

# Daniel 4.1-18

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## *Who's in charge here?*

Amington (Online)

Sunday 14 February 2021

Daniel: Faithful in Exile (5)

### **Exiled at home**

I hope you are enjoying our journey through Daniel – but more than that, I hope you are finding it as helpful as I am. We might not be forced to live away from our homes as Daniel and his friends were – in fact it's the opposite as we are forced to stay *in* them!

But we *are* exiled from one another physically, we *are* exiled from the way of life and faith that we were made for. I'm sick of it, and I imagine most of you are as well. At a home group this week some were saying how much harder it is to keep going in our faith when it's all virtual and remote and we can't see and support one another properly.

And yet, we *are* still meeting together, we *are* still praying and worshipping together, and God is still with us wherever we are – as he always has been and always will be.

For me this highlights one of the key truths in Daniel, one of the most important things it reveals: whatever happens, no matter how catastrophic, God is in charge.

All married couples on earth died and arrived at the pearly gates.

God arrived and said, 'I want the men to make two lines: one line for all the husbands who were constantly nagged and henpecked by their wives, and the other line for all the husbands who stood up for themselves. And I want all the wives to go with St Peter.'

There was a lot of shuffling and moving around – eventually the wives were gone and there were two lines. The line of husbands who had been constantly nagged and henpecked by their wives was hundreds of miles long. Yet the line of husbands who'd stood up for themselves had only one man in it.

God looked up at the huge line of henpecked husbands and said, 'You should be ashamed of yourselves. I created men and women equal, but you allowed yourselves to be henpecked and nagged by your wives. Only one of you stood up for himself! I am proud of him – so tell us my son, how did you manage it?'

The man shuffled awkwardly and said, 'I don't know what to say, Lord – my wife told me to stand here.'

## God Most High (2, 17)

God is in charge, but he doesn't micro-manage. He gives people – like Nebuchadnezzar – power and authority to use and sadly abuse. He permits bad things to happen, whether as large-scale as a pandemic or a natural disaster, or as local as a failed marriage or bullying – and countless other things too.

The world is a mess; if God is in 'control', he isn't doing a very good job! In fact the Bible says someone *else* controls the world: **the whole world is under the control of the evil one** (1 John 5.19).

Some of you may remember when we used some sermon videos from *The Story* in our services 18 months ago. The key principle was the difference between the Upper Story and the Lower Story.

In the Upper Story God is very much in charge. He is the creator of the whole world, he sustains the whole world, and he is guiding everything into the glorious future he has planned for the whole world. In the Upper Story God is weaving everything together into what will one day be a beautiful tapestry.

In the Lower Story it's like the back of a tapestry, a tangled mess, with glimpses of the beautiful image on the other side.

Daniel and his friends knew all about that tangled mess, taken far away from home in exile. We today know something of that mess, as we struggle through this pandemic separated from so much that brings us joy and fulfilment.

That's the Lower Story. It's real, it's hard, it's painful – this is how it is but it is not *all* there is.

That's why one of my favourite titles for God, used often in Daniel, is God **Most High** (2, 17). There is nothing and no-one higher than God. He is the most important, the most powerful, the King of *all* kings and the Lord of *all* lords, the **Most High** God.

We may struggle to see it when we're caught in the tangled mess of the tapestry, but he *is* ultimately in charge, and he *is* making something beautiful even out of the pain and the mess of this life.

And he calls us to be faithful in the Lower Story – wherever we are, whoever we are, whatever we are doing, and whatever is happening to us – he calls us to be faithful, to trust that he *is* the **Most High**, and to make *him* the first and most important thing in our lives.

So let's see what our old friend Nebuchadnezzar is up to today.

## The Dream (4-16)

A woman sent a romantic text to her boyfriend one day. It read, 'I love you. If you are laughing, send me your smile. If you are crying, send me your tears. If you are eating, send me a bite. If you are drinking, send me a sip. If you are sleeping, send me your dreams. I love you.'

Her boyfriend replied, 'I am on the toilet. Please advise.'

Nebuchadnezzar is dreaming again in our reading today – and as before he was **afraid, terrified** even (5). His days were full of wealth and power and anger and servants – but at night he was at God's mercy. As before he gathered all the pagan **wise men of Babylon** (6), and as before **they could not interpret** his dream – although he **told them** what it was this time (7)!

This dream was about an **enormous tree** in the **middle of the land** (10), **large and strong, visible** from everywhere on earth (11), **beautiful, abundant**, sheltering **wild animals** and **birds**, and feeding **every creature** (12).

But it was **cut down**, stripped bare (14), left as a **stump, bound with iron and bronze** in the **ground**, surrounded by **grass** (15).

It's clear that the tree actually stands for a man – Nebuchadnezzar himself, as we shall see next week – because then the voice in the dream talks about him being **drenched with dew**, living with the **animals** (15), and being given the **mind of an animal** (16).

## The Verdict (17)

That was the dream – we'll come back to all that next week. For now I'd like to focus on verse 17, the very end of the dream, the final thing announced by the angel:

“The decision is announced by messengers, the holy ones declare the verdict, so that the living may know that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of people.” ’

*Daniel 4.17 (NIV)*

This verse answers a series of questions:

*Who* is in charge? Everyone in Babylon, if they had been asked that question on the street, would have answered instantly – and possibly nervously – ‘Nebuchadnezzar!’ But who’s *really* in charge?

*When* does he rule? Look at the tenses of all the verbs in this verse: they are all *present* tense. God rules *today*, not simply in the future.

*Where* does he rule? Israel? Over his people? Look at what the verse says: **‘the Most High is sovereign over *all* kingdoms’**. That includes here *point down* and it includes here *tap heart*.

*How* does he rule? With complete freedom: God gives kingdoms **‘to anyone he wishes’** – even **‘the lowliest of people’**. Well that is a kick in the teeth for leaders like Nebuchadnezzar, a genuinely humbling truth. ‘You might have authority,’ the angel says in the king’s dream, ‘But that doesn’t make you special!’

God’s sovereign freedom is seen in the rather vague word **‘times’** (16), which will come up again in Daniel. It is used to reveal *and* keep hidden what God is doing. He alone is sovereign: over Nebuchadnezzar, over me, and over you.

## **From the lips to the heart**

It’s easy to say God is sovereign. Nebuchadnezzar did it himself – but it made no difference to his attitude or to his actions.

The worst charge the Bible has for God’s people, time and again, is when they (we) honour God with our lips, while our hearts are far from him.

Friends, I don’t want that to be me, or you.

So, if you have the space – and the knees! – I invite you, *now*, at home, to kneel with me, bow your head, picture God Most High sitting on his throne, and acknowledge him, and only him, as your sovereign Lord.

Let us pray. You can echo these words if you wish, use your own, or sit in silence.

*Sovereign Lord, we acknowledge you with our lips, and commit our hearts to you now. Help us to follow, not our own desires, but your Son Jesus. May our faith be seen, not only in our words, but in our actions and in our decisions as well. May our lives reflect your glory. Amen.*