

THE SPIDER JUST DOESN'T GET IT

9th in a Series on the Character of God Called, "Indescribable"- Topic: God's Sovereignty

Daniel 4:34-36

Laurie and I were watching a TV show that involved spies. It had the expected complement of twists and turns that you would expect in a show of that type. At one point the central character went through a terrible series of events that took place over several episodes. She suffered terrible betrayal and her life completely unraveled, including being wrongly committed to a mental institution. Then came an episode when it was revealed that the whole thing had been a plan that she and her boss had cooked up as a way to get her into a meeting with one of the most powerful intelligence officers of an enemy nation. It was a total shock. Both Laurie and I said, "I absolutely did not see that coming. I never would have dreamed that she and her boss planned the whole thing." We did not know there was a plan all along.

You might hear people say, "Everything happens for a reason." Technically, that is correct, because every effect has a cause. Laurie and I had to paint some trim around our garage door when we got a new one recently. The next day we noticed some white paint on our driveway some distance away from where we were painting. Everything happens for a reason. That paint showing up on our driveway had a cause. It didn't just randomly and magically appear.

Something caused it to be there. It is an effect of something; it had a cause. We just don't always know what the cause is. (Both of us have a suspicion, and it has to do with one of us who seems to get paint all over everything when he tries to paint...) But usually people who say "everything happens for a reason" mean there is a purpose for the things that happen in their lives. Is that true? Is there some plan being carried out that we can't see? Are we someday going to say, "I absolutely did not see that coming. I had no idea there was a plan all along"? Why should we believe that is true? It turns out that there is an aspect of God's character that suggests that this is, indeed, true. In all the twists and turns of our lives there is something going on that we mostly can't see. As we continue our study of the character of God, let's look at Daniel 4:34-35.

GOD IS THE SOURCE OF EVERYTHING

In the 7th century BC, Assyria was the dominant power in the Middle East. They had been powerful for some time and were the nation that God used to bring judgment on the northern kingdom of Israel. There was an Assyrian government official named Nabopolassar who felt he was destined for greater things than the position he had in that kingdom. In 620 BC he led a successful rebellion against Assyria and established his own kingdom, which became known as the Babylonian Empire. That new kingdom supplanted Assyria as the pre-eminent power in the

world. Nabopolassar ruled over Babylon until his death in 605. He was succeeded by his son, Nebuchadnezzar II, whose name in the Babylonian language was something like Nabu-kudurri-usur. Nebuchadnezzar became Babylon's greatest, longest reigning, most powerful and most famous king. Let's call him Nabu for short.

In Daniel 4, Nabu was at the height of his power. And that was a lofty height. He was like the President of the United States in that he was the most powerful man in the world. Except he was more powerful than the President because he was President for life. He did not have a term of office. He ruled as long as he was alive. He was not elected. He answered to no one. Furthermore, in that day there was no such thing as the rule of law. Whatever he decided was the law. If he decided he wanted to kill a wealthy man, take his wife and all his lands and wealth, then he could do it, because whatever he chose to do was the law. He could do absolutely anything he wanted to do. There was no separation of powers in the government. There was just him. There were no limits on his power.

That kind of power has some unfortunate effects on people. An article in *The Atlantic* three years ago cited studies conducted at McMaster University on people with power. The studies revealed that their brains were physically affected by their power and they behaved like people who have suffered traumatic brain injury. In other words, *it's like they are brain damaged*. The power definitely went to Nabu's head. We get a glimpse of this in verse 29. "Twelve months later, as the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, he said, 'Is this not the great Babylon I have built as a royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?'" He was very impressed with himself. He was crowing about his great power and his majesty and glory. Back in Chapter 3, he had a giant statue of him made out of gold. It was 90 feet tall. Then he decreed that when the band played, everyone was required to fall down and worship the statue. Uh, compensating for something, Nabu? He fell prey to the temptation of power. He thought he was unstoppable, and that he was the one who was in control not only of his life, but of everyone and everything else. He thought he was the center of everything, that he mattered above all else. His power-induced brain damage can be seen in the fact that he had already been warned that this was a problem, but he paid no attention. He was about to find out that it was, in fact, a huge problem.

