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The Revelation of the Sovereignty of God

by T. Austin-Sparks

Transcript of a message given between 1961 and 1971 (exact year unknown) at Halford House Christian Fellowship in Richmond, Surrey, England. Words which were not clear are enclosed in [square brackets].

I'm very glad to be with you again, dear friends, for this little time and I'm only sorry that it doesn't occur more often. Now, I understand that you have embarked upon a study of the book of Daniel and it had been suggested that I might be able to say something [I trust is] helpful in that connection.

What I have to say will not be anything in the nature of a systematic study of that [great] book. Indeed, I don't know that what I have to say will be very systematic at all, but a few more or less general observations in which you may find some directive in your further studies. I don't expect to say something so wonderful that the roof will come down, there *are* preachers of that calibre, but I think you're fairly safe this evening!

Well now, in turning to this book again in a general way, you will get a good deal of the outline and the more technical content of the book as you go on. I shall not refer to that. But in general, you know that there are three quite clear aspects of this whole book.

The first is the historical, that it is a book of history, the history of a series of empires rising and falling, and of many of the events and happenings at the different times represented by those empires. It's a book of *history*.

And then it is also a book of prophecy. That is, that it looks on beyond itself, a long, long way ahead to what the book itself calls, "the time of the end". You will be probably giving a deal of time to the *prophecies* that are in the book of Daniel.

But then there is the third aspect, what we will call the "mystical", or more happily: the spiritual, which transcends the historical and the, particularly, prophetic. As much as the prophetic relates to certain times and events in the future, the spiritual or the mystical is that which transcends all time, rises above all the *earthly* happenings, events, and conditions, and is of the heavenly and eternal character. That is very much in evidence in this book. It's mainly upon that that we shall dwell this evening, but we mention that the book has these three very distinct features: the historical, prophetic, and the mystical or spiritual.

When I use that word 'mystical', I don't mean mysterious. I mean what the New Testament calls the 'mystery', that is, something hidden *behind* what is on the surface - the deeper meaning and secret of the obvious, the events, the happenings - the seen things are not *all* that there is to it, there's something *behind* it all. It all *contains* something. There is a significance in the events, which is not on the surface.

Now, in that connection (you see I'm just rambling!) you will remember that at the end, Daniel was commanded to "seal up the book until the time of the end". Seal up the book; this is a sealed book. It's a sealed book, and no one can understand this book until the Holy Spirit breaks the seal. That is why *this* book is the most controversial book in the whole of the Old Testament. It, with the book of the Revelation in the New Testament, these two, are the most controversial books in the whole Bible: Daniel and the Revelation. And on those two books there are more *conflicting* opinions and interpretations than on any other part of the Bible.

You get hold of any bibliography on Daniel, expositors of Daniel, treatise on Daniel, and you see the vast variety of interpretations; conflicting interpretations. I've found very few people see eye to eye on the matter of the interpretation of this book, as of the book of the Revelation. And the result is that, because of the confusion, many have given up their interest and study of these books, "Don't understand Revelation, just cannot." "Don't know what Daniel was talking about, what's it all about?" It's a mystery.

Now, you see, if you approach this thing even, even with a *Christian natural* mind, that's where you are landed. Only the Holy Spirit can unlock the seal - of any scriptures that's true, but of these in particular. It's no use just coming to this as a document of history or prophecy and trying to lay it all out and get an 'apple pie' apprehension of the thing. You won't do it!

I venture to suggest that if you're going on in this book in the coming weeks, you're going to get into a lot of confusion unless the Holy Spirit gives you the key; something behind. That's the only way in which I've been able to solve the problems of this book and, more especially, the book of the Revelation, that you must get a hidden key and secret, something that is not just on the surface of what is said, and what is happening. You'll get into confusion.

Well, it's the *spiritual*, that's what I mean by the mystical: that which lies deeper than the surface. It is that which is *the* thing that is going to make your study profitable and make this book at all intelligible and really of help.

