

FAITHFUL UNDER GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

INTRODUCTION

I loved college. When I began my freshman year in college, I had already been on the campus a dozen times, and so I was in a sense at home away from home. It didn't take me too long to get acclimated to my roommates; I had a great time with them—one of them was Will Cover, another was a high school friend of mine who would always pull me out of my bed at night, and the third was a computer nerd, nicknamed T-bone, who walked around with so many knickknacks on his belt that he looked like Inspector Gadget. During those first few weeks of my freshman year, I also don't remember the transition to life on my own (or as "on my own" as it could be on a strict college campus) being a big point of transition. For the most part, the class work and toughened academic load from high school also wasn't a difficult adjustment for me—I enjoyed the challenge and depth of learning. However, there was one aspect of my first semester of my freshman year that was greatly stretching for me. That was English 102. The most difficult part wasn't so much the material (my highest ACT scores had been in English), or the amount of work, or the demanding syllabus. It was my tutorial class teacher. I really struggled with my teacher—I had a hard time understanding what she wanted, or perhaps better worded, I had a hard time being motivated to give her what she wanted. She was a bit different, and friends of mine who have had her after me have had similar feelings towards her. I struggled with being content under her teaching for most of the semester, and when an easy A wasn't offered to me, I decided with just a few weeks left in the semester to just give up and get the class over with. As a result, I ended with a much lower grade than I should have. Much worse, however, is that I had taken the pressure of that situation as an excuse to respond unfaithfully in my responsibilities—a response that did not honor the Lord. I had responded with laziness, discontentment, and frustration.

While such a response was certainly sinful, some Christians respond to pressure with much more obvious sinful reactions. Statistics tell us that the divorce rate among Christians is equal to that among non-believers. Premarital sex, alcohol and drug abuse, and suicide among Christian teenagers continue to rise. Pornography is a growing industry in Christian homes. Many believers work on Sundays and no longer join themselves weekly to a local church body.

Oftentimes, these sins are not so much premeditated decisions as they are simply wrong responses to pressure. A Spirit-filled, Spirit-led believer will not often willfully chose to do some evil that randomly presents itself. No, but when pressure builds and difficulty roars its ugly head, such a believer may respond in opposition to that same Spirit who indwells him. It is when life pressures us that we so often capitulate and become unfaithful.

The reason for these unfaithful responses is that, truthfully, *in pressure, it seems easier and more profitable to go along with the world*. When we follow the world, we seem to be able to meet our own needs our way, the current of resistance is weaker, and oftentimes we experience a level of prosperity. Yet, God desires and demands faithfulness even though pressure and difficulties are promised. So, how does one break out of this mold of sinful responses even when the pressures of life seem insurmountable? When we don't know how to handle something, what will motivate us to stay faithful in our obedience to God? The account of Daniel in Daniel 1 answers these very questions.

In these verses, the author very clearly stresses one characteristic of God as the motivation to keep us faithful in our obedience even during difficult times. That characteristic is the control (or sovereignty) of God. The author stresses this attribute of God by using one Hebrew phrase three times in our story. That phrase is "God gave" and it occurs strategically in three separate sections to highlight three areas over which God exercises His control in our lives. We will look at those three areas this morning, and in so doing, we will discover the moral (main point) of this story. This story teaches that *because God is in control, you must remain faithful to God amidst pressure*.

Transition: From this passage, we will be reminded that the control of God extends to your circumstances, reputation, and success. Therefore, you must remain faithful to God amidst pressure. First,...

**Because God controls your circumstances,
you must remain faithful to God amidst pressure (vv. 1-7).
KEY VERSE 2**

Transition: From verses 1-7, we discover several areas of life circumstances over which God exercises control.

I. God controls your trials (vv. 1-2).

Explanation:

- READ verses 1-2.
- God had not delivered His people; in fact, it appeared that He had abandoned them. However, the reality of this situation was that God was as in control of their defeat as He had been over their victories.
- **Transition:** From these verses, several truths can be gleaned concerning God's control over one's trials.

A. God's control extends over His enemies.

- From the earthly perspective, "Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon [came] unto Jerusalem and besieged it." From the heavenly perspective, "the Lord gave Jehoiakim, king of Judah, into his hand."

- Now, Nebuchadnezzar was not trying to please God, and yet in the perfect, sovereign, foreordained control of God, Nebuchadnezzar became an instrument that accomplished exactly what God wanted. God can take the destructive plans of His enemies and use them to further His own kingdom and promote His own glory and our own good.

