

Trading Places

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[0 : 00] I mean, this is the Word of God and we're going to look at this passage this morning for a little while in our ongoing study of this amazing book.

It's very different culturally from our own situation obviously, but nonetheless the living Word of God and applicable to our own lives and to our own experiences.

I guess if there's one message that comes through, I mentioned at the conference yesterday and I did a seminar stream on revitalising churches with Wayne Sutton from Carubbers and he did the morning slot and I did the afternoon slot and the trouble was that everything really that I wanted to say was said in the morning slot and so I just kind of hid behind this great theme of scripture that if it's something's important it's worth saying two or three times.

So that kind of got me out of a sticky spot with not having anything original to say. But that's true, you know, the Bible does often use repetition to remind us of what the themes of passages or chapters are and this chapter's no different.

If you look at verse 17 of this chapter we have these words, the decision is nice when messengers, the holy ones declare the verdict, so that the living may know that the most high is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets them over the lowliest of men.

[1 : 32] Now that phrase that the Lord gives to the living may know that the most high is sovereign over the kingdoms, give them to anyone he wishes is repeated three times, verse 25 and verse 32 as well.

So the message of this chapter is for the living, okay, it's for the living he says here and that's the living in Daniel's time but that's no less the living in our time. So it's not a message for the dead, it's a message for the living.

The living need to know that the Lord God is in control. That's really what he's saying, that's what this passage is about, it's an uncomfortable truth, it's a truth that we battle and struggle with but that's what he's saying, he said the Lord God is sovereign, he's in control and that is what he wants the living to know that the Lord God is sovereign.

Now that's a well known biblical truth isn't it? It's maybe one that we hear and we maybe think about or maybe we don't think about.

But maybe what you think about most when you hear that, you know if you hear ministers say or you read books that say God's sovereign, God's in control, God is absolutely knows exactly what's happening and everything is governed by his authority in his hand.

[2 : 48] I wonder what you say. I think what I quite often say is it certainly doesn't look like it. It doesn't look like it. It doesn't look like God's sovereign, it doesn't look like he's in control and you know the great thing about this chapter in the Bible which speaks to the living is written into exactly the same situation.

It didn't look like God was in control, God's declaring to the living he says look I'm in control, I'm sovereign, I give my kingdoms to whoever I want but it didn't look like that and that is great for us. You know the Israelites had been taken out of the promised land that God had given them, they were exiled into Babylon, there was only a few young men who were believers.

It looked like God had completely abandoned them. Nebuchadnezzar was sticking his fingers heavenwards and he was saying I'm God, I'm sovereign, I'm Lord, I can do what I want and they seemed to have that free reign to do whatever he wanted.

So in these times for the people of God, for Daniel, for anyone who was watching the situation it certainly didn't look like God was in control. It didn't look like he was sovereign.

[3 : 59] And I think probably if we're honest with each other and honest with our thoughts that is often what we think today. We know that biblical truth, we believe it kind of but we look around us

and we say well it doesn't really look like God is sovereign, it doesn't look like he's in control.

So it's very important for us to recognise a couple of things. It's important first of all to understand what God means by being in control, by being sovereign in the world of brokenness and evil and sin.

Because we know what it must mean, it must mean that he allows evil to happen. It means that he actually sovereignly uses evil for his own purposes.

It means that we are in a time when this whole world is under judgment and brokenness because of sin and that he remains sovereign even through that.

He allows humanity as it were to make their own decisions, to follow through on their own rebellion against him. He doesn't control them in a robotic kind of way.

[5 : 11] That's not the kind of sovereign that he has. But in the midst of all that he has a purpose for good and the cross is writ large in all of that reality of darkness and mystery and difficulty that we see in our lives.

So we recognise that as sovereign he doesn't mean everything goes swimmingly. It doesn't mean that he just clicks his fingers and changes evil into good or makes everyone believers or stops bad things happening.

There's a mystery swilling around the truth of his providence that says he allows us our choices, he allows us our freedom, he allows us our rebellion and the consequences of turning as humanity are backs on him.