At this point we need to think about another character in this story. It was a man named Daniel. Daniel was a young Jewish man who had been captured when Babylon conquered and destroyed Judah, the remaining Jewish nation. He was taken as an exile to Babylon where he was trained and then served in Nabu's administration. He quickly became a favorite of the king, due largely to his remarkable ability to interpret dreams and prophesy events. He first came to Nabu's attention when the King had an especially disturbing dream. He had an entire department of wannabe prophets, seers, astrologers and wise men who claimed to be able to interpret dreams, but Nabu had a suspicion that they were all quacks who made stuff up. So he said that the test of

their veracity and value would be that they had to interpret the dream – *without him telling them what it was*. But none of them could do it. That confirmed Nabu’s suspicion that they were a bunch of phonies, so he ordered that they all be executed. At that point Daniel came to the rescue. He explained what the dream was, interpreted it, impressed the king and saved the lives of all the people in the Department of Wise Men.

In Daniel 4 Nabu had another dream. Daniel was saddened by it because it was not good news for the king, to whom he was loyal. The meaning of the dream is explained by Daniel in verse 25. “You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like the ox and be drenched with the dew of heaven. Seven times will pass by for you, until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes.” Somehow the king was going to fall from his lofty position, go live in the fields with animals and eat grass like one of them. He would stay that way for seven years.

Verse 33 says, “Immediately what had been said about Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled. He was driven away from people and ate grass like the ox. His body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair grew like the feathers of an eagle and his nails like the claws of a bird.” The man lost his mind. He became King Looney Tunes. For seven years he lived out in the fields, babbling nonsense, eating grass, and looking like an insane Howard Hughes at the end of his life. Like a meteor, he fell from the loftiest of positions to total humiliation.

In verses 34-35 we see in the king’s own words what happened next. “At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High. I honored and glorified him who lives forever. His dominion is an eternal dominion, his kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him, ‘What have you done?’”

Nabu humbled himself. He admitted that he was not the great power in control of all things. Life was not about him and what he wanted, but about the Most High God and what he wants. In his statement, Nebuchadnezzar mentioned several aspects of God’s sovereignty. His power is unlimited; no one can stop him. He does as he pleases. Compared to him, the people of the earth are nothing. But notice also, his dominion is eternal. He rules from generation to generation.

That is not true of any human ruler, and it certainly was not true of Nebuchadnezzar. He ruled for a long time – 43 years – which, although long, in historical terms, is not much more than a moment. He was succeeded by a series of relatively inconsequential kings, and then, only 25 years after he died, Babylon was defeated by the Persians. The great Babylon, superpower of its time, lasted only a little over 100 years.

Nebuchadnezzar serves as an example of human power and hubris. He was as powerful as it was possible for a man to be at that time. But he found out the hard way that he literally was as nothing compared to God. His power could disappear in an instant, and it did. He could go from the pinnacle of pride and power to the humiliating state of an insane homeless man in the blink of an eye. He reminds us how puny and brief human power really is. But God has always ruled and always will rule.

Genesis 1 says, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” God was active before anything existed. Psalm 90:2 says, “Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the whole world, from everlasting to everlasting, you are God.” Colossians 1:17 says, “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” He is eternal. He existed before *any* thing came to be, and it only exists because he brought it about. In Revelation 21:6 he says, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End.” He is the source of all that exists. Revelation 11:15 says, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever.”

GOD SUSTAINS EVERYTHING

Remember that Colossians 1:17 says that in Christ all things hold together. Hebrews 1:3 says the same thing. “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory, and the exact representation of his being, *sustaining all things* by his powerful word.” He sustains all things.

I am not a physicist, nor the son of a physicist, so I am definitely a layman in matters scientific. If you go much beyond “There are atoms that can join and form molecules,” it quickly starts to sound like Chinese to me, and I *don’t* know Chinese. But even I can see some things about our universe that come into play here. I know that most atoms have more than one proton and that protons have a positive charge. This means like two magnets with a positive charge, they should repel each other and blow the atom apart. But they don’t. Why not? Well two of the four fundamental forces are the “strong nuclear force” and the “weak nuclear force.” They are forces that keep protons together even when they want to be apart.

Oh, so the strong nuclear force keeps atoms from blowing up. Yes. All right, what is that force and where does it come from? Well, uh, it’s the strong nuclear force, you see, and – we don’t really know where it comes from. It’s just there. So you don’t really know what it is or why it is there. Well, no we don’t. I submit that God created that force, whatever it is, and God keeps it in place so that atoms don’t blow up and in the process explode the entire universe.

We all are very familiar with gravity. We’ve experienced it every day of our lives, sometimes with unfortunate results. Many years ago I was lifting weights and in the process of changing weights on a barbell I dropped a fairly heavy weight. When you do that gravity always comes into play. The weight did not hover in mid-air, it didn’t soar up to the heavens. It dropped. Unfortunately, my foot was in the landing zone below. I got a painful lesson in gravity. It seems

every time I eat, gravity comes into play, because under my place at the table there are always crumbs. How do they get there? I maintain it is some foul villain's evil plot to make me look bad, but the truth is, it is gravity. Yes, but what is gravity? We don't really know.