Well, having said that, and we shall be dwelling on that mainly as we go on, and I hope to be able to illustrate that before we are much further on. What is the *supreme* value of the book of Daniel? You must be able to write on the title page that which *is the key* to the whole book. There's many things in it, a variety of things, a diversity of things, but there's *one thing* which comprehends all, and brings all into harmony. You must be able to put your hand on that. And what is it that is the supreme message and value of the whole book from beginning to end? And the answer is: the revelation of the sovereignty of God.

Think for a moment, and the book lies open: the sovereignty of God in the affairs of this world, the affairs of His people, of His servants, and in the affairs of men. The one phrase which stands over, is this: the heavens do rule!

The Heavens Do Rule

You go from part to part with that in your eye. Well, that's true, that's just what and how it works out: the *marvellous* manifestation of God's sovereignty *in* things, and *over* things, and *through* things. That's what it's all about. And surely that is the most helpful thing, isn't it? The most helpful thing: to be able to discern, to *discern* in this so *comprehensive* way and in these so *difficult* situations, these seemingly *impossible* situations (speaking humanly) to discern the controlling hand of God and see a will higher than the will of man, higher than the forces of nature, a will that is stronger than the fiery furnace, than the den of lions. It's something greater than all that's here; the will of the mightiest monarchs of all time and history, and over it all there's another will, a sovereign will exercising itself - sometimes complimentary, sometimes in opposition to what is, but there it is - the sovereignty of God.

Now, another thing that you probably have already discovered or been told, that this, this book brings into view what is called in the New Testament:

The Times of the Gentiles.

It's an entirely new historical phase in the course of this world. Up to this time, that is, up to the end of the prophecies of Jeremiah where Daniel begins, it was Israel and Jerusalem as the centre of the world of God's governmental activity. Through David and Solomon He had brought Israel and Jerusalem into the place as of His earthly throne. There His government was seated and He made Israel and Jerusalem the governmental centre of the nations. Through them and through it, there went forth to the nations the exercise of the Divine authority.

Now we see the steady, steady breakdown of that, decline of that after Solomon, through the division of the kingdom of Israel and Judah, and then various sets of kings; the steady decline in that position in Israel and Jerusalem, it's losing it, losing out, losing out in the world. Then by reason of the so great departure from the Lord on the part of Israel, the final climax came and the people were scattered from the land of Israel, and Jerusalem was besieged by Nebuchadnezzar. And from that time, a new phase of this world's history commenced which is called, "the times of the Gentiles" and the throne is in *heaven* now and not in Jerusalem.

And the throne is not "in Israel", it's over the nations, *all* the nations. And the nations are gathered in this book, as you see, they [command the prophetic], the succession of kingdoms and empires: Babylonish, the Macedonian, the Grecian, and so on until you come to the Roman (we will be coming

to that more especially in a minute). These are the, these are *the* world powers over which the sovereignty is now exercising itself, so that it's a *heavenly* throne now, *not* in Jerusalem, it's not over one nation, it's over *all* the nations, it's a universal throne.

The times of the Gentiles have been ushered in with the book of Daniel and they go on to the end of this dispensation. We are in that period of the world's history now: it's the times of the Gentiles, of *the nations*, in other words.

Now, it's very interesting therefore, to *transfer* this matter of the Divine sovereignty from Israel to all the nations. Today Israel is set aside. It's not the centre of Divine government; that's all either finished or in abeyance, if that's how you like to interpret it. But at present it's not there, they're out of the way. But the nations are now in the picture, and although it doesn't look like it always, the Divine sovereignty is over the nations. And if you want proof of that, it's to the book of Daniel that you'll go for it. To the book of Daniel you will go for the evidence and the proof that even in *our* day, this throne is in operation, and this sovereignty is functioning over the nations. Well, we'll see that.

But my point at the moment is this: that just as you see in the book of Daniel *the* great reality of the sovereignty of God over *all* things and peoples and events, now that sovereignty is particularly transferred to the Gentile world, the Gentile kingdoms. It's now *not* a matter of the prince of Israel, it's now the prince of this world. The prince of this world, the whole world, who is the object, and sentiment, of the exercise of this Divine sovereignty. It's a world thing.

This sovereignty in this book is *revealed* in the foreknown, and foretold, and *revealed* succession and doom of empires. It's impressive that the successive empires are mentioned, described, analysed; and their rise, and their fall, their doom, their finish, is all here in this book before the events themselves. There's your sovereignty.