And that is mysterious. But that's what it was like then too. And he speaks into that and says, yeah, I am sovereign. I'm telling you, I'm saying that to the living.

I'm sovereign. I'm in control of this. Everything that's happening. And of course Daniel points forward to the coming of Jesus in different ways.

[6 : 21] But at another level it's not just a kind of cosmic truth. It's also a very individual thing because this is an individual story. This is a conversion story. This is a story of great King Nebuchadnezzar becoming a believer and being humbled to the place where he recognised who God was.

So it's about his confession of faith because it's written in the first person. It's like he says, Daniel says, you made this declaration and you wrote this thing out for all your people to hear. Can I use that as part of my book?

Can I put it in the middle of the book because it's really great? And Nebuchadnezzar says, yeah, absolutely use it because it's my personal testimony. And so it's a confession of his faith. And the confession of faith is very much linked to recognising and submitting to the sovereignty of God in your life.

You know, when we can come to that point as believers where we say Christ is Lord, it's the same as saying God is sovereign. It's the same thing. It's when we hand over the control of our life to the living God and say, yes, you're sovereign and I want to cooperate with your sovereignty rather than resist it.

I want to be on the side of victory because that sovereign truth is that you are the victorious King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And I want to allow my life to be lived under your sovereignty.

[7 : 43] Now we have lots of different definitions of becoming Christians. This is probably the least popular. You know, we could talk about cleansing and forgiveness and new life in the spirit and all these wonderful things.

But Christ is Lord is absolutely key that we're saying not my will, but yours be done. You know best that you're good.

You're loving. The perspective is through the cross. We see what he's done. You're loving and you're gracious. And I just give my life and my future to you even when it looks bleak.

It's a kind of confession of Daniel, isn't it? Everything looked bleak for Daniel. Everything looked miserable. But he still said it doesn't. And Daniel's three friends, Shadrach, Meshay and Abednego, even though God slay us, we will still trust in him.

That was the story from the previous chapter, wasn't it? It didn't matter what they thought was better to do. They were willing to go into the fiery furnace because they would not denounce their living God.

[8 : 51] God is sovereign, a confession of faith. So I want briefly to look at the three characters here and with a decreasing time just in case you're worried. So start with Nebuchadnezzar.

He gets the most time because it's his testimony here. And then we're going to look at Daniel and then we're also going to look... Or we're going to look at...

Sorry, we're going to look at Nebuchadnezzar because it's his story. God, not because he's less important, but secondly, and then we're also going to look briefly at Daniel. Okay? And then we'll finish with something.

Okay? And I'm going to use three words that sound quite similar to help me remember. So Nebuchadnezzar, resistant. Okay? So what we see in this story is the ongoing picture of Nebuchadnezzar's...

Or up to this point, the first four chapters, the ongoing story of Nebuchadnezzar's resistance against God. And it's a great picture of the human heart. He was proud and self-serving.

[9 : 48] And he was resistant to God's advances in his life. And the great thing about this reminds us is that it takes time for him to be broken in order to be healed.

Okay? Chapter one, he's introduced to Jehovah for the first time probably through... Or in any kind of meaningful way, through Daniel and the three men's unwillingness to eat the meat and be part of the palace ritual.

Chapter two, it's much more direct. Boom! God speaks to him in a dream and has a message for him. And the third chapter, it's kind of scary.

He's shaken by God because despite his own resistance, he sees God in the fire, personally. So there's this kind of developing challenge from God for Nebuchadnezzar to come to faith in him.

It's kind of like he knows... Now, those of you who feel ovens will know what I'm going to say here.

He has knowledge and he has a scent, but he doesn't yet have faith. He's on this journey, isn't he?

[11 : 00] So he knows about... he's come to know about God. He even come to a place where he kind of acknowledges that God's an amazing God, but he hasn't put his trust in him. And we can... he's not kind of... his pride hasn't been broken in other words.

And he hasn't bowed the knee before this sovereign living God. We know that, obviously, because he's standing, having received this amazing second dream that he knows all about. He stands in top of his palace and says, I'm the majestic one.