It is part of God sustaining all things. If he turned off the gravity machine for just a few moments it would result in utter chaos and destruction. God sustains all things. Think of life itself. What exactly is it? We don't know, but we know it is real.

GOD RULES OVER EVERYTHING

Nabu realized that God does whatever he pleases with the powers of heavens and the people of the earth. In other words, he controls everything in heaven and on earth. Furthermore, as the king said, no one can hold back his hand. In other words, whatever he decides, will happen. No one can stop him.

Psalm 24:1 says, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it." It all belongs to God. And because it belongs to him, he can do with it whatever he chooses. If you create something, then you own it and have the right to do with it whatever you choose. For instance, I have created a couple of novels. I wrote them. One of them, *Black Horse*, depicts fictional events that take place in Hawaii when the tourism industry has completely collapsed, and Waikiki, for instance, has become a ghost town. (Too bad I didn't anticipate that happening because of a pandemic.) Laurie recently saw an article that was about the complete collapse of tourism in Hawaii that used those exact words, describing Waikiki as a ghost town.

Let's suppose that someone came along and decided to rewrite my book with a pandemic as the precipitating cause. They don't have the right to do that. I created the book and it belongs to me. Only I would have the authority and right to change it. Writing a novel is a demanding task. It is a lot of hard work. But in a way it is kind of fun. You create a world with people in it, and you can have those people say and do whatever you want. Often I would have a character do one thing, then I would rethink how I wanted the plot to go, so I would say, "No, let's have him do this instead." I had the right to have my characters do whatever I want, because I created them.

Now you are seeing where this is going. God has the right to decide what everything and everybody on the earth does, because he created all of it. Psalm 24:1 says the earth is the Lord's and everything in it. I am one of those things in it, and so are you. We belong to God. We are his, and he has both the right and the power to decide what we should do. He rules over us, just as he rules over everything.

Proverbs 21:1 in the New American Standard translation says, "The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he wishes." The king was the most powerful person in the ancient world. That verse says God makes kings do whatever he wants.

Ephesians 1:11 says God works all things after the counsel of his will. He makes everything go the way he wants. In his book, *The Attributes of God*, A. W. Pink wrote, “God is God in fact as well as in name. He is on the throne of the universe, directing all things and working all things according to the counsel of his own will.” In fact, Proverbs 16:33 says, “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.” The New Living Translation puts it this way, “We may throw the dice, but the Lord determines how they fall.” Wait, you’re saying if I flip a coin, God decides whether it’s heads or tails? That’s what it’s saying. Lamentations 3:37-38 says, “Who can speak and have it happen if the Lord has not decreed it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come?”

Scholar R. C. Sproul said, “If there is one single molecule in this universe running around loose, totally free of God’s sovereignty, then we have no guarantee that a single promise of God will ever be fulfilled.”

Well that gives us some problems, doesn’t it? If God decides everything, doesn’t that mean he decided to have a pandemic that killed thousands of people? Doesn’t that mean he is responsible for a child getting cancer? Doesn’t that mean that when some sick person kidnaps, abuses and then kills an innocent child, that God must have chosen that to happen? Doesn’t this make God cruel, the author of unspeakable evils?

Doesn’t that in fact remove responsibility for our actions from us? Recently Laurie and I were helping Carissa with their son, Wesley, while Michael was in Atlanta taking his required simulator exams. We all went for a walk and passed a house where a family was moving out with a big moving truck parked out front. That sparked a conversation about the many times we have helped Carissa move. Laurie brought up one of the more painful memories of our life, the day when in the process of helping Carissa move while in college Laurie got hit in the face by a bungee cord that snapped free. Fortunately, I was studying in preparation for this topic, and for the first time I was able to absolve myself of guilt in the matter. I told her, “You see, God is sovereign over all things, and he decided that you should have your face cut open by a flying bungee cord. So it was not my fault. There was nothing I could have done about it because God had ordained it should happen. Really, it was his fault.” Ultimately doesn’t this mean that I can do anything I want because God works all things after the counsel of his will, so whatever I do must be what he has sovereignly decided I should do? If he didn’t choose that I should do it then I wouldn’t be able to do it. So whatever I do must be God’s will, right?