B. God's control does not always make sense.

- Here God is allowing a wicked, proud king of a wicked, proud nation to conquer His people. And, actually, He is not simply allowing it; He's making sure it happens.
- A perceptive, fair-minded reader comes to this passage and questions both the goodness and justness of God. Like Habakkuk, he asks, "How can you use someone as wicked as the Babylonians to punish your people, even though they have been disobedient and rebellious? That's not fair!" Does God ignore His mercy and covenant in order to work His wrath and justice?
- **Transition:** No, for while God's control may not make sense to finite human minds, we thirdly learn...

C. God's control is always purposeful.

- Throughout the Old Testament, God had consistently warned His people about the peril that would be theirs if they forsook Him.
- God, then, was being just and true to His word in allowing His people to be subdued by the Babylonians. He was also being very loving towards them, for this siege was a sign of His chastening upon His people and was thus a proof of His commitment to them. And the 70 years of captivity accomplished God's purpose of ridding Israel of her great sin of idolatry.
- And, so, God did not arbitrarily force His control upon His people in order to crush them. Rather, it was in keeping with His justice and mercy.

II. God controls your opportunities (vv. 3-4).

Explanation:

- Jerusalem has been besieged, friends and family members have been killed, homes have been burned, life has been turned upside down. Questions linger—What will they do to us? Will they take us all to Babylon? Will they kill us? Will they make us slaves? Will we retain any freedom? How do we pick up the pieces and go on? I've lost everything; where do I begin?

- Suddenly, at least for some, things begin to look up a little bit. According to verses 3-4, Nebuchadnezzar commands that many of the young join him in Babylon to serve, not in some slave camp, but in his court.

A. God gives opportunities.

- Many factors were used to determine which men received this opportunity, and frankly many of those factors were simply up to God (such as being from a noble family or being without blemish and well-favored [lit., "handsome"], etc.).
- Obviously, these Hebrew youths, and we as well, didn't get to pick to be born into a family of nobility, nor were they able to ask ahead of time if they could be good-looking and smart.
- They didn't ask for this opportunity; they didn't have a run-off and beat an opponent to be selected; they didn't pass a test to be selected. Rather, they received this opportunity because of how God had made them, placed them into this life, and gifted them.

B. We must take opportunities.

- On the flip side, we have a responsibility, too.
- Apparently, according to the qualifications in verses 3 and 4, there may have been those who had been born into a noble family and who were good-looking, but who were not "skillful in all wisdom, and cunning in knowledge, and understanding science, and...[able] to stand in the king's palace." There may have been some hunks and prepys, who had not prepared themselves effectively in the classroom and in learning life-lessons and good-manners, and who thereby disqualified themselves from what was a great opportunity.
- And so, we can never use the excuse that we weren't created right or weren't gifted right or that we were born into the wrong family or into a bad environment or that we have a boring personality. We have the responsibility to prepare ourselves the best we can so that God can use us wherever we are in life.

III. God controls your temptations (vv. 5-7).

A. Some temptations are obvious.

- READ verse 5.
- At first glance, verse 5 seems to be pretty attractive. Three years straight of apparently doing little else than stuffing one's face with the finest food of the land. I'd take that. Verse 8, however, helps us understand that such a proposition from the king was actually an invitation for these Hebrew teenagers to sin.

- Eating of this food and drinking of this wine would have been a sin for these men for possibly three reasons. It could have been that they were being required to eat (1) unclean food or (2) food offered to idols. Also, (3) they may have been required to participate in a food-offering ceremony to the pagan gods before each meal.
- Interestingly, the text seems to indicate that from among the whole host of young men who were brought to Jerusalem, Daniel and his three friends were the only ones who resisted.
- Instead of reasoning that since God didn't deliver them, they didn't owe him obedience any more, these Hebrews reasoned that God was in control of their circumstances, and that included their temptations, and so they would then trust Him to help them obey and honor Him.