This has all happened because of me. But it's interesting this chapter, isn't it? Because I think probably he knows that the dream is about him.

This dream is about this big tree. He knows it's about him and he doesn't ask for Daniel, because I think he knows Daniel's going to interpret the dream. In fact, he probably doesn't even need Daniel to interpret the dream. He probably knows himself, but he asks for the astrologers to come and they can't.

They can't do anything again. And he avoids Daniel, but then he actually eventually gets Daniel. And here's the meaning of the dream. It doesn't seem to make a real big, great deal of difference.

[12 : 02] Sorry, false teeth in the wrong way today. And time passes again. Another 12 months.

And he's probably thinking, well, yeah, that dream 12 months ago and nothing's really happened. It's not going to come at pass. And I haven't really bowed the knee and it doesn't really seem to make any difference.

To the day, bang. He stands on his roof and he looks around the magnificent city of Babylon, most amazing city that was ever built. It's still one of the Seven Wonders of the World, the hanging gardens of Babylon.

He looks and if you see model architectural drawings of Babylon, it's an amazing city, amazing what he built.

He sine you and his body resists bowing the knee to God and he takes the glory for himself. His sinful heart just is beating and beating and beating.

[12 : 59] And so God takes everything from him. All that he has. And interestingly, there's some connection. I think you've noticed it maybe when the reading was that the birds of the air and the animals of the fields rested under this tree and here we see him turning into almost an animal.

Come back to that briefly. But that, you know, is a picture of every human heart to a greater or lesser degree. You know, we're looking this year.

Our biggest weakness as a church has been people becoming Christians, coming to a living faith with lots of people moving to the area. Lots of people come to church, but our friends and our family members and our people that we love and know that haven't become Christians.

That's our greatest concern. It's our greatest weakness, conversions to Jesus Christ. That's really kind of what we're focusing on in this whole thing about getting for growth. We recognize it's tough, you know.

It's tough. If it's going to take time. This is the living God and he gives us this model which says it takes time for people to come to faith in me.

[14:09] Great Nebuchadnezzar. It takes years and it takes a breakdown of resistance because our hearts are resistant and resistant. If you're not a Christian today and you think your heart is okay and it's good, then listen to the story because it's a resistant heart to the grace and the goodness of God and it might be packaged in all kinds of niceness and intellectual honesty, but it's a resistant heart to the living God and to his lordship to that place where you can say, I will bow the knee because of this great sovereign redeeming, crucified and risen Savior that we worshiped today.

Because isn't there often these stages as there was with Nebuchadnezzar? People have a knowledge of God first. They hear about God. They may even get to the stage where they are sent. Yeah, he's a good guy. I like Jesus. I think Jesus is fine and yeah, I think probably he's God and he died on the cross, but you don't yet put your faith and trust in him.

There's this stage that you haven't taken. There's this last movement that you haven't made towards God, even though he has made all the movement towards you. Even the devils believe and shudder.

They assent. They know the facts, but they have no faith in the living God. It's one of the great danger of church going, isn't it, that we can be content simply with belonging to a church and to know, yeah, I believe in Jesus or I believe in God or I believe in the Bible, but not taking that step of humbling trust and surrender of your life and soul to the living God through Jesus Christ.

[15:54] You're afraid of that. And maybe you're in that position to you're afraid of surrendering your heart. What will it mean? What will it mean for my social life? What will it mean for my ambitions? What will it mean for the way I live if I surrender everything to Jesus Christ?

And we need to recognize that battle. And if you're not a Christian, then I challenge you to move from just ascent to faith, but also in our prayers and our concerns for those who aren't Christians, let's not give up because it's stage.

I know statistics can be damning and they can be good or bad, but I think there's a degree of truth in at least some of them. In the current situation we live in, in the society we live in, that it can take up to generally speaking.

As we look back, it takes up to four years for people to become Christians from first hearing the gospel to putting their faith in Christ. And it can take up 43 times of hearing the gospel.

