what if” leads to paralysis and isolation – tragically, the very things we seek to avoid.

“What then?” asks the person who trusts in what God has already done – receiving Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior based on what God has done in his life, the death, the resurrection of the incarnated, eternal Word of God, Jesus Christ – and then asking how to be faithful as a child of God. You already know how the story ends and you trust the one who wrote it. The “what then” person is living a dynamic life responding to the opportunities to serve. There is no expectation that things will remain the same. In fact, there is the expectation that some things will fail in human terms; but the point is, obedience never fails in God’s terms.

That difference is huge. “What if” requires us to be responsible for trying to control every aspect of our world; “what then” invites us into relationship with the one who actually is in control, who actually is sovereign. It takes an awful lot of the anxiety out of day-to-day life. It is the difference between living for God with abandon and living for ourselves in fear.

Being different will often put you at odds with the world.

Daniel conformed in many ways. He took on the clothing, he took the education, he took the name that was given to him. He was not disrespectful. He did not ask the king to serve different food to everyone else.

But Daniel’s request for different food *was* a request to be different. It was his request to be faithful to God and it served to mark him as being different than others. For Daniel, the issue was simply one of identity: he was God’s subject, not the king’s.

But the reality is that being different – being different for God, that is – will often put you at odds with the world around you. If today is the only thing, if all we see is all there is, then it really would be frightening to stand up for God. But today is not the only thing, life is more than what we see, and Jesus’ promise that, “Lo, I will be with you always,” is a tremendous word of comfort.

Being different for God is not an option. It is a command. We are to present our bodies as living sacrifices. We are not to conform to the world but be transformed by the renewing of our minds so that we will be able to discern God’s will – his perfect, good, and pleasing will.

Understanding that we are God’s, and understanding that God has called us to offer our lives as a sacrifice to him gives us a great framework for establishing our identity. It does not restrict our freedom, it *gives* us freedom. The criticisms offered by the world for a life of faith ring hollow when we consider what that life actually provides: it is not boring, it is not bland, it is not joyless. Understanding ourselves as having a mission from God gives life purpose, it helps us to mark our steps of growth, and it yields tremendous joy. Again,

spend time in prayer. Go on a mission trip. Invest yourself in a Bible study. Take that first step of faith – over and over again – and see how amazing is the adventure.

It is an adventure; being different is not passive or neutral. It requires choice and intention. We have to give ourselves specifically in service to God.

And, we can expect troubles during that adventure. The world has a very different agenda. The temptation is the same as it was in the Garden of Eden, “Surely you will not die, God just does not want you to be like him.” That’s the world’s agenda, to make us try to be our own god. The pressure, the temptation, the fear is all from that same place – how can we displace God and not be subject to him. Unlike living for God, pursuing success in the world’s terms puts us on a path to emptiness, disappointment and death.

How have you established your identity as belonging to God?

1. Coming to worship is one way; not everyone does. One of these Sunday mornings, we are going to send out a team with cameras to take pictures of what everyone who is NOT in church is doing during the time we are in service.
2. Do you say grace before meals in restaurants?
3. Do you talk about what happened at church with your non-church friends?
4. Do you talk about being lucky or being blessed?

Are there things the world offers that you intentionally choose NOT to do?

1. Do you not accept invitations to go see some movies or watch some television shows?
2. Do you choose not to use some words in your conversation?

In short, how do you praise God in your daily life? Remember, I am not asking how you have earned salvation – you have not, it has come to you by the grace of God through Jesus Christ – but rather, standing firm on that grace, how are you praising God in your daily life?

Daniel chose to serve God as his first priority; he was a witness to his friends and to the palace master. He would become a witness to the king. Daniel may be the hero of the story in human terms; but make no mistake, the message is clear: God is sovereign. God is in control. Human appearances are deceiving.

And so it is as we approach the communion table. From a human standpoint, the broken body of Christ and the blood of Christ look like utter failure and defeat. For God, however, it was the declaration of independence from sin and death. It was a powerful

statement of sovereignty over all things. When we come to Lord's table, we are bearing witness the Jesus Christ is Lord, that we are subject to him because we are "doing this in remembrance of me."

As we approach this table and as you go forward from this place today, take time to thank those who have served and remember those who have sacrificed their lives for our freedom. But also take time to thank God for claiming us as his own, for dying for us and rising again that we might have life, and life abundantly. Go forward confident in the conviction that you can live God's way: today, tomorrow, and forevermore.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

8:45 communion

10:00 hymn