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CHAPTER ONE

A Single Lens

The sovereignty of God is the one impregnable rock
to which the suffering human heart must cling.

—*Margaret Clarkson*

IF ONLY THE KING had believed the truth years earlier. The truth might have kept him from going crazy.

It's what keeps any of us from going crazy.

...

Tucked away toward the end of your Old Testament is a smallish book you may have checked off in your Bible reading plan more than once without ever pausing to dig deeper into its message. The narrative portions of the book of Daniel are familiar enough to many that it's tempting to gloss over them. Perhaps you've heard these stories since childhood, as I have. Interwoven through those accounts are a number of complex dreams and visions, along with some of the most detailed prophecies found in the Bible. These portions seem incomprehensible at points,

making it easy to skip over them in favor of passages that make more sense to us.

I hope you won't, however, because the book of Daniel has so much to say to us.

The characters, historical details, and timelines we encounter in this little book may appear to be archaic, confusing, and relatively insignificant, especially against the backdrop of events that loom large in our world today. But this inspired record—both the well-known stories and the prophetic maze that winds its way through them—could not be more relevant or timely for your life and mine.

Take, for example, a striking scene found in Daniel 4, in which we come across the two words that I chose for the title for this book—the words that touched all of us so deeply on the occasion of baby Samuel's death:

Heaven rules.

No phrase pulses more frequently in my mind and heart than this one. It's on the screensaver photo that pops up every time I look at my phone. It's printed on the mug I use each morning for my tea. It's featured on artwork hanging in my study. It's engraved on a gold necklace hanging around my neck, a gift from a dear friend who is battling terminal cancer.

"Heaven rules" is a right-sizing truth—putting our view of God, our view of ourselves, and our view of our problems in proper perspective.

I love being surrounded by reminders of this simple but profound truth. It has become for me an overarching, undergirding meta-theme, foundational to how I view all of Scripture and all of life. And over and over again, when I have found myself in tumultuous waters, it has been both an anchor and a life preserver for my soul.

As you read what follows, I pray that these two words will take hold of you and that they will stay with you long after you've closed this book and returned it to the shelf. My hope is that the promise and the perspective contained in the phrase will become deeply and forever ingrained in the fabric of your being, that it will bring you comfort and courage in every painful season and perplexing circumstance of your life, and that it will become your reflexive, trusting response to every crisis and troubling development in our upside-down world.



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THE KING AND HIS DREAM

Now, travel back with me to the sixth century BC, to the capital of the vast, sprawling Babylonian empire, as we make our way into the palace where we will meet a powerful man who was forced to learn the hard way that Heaven rules. He tells the story himself in Daniel 4, years after it happened to him.

You'll get the most out of this book if you read it with your Bible opened to the book of Daniel. In fact, before moving on, let me encourage you to take a few minutes to read Daniel 4. As you read, highlight each reference to God as "the Most High." And ask yourself: What did the Babylonian king's life look like before—and after—he acknowledged Heaven's rule?

Flush with success and renowned for his legendary accomplishments and military exploits, Nebuchadnezzar, the reigning monarch, experienced a distressing dream. He instantly recognized that it possessed significant meaning—that it was not just the quirky remains of an unprocessed memory from earlier in the day. But he didn't know what that meaning was until he consulted the prophet Daniel, known as the wise man Belteshazzar in his court.

In the dream Nebuchadnezzar had seen a tree—a tall, towering, massive tree, lush and full, beautiful and abundant. Happy birds and forest animals had come from all over the earth to sleep under it, eat from it, and nest within its branches, deriving nourishing pleasure from its fruit and shade. This tree, as he now learned from Daniel, was a visual image of Nebuchadnezzar himself, the most powerful and influential figure in the known world at the time.

But the scene with the awe-inspiring tree had suddenly been shattered by the loud, commanding appearance of an angel soaring down from the sky and shouting out an order to "cut down the tree and chop off its branches," to "strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit," leaving nothing but the stump and

its roots in the ground—a shocking blow to the king’s mighty strength and standing.