B. Many temptations are subtle.

- These four men also faced a more subtle temptation, and that temptation was simply to forget God and live apart from an awareness of the presence of God.
- Verses 6-7 tell us that the names of these men were changed from Hebrew names to Babylonian names. Now, that was not a sin, for the Hebrews had no choice in the matter—it was imposed upon them. However, with that imposition came a temptation to allow the meanings of those new names to change their worldview and perspective.
- See, their old names reminded them of the character of God and of their responsibility to Him. Their new names pointed them to trust in false gods:
 - **Daniel** = “God is my Judge” → **Belteshazzar** = “Bel, Protect his Life!”
 - **Hananiah** = “Yahweh is Gracious” → **Shadrach** = “The Command of Aku [the moon god]”
 - **Mishael** = “Who is What God is?” → **Meshach** = “Who is What Aku is?”
 - **Azariah** = “Yahweh has Helped” → **Abednego** = “Servant of Nebo”
- Daniel and his three friends, however, recognized the temptation and resisted it, because they were in Babylon, under the control of God

Application: God's control of circumstances provides great assurance in a world where change is so common. **(Problem 1)** Young people who find themselves in a difficult home life must especially meditate upon the control of God in life's circumstances. Many children today experience the abrupt change of life as parents file for a divorce. **(Solution 1)** For you who

find yourself in such a home, you must believe that as God was the one who caused the victory of the pagan king Nebuchadnezzar over God's own people, so God has a hand in your confusing situation. No doubt you will be tempted to respond as the world does in anger and bitterness, making demands and taking sides. You must resist such temptation—God saw it coming and allowed it into your life for a purpose, even though you may not understand. God is committed to causing you good and not harm, and so, He promises His control even over those who would not be as benevolent towards you. In your home, as God gives opportunity, you must be faithful in sharing truth with the parties involved and in rebuking in love from Scripture. And as Daniel could gain encouragement from his three other Hebrew friends, perhaps you need to seek for a friend who can minister grace and counsel to you at this time of circumstantial turmoil. For the Christian, feelings of fear or confusion, pride or selfishness, weakness or lust are replaced with godly faithfulness in light of God's control of our trials, opportunities, and temptation.

Transition: *Because God is in control, you must remain faithful to Him amidst pressure.* We saw first that God's control over circumstances requires our faithfulness to Him. Second,...

**Because God controls your reputation,
you must remain faithful to God amidst pressure (vv. 8-16).
KEY VERSE 9**

Transition: READ verses 8-9....Note the progression in verses 8-16.

I. You must commit yourself to purity (vv. 8-9).

Explanation:

- This was the first step in the sovereign preservation of these Hebrews' reputation by God. God doesn't promise to protect your testimony if you purposely do that which will harm it.
- Proverbs 16:7 teaches, “When a man's ways please the LORD, He maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him.”

A. You must first choose purity.

- First there was a heart choice (i.e., “purposed in his heart”—a decided resolution) to have no part with sin. Daniel made a covenant (with God) that he would live as God commanded, not as the Babylonians dictated.
- Unfortunately, most of us end here, and even this choice of determination is pretty weak. And so, instead of a one time “purposing in our hearts” like Daniel to not defile ourselves with such-and-such, we purpose in our hearts on Sunday afternoon, then we fail, so we purpose in our heart on

Monday, then we fail and get discouraged, so we purpose in our hearts again on Wednesday night, then we fail later in the week, and so on and so forth.

- **Transition:** The solution is that a commitment to purity *begins* with a heart commitment, but *then* it gets *practical*.

B. You must then live purely.

- Daniel acted on his heart choice and lived differently. Consider the scenario from Daniel's perspective.
 - To not conform could cost him his life or any success in the king's court.
 - On the other hand, the temptation to conform seemed really enticing and harmless.
 - His authorities (parents and religious leaders) were gone and were not hounding him to do right.
 - His new authorities were encouraging and promising to reward his conformity. Doing wrong was the accepting thing in this culture.
 - His peers were all doing wrong and perhaps pressuring him to do the same.
- Yet, in spite of this, because he had made a heart commitment to God to not defile himself and blaspheme God, he started living differently. He didn't make a commitment and then just live life the way he had been. He didn't make the heart commitment and then sit at the table while everyone else ate and while the smell from the food in front of him wafted up into his nostrils. No, he pushed away the plate and excused himself from the table. He started acting.
- **Transition:** But notice that Daniel didn't stop there. He didn't simply commit himself to purity. Daniel went on to solve the problem, not just bare under it. So, as for Daniel, the truth that God controls your reputation not only obligates you to commit yourself to purity; secondly, it means that...

II. You must deal wisely with your problems (vv. 10-13).

Explanation:

- Daniel's response to his problems teaches us two important principles with regard to how we respond to temptations and attacks to our testimony.