God knows what power is going to arise at a given time, how long that will hold the field, exactly what will take place during its tenure, and when it will end, and how it will end. That's all here. The sovereignty of God is fully acquainted with, and in charge of, every fresh phase of this world's history. And that's all settled in heaven before any of it begins. That's all fixed in advance.

And if we're in times when it seems that certain world powers are having it more or less their own way and are getting more and more power, God has foreseen it, foretold it, but foredoomed it; it's got its time, its time. And when that time is up, it'll be destroyed. That's what is here. It may extend beyond our lifetime, but that doesn't alter the fact that its tenure is fixed in heaven; the heaven's do rule. The sovereignty of God has its dates for these things *and* how things will finish up. That's one aspect of this sovereignty.

Now, the next thing and the all-inclusive thing (and this is what you want to keep in mind *all* the time in your studies, ever and always) this one thing: *the inclusive and comprehensive relationship of all things to God's Son*. Be they empires, be they what they may be, every thing is fixed, *fixed*, irrevocably, [unalterably], indomitably, to the Son of God who rules everything.

Look at Daniel if you like, chapter 7, verse 2: "Daniel spake and said, I saw in my vision by night, behold, the four winds of the heaven brake forth upon the great sea."

Verse 9: "I beheld till thrones were placed, and one that was ancient of days did sit: his raiment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, and the wheels thereof burning fire. A fiery stream issued and came forth from before Him: thousands of thousands ministered unto Him, and ten thousand times ten thousand..." does that call up anything? The margin will put you clear on that. Who is this one with His head and His hair as white wool... do you remember? And this fiery sword of flame going forth from His mouth, thousands, and thousand times ten thousand ministering to Him, "I stood before Him: the judgment was set, and the books were opened." Verse 22: "...until the ancient of days came, and judgment was given to the saints of the Most High, and the time came that the saints possessed the kingdom."

Clearly, the all-governing thing of this book is:

God's Intention Concerning His Son.

There's no doubt about that. The point is this: empire after empire, *mighty kingdoms* following one another and spreading themselves over the *whole* world with one object, if you read the history that is behind this book. One object. What? To bring world dominion under one head. [That's what it comes down to.] Nebuchadnezzar: "Thou art this head of gold..." Nebuchadnezzar sought to bring the *whole* world under his headship; one dominating head of the whole world and all the nations. God deals with that!

And we know, you have probably already seen what happened to the Babylonish empire, what happened to it, followed by another which tries the same thing: to take world dominion under one human head. It also meets its doom. And another, and yet another! And every one goes the same way. Why? Because God has reserved *that* for His Son, that for His Son - that is the right, the prerogative, the inheritance of God's *Son* and no one else's. And anyone else who seeks to usurp that place and take that position, is doomed!

Never before perhaps, in the history of the world, was *this* thing on a greater scale and a more terrible form than it is in our own day. We know quite well there is a power at work now in this world, on this earth, the sworn object of which is to bring all the world under *its* government and it will stamp out everything and anything that gets in its way. Well, it's true of Babylon, the Greco-Macedonian, the Median and all the others. It will be true of these, and of this one, if this is the last one to go for world dominion.

It's very remarkable, you know, dear friends, that you and I here, many of you are not so very old, but you have lived long enough to see this very thing happen, repeatedly. Some of you will go back to the first world war. It was the sworn intention of the German kaiser to bring this whole world under his government. He was called the "last Caesar" and he took the name for himself. Alright, we know what happened.

Hitler had *exactly* the same object, to bring *all* countries under his domination, and set his rule over all of them. See what's happened? Mussolini, he took the name of Caesar, he had a great, a great relief map set up in Rome of the old Roman empire and its ten kingdoms, and took to himself the name of the last Caesar for the restoration of the Roman empire under his government. A terrible, terrible end, a terrible end to these men, [they're dead]! Really *shocking*, the end to which they came. They're getting into the place appointed for God's Son, get into the way of God's Son like that, and you're *doomed*, you're doomed! The sovereignty of God, you see, supremely, comprehensively

operates in relation to the position eternally secured, appointed for God's Son, Jesus Christ: world dominion!