Worse, the angel had described the tree-king descending into madness, being “drenched with dew from the sky,” pawing wildly at the ground for food, his mind changed “from that of a human” to that “of an animal” (Dan. 4:14–16).

And it happened! The events the dream foretold took place just as the angel had described and Daniel had interpreted to Nebuchadnezzar. What a comedown—from hero to zero. From universal acclaim to utter humiliation. Stripped of prestige and power. Reduced to grinding out an existence as a brute beast.

Why? To what purpose was this dramatic takedown? As Nebuchadnezzar recounted his memories of this whole series of events—the dream itself, the prophet’s warning, a year’s reprieve, then seven years of insanity—he remembered well the “why,” having heard it spoken more than once throughout his long ordeal:

“This is so that the living will know that the Most High is ruler.” (4:17)

“The Most High is ruler.” (4:25)

“The Most High is ruler.” (4:32)

Or, as Daniel had declared when explaining the meaning of the dream to the king:

“Your kingdom will be restored to you as soon as you acknowledge that *Heaven rules*.” (4:26)

Yes, the sooner we know and believe this truth, the saner we all can be.

CORRECTION, COMFORT, AND COURAGE

The seeds for this book were first planted in my heart in 2020. Who could ever forget 2020? It was a sad, unsettling, disturbing year. A crazy-feeling year. The news about the COVID-19 pandemic became a daily drip—both fatiguing and frightful. And the stress it created spread to other elements of our society: polarized politics, racial tensions, underlying distrust of government and the news media, and embittered disagreements along partisan lines. Even families, churches, and longtime friendships felt the splintering effects.

And the turmoil was hardly limited to the United States. Economies staggered throughout the world, unemployment soared, public dissension exploded, political and social issues festered. Wave after wave of crises—many COVID related, others not—came crashing in upon the shores of our collective emotions and values, until every day felt as though the sky was falling. This tree of civilization we'd been growing—so proud, so expansively self-assured, so illustrious in appearance and in its representation of the kingdom of man—was being shaken to its roots by the might of another kingdom. Another Ruler.

Yes, whether we recognize it or not, whether we concur or not, the truth remains:

Heaven rules.

By “Heaven rules,” of course, I mean “God rules.” The God of heaven rules. He rules over every tide of history, over every king and kingdom, over every activity we undertake, over every person and part of His creation. “Heaven rules” is a right-sizing truth—putting our view of God, our view of ourselves, and our view of our problems in proper perspective. It’s a truth meant to instill healthy fear within every proud heart that aims to be its own ruler and that believes we humans can determine our own direction and destiny.

That’s how Heaven’s rule *corrects* us, and we’re crazy to think we don’t need it. God is kind, not cruel, in reminding us who’s in charge and in doing it at whatever cost He knows is necessary to get our distracted attention. None of us really wants to find out what would happen if He weren’t in charge!

But here’s why I’ve written this book. This same truth that corrects us is also intended to *comfort* us. To reassure and free us. To catch us and keep us. “Heaven rules” means He is sovereign over everything that touches us, that nothing comes to us unbidden by His desire to use it for our



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good and for His glory and for the greater things He created us to be part of. He is ruler over every diagnosis and prognosis, over all incomes and outcomes, over the most daunting challenges as well as the most seemingly trivial details of our lives.

This truth that is powerful enough to take down the great is also powerful enough to bear up the least of us, both in our private ordeals and as we face the world that seems to be imploding around us. We can take comfort as we walk on this earth because of our Father's rule from heaven. Comfort and *courage*—for “Heaven rules” does not call for a passive acceptance of fate; it comes with the promise of grace for the battle. When we feel we just can't withstand any more pressure, problems, or pain, the awareness of God's rule infuses us with supernatural strength. It enables us to live with contented, cemented clarity through the chaos and the ugly fallout of a fallen world, through struggles and circumstances that make us want to run away in panic or curl up in despair. We find the courage to patiently, even joyfully, persevere in the assurance that Heaven rules.