Now, of course, God's sovereign and He works and can work in an instant, but generally speaking, and we have here a model of the pattern that very often is the case.

[17:07] We were saying with Paul, wasn't it? Paul the great leader of the New Testament church. We talk about a Damascus road experience, but we know God had been persistent with him beforehand that he sat while Stephen was being martyred and the clothes of Stephen were laid at his feet.

So he'd known about the gospel and he'd heard about the gospel and he'd been pricked with the message of the gospel prodded by God and he'd resisted it.

Why do you kick against the God, said God? Because he'd been prompted by the hound of heaven, by the love and grace of God. So we're resistant. Same thing and I'm getting shorter.

God is persistent and it's just the following, isn't it? If Nebuchadnezzar's resistant, God is persistent. This is a great picture. It's the other side of the coin in this story, isn't it?

That God is working in Nebuchadnezzar's life long before Nebuchadnezzar sees it with the whole Babylonian captivity and bringing Daniel into the royal court in Mechach and Abedigo and their prayers, their prayers for Nebuchadnezzar.

[18:19] He uses them and sovereignly the sovereign God of the universe who does what he pleases, chooses to work through the prayers of Daniel and the others for Nebuchadnezzar and then shows himself to Nebuchadnezzar in the fire in this remarkable vision of himself and then gives him the second dream and takes away everything from him.

God is persistent to the point of utterly breaking Nebuchadnezzar. You think, that's harsh, what a harsh God. I wasn't taking everything from him. But look, the dream even speaks kind of warmly

about the blessings that Nebuchadnezzar received and the wonder of being this great tree with so many beautiful blessings and good and they've been put there by God but it was to break him in order to remold him and remodel him and refashion him and redeem him.

Do you think you can enter heaven without being broken? God is persistent because your pride will send you to hell.

Pride will send us to hell and it needs to be broken in our lives. You know, have you asked, generally speaking, what do you think of trouble in your life?

What do you think of difficulties? Very often difficulties come and we blame God and we shake our fists at him and yet often the difficulties come not only just sometimes to strip away the things that we're trusting in that keep us from him but also to humble us to be needy and to be remade.

[20 : 06] You know, that's a great thing is that when something is made you make a mess of it, a pot or something like clay. We don't do much pottery these days but you may be used to doing it in school and it was really difficult to keep the clay on the wheel and you used to go away from it and it would be completely a mess.

Sometimes eventually you got some kind of pot but then you looked at it and it was horrible. It was just brutal so you just mash all up and destroy it in order to start again and maybe get the art teacher to come in with his strong hands and do something proper with it.

It really was. God breaks us to remold us because don't presume that God is abandoning you or doesn't love you because of these things. He takes these things and He uses them and He molds us and He wants us to learn from these experiences so that we will be more graceful and more dependent and more loving.

God is persistent and then Daniel we say is consistent. Okay? If Nebuchadnezzar was resistant and God is persistent, Daniel is consistent in his life.

And yeah, the message of this chapter is very much God is sovereign. God's in control. God does what He likes because He's good and He's perfect and He's holy and He's loving and He is seen through the perspective of the cross.

[21 : 32] But in that control, He uses people and He used Daniel and his three friends and the consistency of Daniel, the consistency of his life, the consistency of his faithfulness, of his prayers, of his life, of his witness.

You know, Nebuchadnezzar might have wanted to avoid Daniel because he knew Daniel was going to give the right answer, but he knew Daniel loved him and he knew Daniel was respectful and gracious and was a great leader.

And we can see by this stage that Daniel is the chief of all the astrologers. He's the main man and he's been consistent. He's such a brilliant character in the Bible in the Old Testament.

Daniel is amazing. Work of God that kind of surrounds his life. God works in his wake. That sounds a bit skewed, doesn't it?

It's really that in Daniel's life, or Daniel works in the wake of God, but it looks like you know, God just in his sovereignty is working around Daniel and his faithfulness in an amazing way.

[22 : 42] And if we were to see God at work in our lives, I do believe in His sovereignty. He chooses to use us when in the mystery of His sovereignty, when we are dependent on Him, when we are prayerful, when we are obedient to Him.