There are some obvious conundrums that this doctrine causes. Scripture says that humans exercise real choices by their own will and in so doing, create great evil. They do so against God’s will, and they are responsible for those choices. Yet it also says God is sovereign and nothing is outside of his control. How can both of these things be true? How can God both be in control of all things yet not control the actions of human beings?

Isaiah 55:8-9 says, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” Romans 11:33-34 says, “Oh, the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out. Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?” No one has truly known the mind of the Lord.

God’s ways are unsearchable. You and I can’t trace them. Both of these passages tell us there is a truth that is unsatisfying, but certain. It is that we are not going to understand how God makes things work. We are not going to be able to figure out how he could run a system in which he is sovereign over everything, yet he allows us to freely make choices that are against his will, that are evil and destructive and do great harm to us and others.

God has given us minds and he wants us to use them to the best of our ability. He wants us to make the most of them and use them to our limits. But we are finite, and that means we do have limits. The average human brain weighs about 14 ounces at birth. It grows as we grow and actually reaches its maximum size when we are about 15 years old, which clearly means there is not a direct correlation between size of the brain and wisdom. The average fully grown human brain weighs about 46 ounces. It is an awesome, almost miraculous organ. It is astoundingly powerful. But here’s the question, do you really expect a finite human brain, a biological computer weighing less than 3 pounds, to be able to comprehend the infinite?

It is not very satisfying when we are confronted with the befuddling issues that come with the sovereignty of God to be told we are never going to be able to unravel this knot because it is infinitely above our pay grade. But that was exactly what happened in the book of Job. After 40 chapters of debate about what happened to Job, in the end Job said, “I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted. You asked, ‘Who is this that obscures my plans without knowledge?’ Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know,” in Job 42:1-3. In verse 5 he said, “Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.”

I was working in my study at home when a spider showed up crawling across my desk. I said to it, “Look, this is where I study God’s Word, where I prepare to teach people about the grace of God. This is where I pray and talk to God. This is not a place for you.” He didn’t seem to care. I tried another tack. “This is in our home, a place that is our refuge. You actually don’t belong here because you can cause us problems. You bite us and it makes us itch, and some of your kind can actually do damage to us. So you are not welcome here. There is a vast world outside our house, and we would be fine with you taking up residence anywhere out there.” Unfortunately that spider has a tiny brain. It does not allow him to understand any of what I told him. He had no concept of what I was doing, or of what is important to us. He just went on about his business with no regard to all that I had tried to explain to him. So I squished him. We

need to understand that a spider is much closer to being able to grasp human abilities and thoughts than we humans are to being able to grasp the infinite nature and wisdom of God.

Failing to recognize our limits is a problem. For instance, my iPad has some artificial intelligence functions, but it doesn't understand its own limits. It assumes it knows what I'm going to type and sometimes "corrects" my wording. For instance, I discovered when I had intended to type the word "temptation" it beat me to the punch. It "corrected" my wording to "tea Patti on." I told it that it's too big for its britches and as a result was not at all helpful. It needs to learn its limits. Here is what one scholar said about this matter: "If God were small enough for us to understand, he wouldn't be big enough for us to worship."

APPLICATION

DON'T GET SPIDER SYNDROME

It is easy for us to be like the spider in my office, using his tiny brain to understand what is happening around him. The spider's brain is not sufficient to enable him to understand a human being and why we do what we do.

Our problem is we try to understand how an infinite and sovereign God operates and why he does what he does. We have to accept that we do not have the bandwidth to understand an infinite God. When I was in elementary school there came a point where they introduced a new music unit in the curriculum. They wanted to teach all of us scholars something about music. The way they went about that was to have all the kids learn to play a recorder. Only there was a problem for me. It so happened that my parents had arranged for me to have piano lessons. The school policy was that those who were having music lessons, such as piano lessons, would not get a recorder. This seemed terribly unfair to me. I felt like I was being punished and didn't get to do what other kids did. They got to play cool recorders that they could take anywhere, and I was stuck playing a dumb piano. I felt cheated.

Now I look back on that incident and can see it for what it really was. The adults knew what I didn't know. The piano is known as the queen of instruments. The idea was for students to learn something about music. The adults knew that I would learn far more about music from taking piano lessons than the little bit they would teach me using a recorder. Plus, the recorder isn't really all that cool of an instrument. Now I realize missing out on the recorder was no loss at all. I didn't know that at the time. I didn't know that there was a plan for my good, even if it didn't feel like it. But there was a plan, and it was wise.

We need to live by faith. We need to believe that God is big enough to be sovereign over all things, but somehow give people the freedom to choose. We need to believe that God with his eternal perspective and his infinite wisdom can work a plan that will entail elements we just don't understand.