Not even 2020 could topple this truth.

Throughout that year, however, my husband and I were tested to find out if we really believed it to be true.

First, a bit of background. As perhaps you know, in 2015 a widower named Robert Wolgemuth asked this fifty-seven-year-old, never-married woman to marry him. I said, “Yes, with all my heart.” Of the many experiences I've had in my life that testify to Heaven's rule, one that's up there near the top is God's

providential plan for leading me into marriage with this precious man.

Less than five years after we said “I do,” the Lord led us into another major opportunity to experience and embrace His sovereign rule in our lives. Just as the world was being upended by the global pandemic, my otherwise healthy husband, over the course of just a handful of months, received diagnoses of two—that’s right, *two*—different, unrelated cancers.

As you’d imagine—or perhaps you know all too well from firsthand experience—the arrival of this invasive unknown brought with it waves of sadness. Unspoken fears. Hard, tearful conversations. Long waits for critical test results and for clear information on what to expect next.

And as you have found to be the case in difficult chapters of your own story, we had a choice to make.

Not regarding whether our lives were to be impacted by cancer—we were not given an option about that. The question was how we would receive and respond to this new reality. How we would prepare ourselves to endure it and begin walking through it, having no way of knowing the ups and downs to come—or even if “down” was the only direction it would take us.

We can take comfort as we walk on this earth because of our



We can take comfort
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Comfort and courage . . .
to patiently, even joyfully,
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Father's rule from heaven. Comfort and *courage* . . . to patiently, even joyfully, persevere.

Looking back, we can see clearly that God had been preparing us for this journey. In 2019, before the arrival of either COVID or cancer-times-two, Robert and I coauthored a book we called *You Can Trust God to Write Your Story: Embracing the Mysteries of Providence*. In one chapter we reflected on God's providences—some painful, some beautiful, but all good—in our own story. At the end of that chapter we wrote,

We can't help but wonder what rocky paths we may yet be called to travel. . . . We may yet face serious health issues, losing one or the other to death, and/or other crises known only to Him. But we know He has been faithful in each chapter thus far. And we know that He will be faithful in each one yet to come, that His grace will be sufficient for wherever He leads us.¹

We maintained, in other words, as Scripture does, that God could be trusted to write our story. And in 2020 we held to that belief, even when double cancer showed up in a leading role as antagonist.

To put it more succinctly, we knew that Heaven rules.

How I have come to cling to these two words from Daniel's long-ago conversation with the Babylonian king. And how I have grown to love them. In fact, if you were to look through my Bible or through my journals, texts, emails, and stray pieces of paper

scattered throughout my home and study, you might see scribbled here and there two letters that have become part of the warp and woof of my life:

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“Heaven rules.” I can’t recall a time when I didn’t know and believe this theological truth at some level, thanks to parents who taught and lived it out in our home as I was growing up. But increasingly, throughout my adulthood and even more so in recent years, this way of viewing the complexities and crises of life in this broken world has captured my heart. It has become a lens through which I see and process, well, *everything*. Rarely does a day go by when I don’t speak of it or share it in some fashion with someone else, some person who’s gasping for air amid the churning white water of their own worries or questions or fears or difficulties. Just minutes ago, in fact, I had occasion to remind a dear friend of this reassuring truth in a phone conversation.

“Heaven rules,” to me, is not some nebulous adage confined to the unseen realms beyond time and space. It reminds us that our God in heaven is actively controlling and working through every single happening, event, and circumstance taking place on the earth, and He is doing it to accomplish His good, eternal, redemptive purposes.

He is doing it despite whatever you may hear concerning the state of our world while watching or scrolling through the news of the day.

He is doing it despite whatever pops up as you check your email or social media feeds after you emerge from a long meeting.