He chooses to bless that and use that. He responds to our prayers. We're talking about conversion this year, talking about people coming to faith. You know, are we praying like Daniel was praying for?

Are we praying for people? Is this so important for us that we pray together and that we plead for lost souls and that we love them into the kingdom through our prayers?

And in March, prayermates have said they're all about that whole, how do we live that way? How do we live with a gentle but powerful, persistent, consistent, loving desire and ability to share the gospel with our friends who don't know Jesus in order to bring them to faith?

So there's these three cards. I'm just finished by talking for a moment about the fact that this is a story of the sovereignty of God, but it's a story about the conversion of an individual.

[23 : 55] About this great, the greatest guy, that's where the trading places theme comes in. It's an amazing story. Daniel, in the beginning of his life, completely changes and he recognizes who is Lord and God.

It's a story of a changed life. I think it's very significant. You go to Daniel chapter 4, the very beginning, it's his own personal testimony to the people's nations and men of every language who live in the world.

May you prosper greatly. Is there a change there? Is there a change in the way he speaks? This is post-conversion. He's looking back at the fact that he's come to faith in the living God and he says, you know, it's my pleasure to tell you about the miraculous signs and wonders the most high God has performed for me and he worships him.

But isn't that interesting? This amazing, powerful potentate speaks quite gently here. It's a total change. May you prosper greatly. All the peoples that are under my care, every language, all the different people that have come into captivity, may you prosper greatly.

There's a lovely change even just in that language that he uses. And we know that he's changed and that Daniel prays that he will change, you know. Daniel, as it's bold enough to speak to him in verse 20:7 says, therefore, okay, please be accept, be pleased to accept my advice.

[25 : 18] Renounce your sins by doing what's right and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue. He was an oppressive ruler. He beat people up.

He was a potentate who ruled by fear in many ways with the people and we see a massive change in him and his sins. He is exposed and he recognized them.

And in this conversion, he is broken. He's broken by the living God and he moves from this place of immense power to a place where he's eating the grass in the field, just like a wild animal.

That may be called Boanthropy for those of you who know, where people become like cows, bovine, where bovine comes from.

So that they chew the grass and chew like the cud. They think their arms are well known, well known, but it's a condition that is real. It's a real condition and that's really what, isn't that interesting?

[26 : 18] What happens to the king of kings, the most powerful man of the whole universe is that he just chews grass like a cow. His amazing abilities, his amazing powers, all taken from him.

Not to, now please take this, not to humiliate him, but to humble him. To humble him and to make him realize he is not sovereign over his own life.

To break his pride and his ugliness and his brutality and his lovelessness and his lack of grace. To see God's glory and to see God's forgiveness and his justice and his love.

That's what we see in this story. God intervening personally in the life of the greatest, most powerful man alive in order to bring him to living faith in himself.

It's a conversion story. What can we learn from that as we close? What we can learn that all we have is from God and he sovereignly gifts you your life this morning, your ability to breathe, your family, your friends, your clothing, your job.

[27 : 28] Everything you have is his gift, your reason. When did you last thank God for your reason, for your capability to think which was taken from Nebuchadnezzar here?

Your ability to study, your ability to learn. Are you using that reason that is his gift to declare your unbelief, to declare that you will not allow him to be your Lord, that you would rather do things your own way.

Please don't do that. Don't use his gifts to stay away from him. The gifts that he gives you. Don't use your feet to walk away from him and your brain to abandon knowledge of him and the truth of him, your heart to love someone else but him.

And within that have you been broken? Have we been broken in our lives, you know, in order to be remade? Can you point to times when your pride has been shattered as a Christian?

Where you say, yeah, my goodness, he is absolutely right. I was self-sufficient, prayerless, my Bible was closed, thankless, loveless. And he broke me in order to remake me.

[28 : 50] May that be our experience in an ongoing way in our lives and he will do that as we pray and as we seek him. And we today have a much greater message from heaven.