The issue here is **acceptance**. God doesn't ask us to understand it all, but to accept it. He wants us to get to the place where, after we have asked all our questions, raised all of our objections, done all of our whining and complaining, we join Job in saying, "I know that you can do all things. Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know..." (Job 42:2-3). Those statements by Job teach us two things. First, to accept that truth requires **humility** to say there are indeed some things "too wonderful for me to know." Second, it will require **faith** that God can do all things.

DON'T GET NEBUCHADNEZZAR SYNDROME

Our problem is that we, like Nabu, fall into the trap of thinking that we are the center of all things. We think that those pre-Copernicans were wrong, that the sun does not actually revolve around the earth, but also that Copernicus was wrong, the earth does not revolve around the sun. No, we think the whole thing revolves around ME! What happens to me in my life is all that matters!

How difficult it is for us to get it into our head that the earth is the Lord's and everything in it, and that includes me. I belong to him. He does not exist to serve me, to make my life more palatable and pleasurable. I exist to serve him. Ooh, that's a tough pill to swallow. Nabu had a hard time swallowing it until he ended up being a genuine grass-fed king. It was only when he woke up after a long sojourn in the pasture and found himself schmoozing with oxen that he admitted that there is one sovereign, one creator, one owner, one center of all things, and it wasn't Nebuchadnezzar. It is the God of Israel.

The issue here is **pride and self-obsession**. Unfortunately to the degree that we insist on our pride, focus on ourselves at the center, we destroy life. We inevitably make ourselves miserable and we do harm to other people around us. Life will never be full and joyful until we give up our pride and put God at the center of everything, and live for his kingdom, not for ours.

DON'T GET PASSENGER SYNDROME

We've all been in that situation where we were passengers in an airplane with a lot of turbulence going on for an extended period. We get tense, grip the seat rest so hard we almost break it, start sweating. Things are happening that we don't like, that scare us, and we have no control over it. We can't see what's happening. We would be a lot calmer if we were flying the plane, we think. The issue here is **control**. We think we'll only be at peace if we control what is happening.

But have you ever been around a control freak? Are you a control freak? What we know about control freaks is they are usually stressed. And they are contagious. They spread stress more easily than the corona virus spreads. That is not a recipe for peace, because they are trying to control things that they, in fact, don't control.

Isaiah 40:22 says, “He (God) sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers.” In verses 23-24 Isaiah says, “He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing. No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground, than he blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.”

Some people watch Fox News and they get so tied up in knots they want to scream. Some watch CNN and they get so angry at Donald Trump that they want to start a revolution. Isaiah says God reduces the rulers of this world to nothing. Do you believe that? If what Isaiah says is true, then we can all calm down and be at peace. “Yes, but...” No, there are no buts. The issue is, do you believe that God really can safely fly the plane? If you do, then *sit back, relax, and enjoy the flight.*

Pastor and author, Francis Chan, asks, “What would your life look like if you really believed these words... that the earth’s inhabitants really are like grasshoppers?” I confess, I don’t like grasshoppers. To me they are one of God’s creepier creations. But one thing I know for sure, despite how much they creep me out, they don’t scare me. I don’t fear they are somehow going to control and ruin my life. The people of this world are like grasshoppers. We do not need to fear them and we don’t need to control them. God has that handled just fine. Governor Newsome announces an edict that while protestors can gather, chant, shout and sing with impunity, Christians can’t sing together, and I gnash my teeth. Then I remember that he actually is Governor Grasshopper. I don’t need to fret about him.

God’s sovereignty is a huge blessing. When we let him control this world we can find rest. And that is the only way we can live at rest. We are in the passenger cabin. Let’s let God fly the plane. William Carey was a hero missionary. He is known as the father of modern missions. After serving as a pastor for several years he helped found a missionary society, then committed to go to India as a missionary himself. But there were some people who wanted to stop him for reasons of their own. He sailed for India in April, 1793, but only got to the Isle of Wight. There because threats to the ship’s captain if he delivered Carey to India, the captain refused to take him any further and put him ashore on the Isle of Wight. There he wrote a letter to Andrew Fuller, one of his best friends. In it he wrote, “All I can say in this affair is that, however mysterious the leadings of Providence are, I have no doubt but that they are superintended by an infinitely wise God.” He didn’t fret, he didn’t get mad, he didn’t try to get even with those who were blocking him, he didn’t give in to frustration, he just rested in the wisdom of his sovereign God. That is how we will find peace in our lives as well. Sit back, relax, let God pilot the plane, and enjoy the flight.