He is doing it despite the nervousness that's ticking under your wristwatch while you're perched in yet another doctor's office or hospital waiting room, listening for your name to be called.

Heaven is still ruling. Heaven is *always* ruling.

I realize it doesn't always seem that way. It may appear, at times, that just the opposite is true. On any given news day, it can feel like our world is spinning out of control, that evildoers are winning the day, and that God is helpless (or unwilling) to do anything about it.

As I write this chapter, our news feeds are being flooded with reports of havoc and even genocide taking place in Ukraine. Does Heaven rule in this corner of the world that is being reduced to rubble?

On a more personal level, it may seem that God is dismissive toward your situation, sluggish to act, even coldly unconcerned about matters weighing heavily on your mind and heart, difficulties that distract and distress you and sabotage your joy.

But for those who "know their God" (Dan. 11:32), not even the most dreaded, drastic, or deathly occurrences can steal their hope and confidence in Him. All will be well, even though at the moment nothing seems to be well. This truth is unshakable, despite any and all indications to the contrary. Even when storms are raging within and around us, you and I can sleep in peace each night, and each morning we can awaken to renewed comfort and courage because of this immutable, irrefutable reality.

Because Heaven rules.

LIVING PROOF

In the midst of all the upheaval that came with 2020, with the disruptions we were all experiencing from COVID and unsettling cultural issues, as well as those Robert and I were facing more personally with his cancer, I found myself drawn anew to the book of Daniel. What I discovered there gave me the fresh, daily hope and perspective that I desperately needed.

Daniel was among the first generation of Jewish citizens who were deported from their home in Judah by Babylon's king, Nebuchadnezzar, who took Jerusalem around 605 BC. Some scholars think young Daniel was no more than fourteen years old when he first appeared in the book bearing his name. I find this especially interesting, because if Daniel's responses had been driven by circumstances and surroundings, as is so often the case with teens (adults too!), he easily could have concluded that God had abandoned him along with the rest of his people. Why else had they been forcibly relocated to Babylon against their will?

But the compelling testimony of Daniel's entire life is that Heaven rules despite all appearances to the contrary. The best-known events in this short book attest to this truth:

- Daniel being strategically placed in position, as a Hebrew in a foreign land, to interpret King Nebuchadnezzar's dreams (Dan. 2 and 4)
- Daniel's three young friends (Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego) being thrown into a fiery furnace for refusing to bow to Nebuchadnezzar's statue (Dan. 3)

- another Babylonian king, Belshazzar, whose collapse from power occurred in a single night, being informed of his imminent downfall by the chilling appearance of a disembodied handwriting on the palace wall (Dan. 5)
- and, of course, the most well-known story of them all: Daniel being thrown into the lions' den (Dan. 6)

These accounts, which span roughly seven decades, can be found in the first half of the book of Daniel. They add up to a life that was beyond remarkable.

The second half of his book, however, is less familiar to most. It contains a host of cryptic prophetic clues about the impending fall of the Babylonian empire, as well as the rise of as-yet-unknown empires that God was positioning to emerge in subsequent centuries. These events would set the stage for the eventual advent of God's Messiah—the coming of Christ to earth—at the Lord's appointed time, as well as His ultimate reign over an eternal kingdom that has no end (Dan. 7–12). The prophetic view that emerges is fascinating, glorious, and not always easy to understand.

Years ago, when I was in Bible college, a popular (though difficult) course offered each year was “Daniel/Revelation.” It explored and attempted to make sense of the ins and outs of these two colossal prophetic books, one in the Old Testament, the other in the New. With the guidance of a knowledgeable Bible professor, students set out to decipher this apocalyptic literature, much of it shrouded in symbolism, attempting to determine what was supposed to happen when in the yet-unknown future.

To be sure, there's a place for that kind of academic effort. But in this book I want us to step back and consider the book of Daniel (as we could also do with the book of Revelation) through a single lens—the lens of “Heaven rules.”