A. This requires honesty in your refusal.

- Apparently from verse 10, Daniel had shared his conviction with the prince of the eunuchs, for the prince expressed a fear for his own life because of Daniel's decision.

- See, Daniel had been honest. He didn't make excuses for why he chose to not eat the food (e.g., "I don't feel well"; "I don't like ham"; "That wine bothers my stomach"; "I'm a picky eater"). He didn't try to make it look like he ate it without eating it (e.g., dumping it into a potted plant, etc.). He spoke the truth in love, and trusted God to allow his honesty, sincerity, and graciousness to find a receptive and understanding ear.
- Don't ever be afraid to do right and to graciously express why you're doing it. Oftentimes, we have a wrong view of the world as waiting to persecute us if we chose to do right and not do what they are doing. While that may sometimes be the case, many times people will respect someone who stands for something (especially who stands for morality and truth) and who is consistent. And oftentimes that will serve to stir their thinking and prick their conscience.

B. This requires creativity in your problem-solving.

- Notice Daniel's creative suggestion...READ verse 11-13.
- The New Testament teaches something very similar in its familiar "put off/put on" paradigm.
- It is not enough to admit a problem and chose to put away the problem. We must be creative in determining what we can replace that problem with.
- Perhaps Daniel sat down and thought about how he could live in that environment, but do so in a way that would not compromise his obedience to God. Perhaps the four of them talked it over, and eventually a creative solution was decided upon, and in a gracious spirit it was suggested to their overseer.
- **Transition:** Thus, the final step of God's control over our reputation is seen in verses 14-16...READ verses 14-16.

III. God will take care of the results (vv. 14-16).

A. God can grant you a hearing.

- God moved their leader to listen to them, trust them, and take their suggestion.
- **Transition:** What was and will be the final result?

B. God can bless your wisdom.

- It didn't necessarily make sense that after only ten days of such a diet, these four Hebrews would be healthier and more nourished than all the other guys who ate the rich food from the king.

- But the Lord allowed it to happen, and in His sovereign control He blessed the faithful and right responses of these four young men.
- As a result, all the other Hebrew men who had beforehand compromised their beliefs, were now forced to conform to the obedient, God honoring suggestion of Daniel. God took care of the results.

Illustration: After spending the night in prayer, begging God for wisdom to know how to respond, Martin Luther appeared before the Diet of Worms in April of 1521. After years of faithfully proclaiming the gospel of Christ and fighting the unbiblical teaching and practices of the Roman Catholic Church, Luther was on trial for his faith. Faithfully fighting the church had certainly not been easy, and now with the threat of excommunication, exile, or execution, compromise seemed very appealing. Luther had been asked if he would recant, and a simple “yes” would have set him free and given him a favorable reputation among the church leaders. However, Luther’s answer rang clear, “Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason...my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against my conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.” Luther had determined to obey God in all things. He was not concerned with being popular, safe, or prosperous; his focus was on faithfully pleasing Christ amidst pressure.

Application: You and I have a similar responsibility in a day in which everything is tolerated except biblical conviction. Since our reputation is in the hand of God, we can commit ourselves to purity without concern for what others think. Daniel faced this pressure in service to the king.

(Problem 1) Similarly, believers in the workplace often feel the pressure to conform rather than shine. Because our society scoffs those who hold Scriptural convictions and because advancement in the workplace is often gained only through unethical behavior, you may find yourself pressured to compromise your beliefs in order to please others and increase your income. **(Solution 1)** You must not do this. If possible, before assuming a position in a secular workplace, you must decide what your standards will be and solidify your beliefs. Having done this, you must ask God for grace to stay true to Him and you must reject any solicitation from your coworkers to do otherwise. If asked by an employer to do something unbiblical, you must be honest, kind, and wise in your response, refusing to participate but suggesting another plan. God will take care of your name.

For most people in this world, there are few things more important than the favor of men. Consequently, in order to gain the approval of men, we all face the pressure to compromise like the world. **(2)** From the medical

student who, needing the high grades, is tempted to cheat on the big exam **(3)** to the unmarried girl whose sexual innocence is mocked by her peers, we know the pressure to focus on reputation rather than righteousness. When you commit to faithfully follow God amidst the world’s pressures, heads will certainly turn and mouths will hang. Often respect will be won. But many will not approve, and some might still reject you. But your name is safe in the hands of God. Both by your lips and your life, you must honor your Savior and leave your reputation up to God.