Now we can get nearer and finish. I wonder if you've ever linked Paul and Daniel? And there is the closest link, the closest link between these two, on this very thing. On this very thing:

World Dominion Vested in the Son of God.

It was God's intention to set up in a spiritual way the reality, the truth, and the testimony to the world sovereignty of His Son right at the *heart* of this world's government, which was Rome. We'd better, I think, we'd better get back to Daniel, hadn't we, before we go further with more.

Chapter 2, we take it up at verse 44, you know what leads up to it, "And in the days of *those kings...*" all of them, represented by the great image, the head of gold, Babylonia and so on, you come down now to the trunk. Now you begin downward from the trunk, the two legs, and the ten toes. Verse 44: "And in the days of those kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom which shall *never* be destroyed, nor shall the sovereignty thereof be left to another people; but it shall break in *pieces* and *consume* all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever. Forasmuch as thou sawest that a stone was cut out of the mountain without hands, and that it brake in pieces the iron, the brass, the clay, the silver, *and* the gold; the great God hath made known to the king what shall come to pass hereafter: and the dream is certain, and the interpretation thereof sure."

The last of those kingdoms of the image, the lower limbs and the toes, was the kingdom of iron - the iron empire of Rome. The greatest of them all in strength, in strength and in expanse. The iron empire of Rome. "In the days, in the days..." *then* what shall come to pass at the end. In the days of those kingdoms shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom which shall *never* be destroyed, nor pass to another people, a Stone cut out of the mountain without hands, breaking in pieces and filling the whole earth.

The days of the Roman empire... very well, something has to happen in Rome, the capital of that empire, the seat of that *world* power, stronger and greater than anything before. Right at its heart, right at its heart, at its throne, at its centre, at its capital, the testimony must be set up by the God of heaven. *And this eternal kingdom* must have its seat on this earth.

Well then, it is put into the *heart* of the apostle Paul, the apostle of the *Gentiles*, note: not of Israel, not of the Jews, the apostle of the Gentiles, of the nations. It is put into his *heart* that he *must* go to Rome; he *must* go to Rome. It became a passion, a dominating thing with him: he must go to Rome! And movement's start, strange movements, confused movements sometimes, very confused, for he didn't go as he thought he would go, as he intended to go, indeed, his way of getting there was very, very different from what *he* had imagined would be his way of getting there, in every sense.

He didn't go as he expected and intended, and it seems that it was set up, set up with tremendous conflict over this thing, it's all thrown into a state of active confusion, and conflict, and cross currents; like that, this matter of Paul getting to Rome. Until he sets out in the ship and then the storm, that terrific storm, where if the devil could have had his way, discerning what this signified, this going to Rome meant for his kingdom, if he'd had his way he would have drowned everybody in order to drown Paul, on the way. "We are not going to have him there," if he can prevent it. In this matter, all the way through, every step and every phase needs sovereign heavenly government to

bring it about. It's got to be the sovereignty of God in this matter, even over Paul himself. Over Paul himself!

If you have sometimes felt as you've read the whole story, "Oh, what a pity that Paul appealed to Caesar, because Herod said if this man had not appealed to Caesar, he could have been set at liberty! Oh, what a pity! Paul, you did make a blunder when you appealed to Caesar." Well, if he did, alright, there's a sovereignty even over Paul's blunder! The sovereignty of God has mistakes in hand, if it was a mistake. Perhaps he's going up to Jerusalem, even when Agabus had taken his girdle and putting it round himself and binding him firmly and saying, "Thus shall it be to the man who owns this girdle" going up to Jerusalem. And they all warned him in the light of that prophecy, and pleaded with him not to go. "I'm going! I'm going."

And you know what happened up there? What happened? Well, he seemed to be landed into the necessity to make some compromise to try and get out of an embarrassing and difficult situation. Well, alright, if you like to look at it like that you can. There's a sovereignty over it all. Paul has *got to get to Rome*, that may be through confusion, and through storms to get there, well, "And so we came to Rome" is the end of the story, isn't it? "And so we *came* to Rome. We *came* to Rome, we came." He's there, he's in Rome. Well, what's happening in Rome? Let's have a look.