When Daniel, our Nebuchadnezzar speaks about this dream that he has, he said in verse 13 of visions, I saw while lying in my bed I looked and there before me was a messenger, a holy one coming down from heaven.

He called down in a loud voice and he had this message. We've got a much greater message haven't we from heaven? We have got some music coming from him.

I thought it was someone's mobile and then he realised it's obviously a concert going on somewhere outside. Okay, that's fine. But there's a much greater message from heaven for us. We have God, sovereign God, the living, most high sovereign over the kingdoms of men and who does what he wishes, coming down and born of a virgin, of a teenage girl in humility.

[29 : 56] He comes this great sovereign, all powerful, all knowing, all encompassing God. He comes from heaven as the sovereign God because that's his plan, that's his purpose.

That's what was always the plan because we couldn't save ourselves. He comes and dies on the cross. You do not think you need the cross? Do you not think you need salvation?

Do you think God made a mistake, that God just went too far? Please, this is the sovereign God and he's come in this way to us. We have got much more responsibility than even Nebuchadnezzar had because of Jesus Christ to respond and to be obedient and to allow him to be our Lord.

Can I just also say that in kind of learning some of the lessons from this conversion that does take, it will probably in most instances unless God is absolutely blessed among us that it will take time for people to come to faith.

It's not just going to take a quick track that we throw in someone's hand or a quick splurge of the gospel message once as we happen to be passing, take time with people, bring down their misconceptions, their hard hearts to the place of knowledge and into a place of ascent and into a place of faith, takes perseverance.

[31 : 19] God wants us to be like Daniel, consistent and long term and committed and it's we're in it for the long haul here. I hope we see that. The everything else is seconded, we're in it for the long haul to bring people to faith and to give our lives and to break down barriers of unbelief and people.

This is a, you know, it takes a long time because people are not in the environment of God and we need to see their barriers broken down.

But also within that may we also appreciate the importance of living under the sovereignty of God. It's a tough reality because we don't understand it very often. I don't understand it sometimes and it's very difficult for us because things are not as they seem and we can't understand how God can be sovereign and control and so many rotten things seem to happen.

But we do know that He uses us as faithful people, praying people and Matthew Henry commentator very wisely said when God intends to bless His people, He sets them praying.

We are people who pray our struggles with God's sovereignty and our struggles with the evils of this world and our struggles with the brokenness of our friends' lives and we have no answers for them. That's okay.

[32 : 36] We don't need to be smarter than smart and we looked on Wednesday evening at Sam 13, you know, how long? God in His word, His living word allows us to see how long, God, you know, how long are you going to hide your face?

How long do you see them that you don't care? How long is it that we will be like this? It's okay for us. It legitimizes these complaints that we have as we bring them to God.

You know, that whole Sam's a question in God's control. God's sovereignty, Lord, it doesn't look like you're sovereign. How long does it seem like you don't care about me? Where is that sovereign grace and love that you speak about?

Take it to Him. Take it to Him in prayer and be able to pray the great prayer of thankfulness that comes at the end of that Sam of blessing and recognizing the goodness of God.

As I was saying this yesterday, the corner is often that as we retrospectively, as we look back, we can see God hasn't abandoned us and He did have a purpose and it was for good and He hasn't left us in our own and that we have come through it and we have learned and we're more empathetic and we're more mature and we are less childish.

[33 : 53] And so we're in a battle, a battle to understand, a battle to be consistent, a battle to be faithful, a battle to bow the knee.

Please, you will be people who recognize the gracious loving sovereignty of the living God and His purposes for good for us as we come to Him by faith and He accepts all who come to Him and cry out for salvation.

Let's bow our heads and pray. Father God, help us we pray. Guide us, protect us. Teach us from your word, may we be those who learn under your sovereign grace and under the power of the Holy Spirit.

Bless us tonight as we break bread together. Bless J. Thomas as he leads that. Thank you for him and we thank you for the sacrament that is there for our encouragement because you know how prone we are to forget.
Help us Lord to know and understand your love more and more for Jesus' sake. Amen.