Transition: We have already noted that *because God controls our circumstances and reputation our faithfulness to Him is necessary*. Finally, we discover in the last section of this chapter, that...

**Because God controls your success,
you must remain faithful to God amidst pressure (vv. 17-21).
KEY VERSE 17**

READ verse 17.

I. God prepares you for service (v. 17).

Explanation:

- God doesn’t give you a place of service until He has first prepared you for it. God doesn’t expect success from you unless He has first prepared you to bear fruit.
- According to this verse, God’s preparation is both...

A. His preparation is complete.

B. His preparation is timely.

- God gave them keen intellectual ability in “all” (NASB, “every branch of”) learning (NASB, “literature” [writing]) and wisdom.
- He didn’t do this for them when they were back in Jerusalem—they didn’t need it then. Nor was God slack in giving it to them after they were tested and qualified only for KP duty. No, God gave these special gifts to them at just the right time.
- Furthermore, He gifted Daniel even more specifically with the ability to interpret dreams, for God knew that Daniel would need that gift in a future ministry opportunity.
- **Transition:** Once God has prepared you for service, God also...

II. God prospers you in service (vv. 18-21).

Explanation:

- READ verses 18-21.

- God prepared them perfectly all the way up to their big Final Exam. And, boy, were they ever prepared. God prospered them, and caused them to pass with High Honors.
- Two considerations of God's prospering should be noted...

A. God will prosper you abundantly.

B. God will prosper you continually.

- Verse 19 tells us that they entered the king's own personal service because there was no one else like them. In fact, according to verse 20, these rookies far outshined the pros (i.e., "ten times better").
- Furthermore, God blessed Daniel with a long life, and throughout his entire life, God prospered Daniel's ministry. Daniel survived through the overthrow of the Babylonian empire by the Medo-Persians, and was then hired by them to work in their highest levels of government. He would have a great ministry with the king of the Persians, Darius, and would even live until the reign of Cyrus, under whose rule the Jews were allowed to return to their homeland.
- God's faithful control over Daniel's success motivated Daniel to faithfully serve his God throughout his entire life in a pagan land.

Application: While our actual prosperity and success is ultimately up to God, diligence and obedience is certainly required from us. This is perhaps the most obvious to **(Problem 1)** students. Demanding teachers, busy schedules, and little sleep sap the energy right out of you. You squeeze every second out of each hour as you pour yourself into your studies, and you see the same average results. Perhaps your diligence even results in lower grades. **(Solution 1)** Don't quit! You have been obedient to God, for He says that it is good for a man to bear the yoke in his youth (Lamentations 3:27). You must stay faithful and leave the results up to God. He is preparing you for service, and that preparation includes more than your classes; it includes your responses to the pressures and disappointments. Keep studying; keep praying; keep asking for help. You can be sure that the struggles of each semester are a part of His complete and purposeful preparation in order for you to succeed in ways that you cannot imagine now.

Students are not the only people who think of success. **(2)** Businessmen, too, must work hard, live godly, and prioritize their lives according to biblical principles, but they must leave their financial gains in God's hands. **(3)** Moms, you can take encouragement in God's control over the success of you children, but you must also be faithful in teaching and disciplining them now, no matter how frustrating it is. **(4)** Sunday School and Christian school teachers have been used by God for years to prepare young people for great ministry. The fruit is not always apparent in elementary school and high school; but a seed planted can be used by God to bring forth a

harvest one-hundred-fold. Believers must be faithful to plant and water, but God is ultimately responsible for the fruit of success.

Conclusion: *Because God is in control, you must remain faithful to God amidst pressure.* Daniel is a great example of one who remained faithful to God amidst pressure. His acute awareness of God's sovereignty over his circumstances (no matter how difficult or inconsistent they may have be), over his reputation (even though obedience would have initially seemed to hurt it), and his success compelled Him to live faithfully. In our lives, too, God is the One who is continually behind the scenes orchestrating all events for His sovereign purposes. It is His control over all things that provides us with a compelling reason to remain faithful to God in spite of the manifold pressures of this world.

If we ignore the sovereignty of God during the difficulties of life and resort to such worldly responses as immorality, worry, and lust, then the statistics will only continue to rise, and we will continue to live defeated joyless lives. No matter what "life may bring," we can be joyful and faithful, because God is still on the throne orchestrating all things perfectly for our good and His glory. May God help us rejoice in the fact of God's unending control over all things and to respond faithfully to life's pressures under God's sovereign control.