You're familiar with a certain fragment of Scripture, but possibly you have never given it this context. The letter to the Philippians. Philippians chapter 1, verse 12: "Now I would have you know, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the progress of the gospel" - we stop there, because we like that. We like that! That's fine. But *he* doesn't stop there, "...so that my bonds became manifest in Christ throughout the *whole praetorian guard*." Let's pause for a moment.

The praetorian guard was Caesar's elite of the armed forces which were employed by Caesar for all his special work in any part of the Roman empire. They came and went from Rome into all parts of the Roman empire on special business. They had charge of special prisoners, and Paul was one of them. This praetorian guard was a worldwide thing. And right *there*, throughout the whole praetorian guard, the testimony of Jesus is established.

Before we go any further, perhaps we'd better go over to Acts for a moment, and see what really this is all about. What is this, what is it? Well, Acts 17, Acts 17 and verse 7: "whom Jason hath received: and these all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is *another* king, Jesus." Contrary to the decrees of Caesar... another king, one Jesus... throughout the whole praetorian guard! Get it? Isn't that tremendous? Right *in* that innermost, *elite* of Caesar's armed forces, with a worldwide connection, the testimony that there's another King! There is another King, and that is not Caesar, that's Jesus; "throughout the whole praetorian guard my bonds are manifest in Christ."

Now then, "and that most of the brethren..." [you see that?] There were a lot of brethren in Rome, Christian brothers *in Rome*, "most of the brethren in the Lord, being confident *through my bonds*, are more abundantly bold to speak the word of God without fear." And that's not all, go to the end of that letter to the Philippians.

In one of the last fragments is this, "The brethren which are with me salute you. *All* the saints salute you, *especially* they that are of Caesar's household." Saints of Caesar's household! What's Paul doing in Rome? What's the effect of Paul being in Rome? What is happening in Rome? Well, that! "The things which happened unto me..." what things? All those things that were set against his coming to

Rome have turned out for the furtherance of the gospel of Christ, even the whole praetorian guard, even Caesar's household itself. And that is not all.

Out from that, that lodging in the capital of the Roman empire, there issued the letter, so-called, to the Ephesians. What is the letter to the Ephesians all about? Well, I think it's concentrated into one fragment, all centres in this, whether it be principalities and powers, world rulers of this darkness, a very, very vivid background to the letter, you see: Rome, Caesar, all that, world rulers of this darkness, hosts of wicked spirits in the heavenlies. Whether it is that, or whatever it is, it all focuses on this: "Unto *Him* be the glory in the church unto all ages forever and ever." The God of heaven has set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed, and He set it up there in Rome, the capital. And the letter, this letter, oh, read the letter to the Ephesians in the light of its background: Rome, and Paul's being in Rome. Tremendous significance!

He wrote from that same room his letter to the Colossians; again, so-called. What's it all about? What is the central word in Colossians? "That in all things *He* might have the pre-eminence". It's the key isn't it? Colossians. In all things, *He*, Jesus, might have the pre-eminence; everything in the letter circles around that.

From that same room the letter to the Philippians went forth. What is the heart of the letter to the Philippians? "And hath given unto *Him*, the name that is above every other name, that in the name of Jesus, *every* knee shall bow;" Caesar's and everybody else's, every knee shall bow, in heaven and earth. The *absolute* pre-eminence of the Lord Jesus, and here, right at the heart of that last of the series of world empires, the greatest and strongest of all, in it and over it is the testimony of Jesus after all. After all! He's supreme.

Now the Stone has been cut out without hands, that is the Lord Jesus and His kingdom, the kingdom of the Son of God's love, that has come. He breaks in pieces. Well, Rome tried the game of breaking it, in its arena the saints were massacred by their tens of thousands. Paul became involved in that terrible world of destruction, as was intended, that the more they killed, slaughtered, and massacred, the stronger it became and the more it grew. The more it grew! Where is it today? It is in all the nations. Where is Rome? Well, it's a memory, a bit of past history, a story, a glory that is no longer. Someone has tried to revive it, and come to an ignominious end.

But the kingdom of the God of heaven is here, it's an everlasting kingdom, it shall have no end, it shall never be destroyed. It will fill the whole earth... as yet we do not see that fully, but it's marvellous, it's marvellous how much of the world is occupied by a testimony in it, the testimony in it to the sovereignty of the Lord Jesus. Marvellous!

The Working of His Sovereignty

The working of His sovereignty, it's not always by the direct action of missionaries, of preachers, sometimes it seems to be a coincidence; almost an accident, a hap that a fragment of the Bible is picked up by somebody and read and devoured. It changes that life. I'm speaking of fact, it's not fiction, it's the truth. And that one, changed, becomes a centre from which there radiates the gospel, and things grow. It's almost like an accident that that bit of the Bible should be found! Somehow, where it came from, nobody knows.

Now, we could fill hours with stories like that of *seeming* coincidence, resulting in something very, very wonderful of the Lord. The *sovereignty* of it! I thank God for this reality, that God *can*, if necessary, He can work directly from heaven. Yes, He *would* work through instruments, through media, but He's got to get His kingdom, and if He cannot get instrumentality to that end, He can work sovereignly.

And we come to our book of the Acts, so-called, not the acts of the apostles, that's quite wrong, it's the Acts of the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven, it's heaven in operation. Oh, it's the sovereignty that's seen at work in that book, isn't it? There, you go through it page after page, and you see heaven intervening. Heaven intervening, what for? Well, this kingdom which is *not* of man's making, not of hands, made by hands, not of man's making, the God of heaven has sent this thing and sent it forth like a Stone to break, shatter, wherever it goes. And this is history, isn't it now? Sovereignty in history.

Well, there it is, but we don't overlook the fact that this is, this is a very costly thing for the ambassadors and representatives of that kingdom. It was *costly* for Paul in Rome, very costly. It was costly for those other saints in Rome. Only those very saints in Caesar's household suffered in the long run, under the awful massacre with Nero. It was costly!

But Paul had gone about saying to the saints everywhere, "And through much tribulation we must enter the kingdom." We could put it round the other way: through much tribulation the kingdom is entered. It's costly, very costly. The things which befell, which happened... oh, what things, what things! Read again from his Corinthian letter, that list of things that happened to him. And then the last things on the way to Rome: the adversities, opposition, difficult situations, more than once at the point of death, in Jerusalem torn to pieces by the mob. In Caesarea 40 men bound themselves by an oath, by a curse that they would neither drink or eat until they had killed Paul. And they're still starving! I was wondering when it came to the point of collision between appetite and the vow, which went to the [void], however, see the point is, that's what he was up against: the determination to kill him in any way whatsoever, by any means - the devil in that storm to drown him.

It's costly, it's very costly. And it's a costly thing to come into the realm where the sovereignty of God operates. You may think, "Oh, God is sovereign, God is sovereign over all and we can have an easy time, it going to be alright, He'll make everything very smooth, because He's Lord!" Not a bit of it. It doesn't work that way, it's a *costly thing* to come into the kingdom and to be an agent and representative of that kingdom.

But you know, dear friends, we only discover *how* the Lord *is* the Lord through adversity, through reverses, through difficulties. We wouldn't know anything about the sovereignty of God if we'd not been right up against it, needing that sovereignty as the *only thing* to get us through or to get us out. If *God* doesn't intervene, well, we're done.

Why should we come to that? Just because, just because we've got to learn that He is sovereign and that's the way to learn. That is the amazing thing, and I say these things with my heart beating very hard. That is why Paul in that prison, knowing all, all that was involved, and all that was before him, what the threats were, what terrible possibilities were there for him in that city, why, he can write from there, "Finally brethren, rejoice in the Lord, *rejoice* in the Lord!" Out from there!

I say, that's too big a challenge for me to face up to, but I suppose the sovereignty of God will see us all through, but that's why it was Paul could write like that and be in the ascendant, in the midst of such situations, because, because he knew the Lord was on the throne, the Lord was the Lord. Now all that comes out of Daniel. You see, there's a close link between Daniel and Paul, because the last empire of Daniel is the Roman and it's got to be shattered by the kingdom that the God of heaven sets up, and Paul is the instrument of bringing *in* that thing that perils and writes the doom of Rome. Wonderful! That's just an introduction to Daniel.