Now, in no way does the affirmation of Heaven's rule suggest that Daniel's life was charmed and easy. It was anything but. From his teenage years until the end of his life, he spent his days in exile, far from his homeland. He lived and worked for roughly seventy years under multiple kings, faithfully serving his God under the godless rulers of successive world powers. He faced temptations and trials galore, being forced repeatedly to choose between his faith in his God (whom he knew as the “Most High”) and the whims of pagan despots and administrations. The political terrain never stopped shifting beneath his feet, even as the peril of being fed to a pride of hungry lions, both literally and figuratively, encircled him.

Yet Daniel's calm, humble, prayerful confidence in the Lord not only kept him upright (except when he knelt to pray) but also made him a sought-out voice of reason in times of crisis. He outlasted one king and regime change after another, not by ranting and railing against evil powers, not by protesting against the wicked systems they perpetuated, but by holding fast to an unchangeable fact: earthly rulers rise and fall, but the Most High God is never in danger of being removed from His throne, and He will never abandon the people He calls His own.

Throughout his long, storied life, Daniel remained a stalwart pillar of faith, exerting a righteous influence in an unrighteous

environment. This is due to the fact that he fixed his sight on the long view—the certainty of God’s everlasting kingdom—even as he faced the unpredictable headwinds caused by an endless succession of dysfunctional leaders and anti-God governments.

Can you see why the account given to us in the book of Daniel is so applicable and needed today? Here where we live and serve in the “Babylon” we know—whether it be in my homeland of America or elsewhere in the world—the life, words, and demeanor of this faithful, faith-filled man provide a model for believers in our own day and for those of every generation.

That’s why I don’t consider it any coincidence that the Lord in His providence turned my attention to Daniel’s story in Scripture as my own world (and perhaps your world, certainly *the* world) was roiling and seizing. Through that intense period, as I soaked in the book of Daniel, the truth of “Heaven rules” proved to be bracing to me, a solid rock for my faith. The things God taught me and showed me through Daniel have caused this phrase to become my true north in an even richer, sweeter way than I had ever experienced before. And today, when life and the world so often feel upside down, this exquisite, enduring truth keeps me right side up.

“Heaven rules” is how Robert and I, by God’s daily, enabling grace, are seeking to face all of life. Mercifully, as I’m writing today, we are looking at cancer through the rearview mirror, although the journey has entailed more surgical procedures, blood transfusions, needle sticks, chemo treatments, biopsies, scans, and hospital stays than we thought our two calendars (and

one man's body!) could possibly accommodate. You just make room when Heaven rules.

But even with the sense of relief we're currently feeling on that front, we still must deliberately choose to trust and praise God each day, regardless of what He apportions to us in His all-good, all-wise design for our lives. Our confidence as we wait for Him to unfold our next season remains the same today as it was back in 2019, in that pre-COVID, pre-cancer season, when we wrote:

As we sit here today, we have no idea what our future may hold. Our story is still being written, and He has not given us an inside track on what the next chapters look like. But our trust is in the One who holds our future . . . [who] gives us freedom and peace, even when we cannot see what lies ahead.²

Heaven rules. It really is true. And no threat, no problem, whether in our own little world or in the great big world around us, can ever steal that assurance from us.

THE VALUE OF A SINGLE LENS

We all know what it is to feel outweighed by life and bewildered when faced with hard things, especially unexpected things. Life just gives us a lot to think about. To worry about.

For this reason, my goal in this book is to fix our hearts on *one single truth*, one that applies to every episode, every piece and particle, of our lives and times. It's an outlook that takes

the randomness and apparent impossibility out of each moment, translating it instead into an opportunity to get a clearer view of this God we serve and worship, an opportunity for that God to be seen and made real to those around us.

There's value in seeing things through a single lens.

I don't know a lot about photography—beyond taking pictures with my cell phone—but I know that most serious photographers today use what's called a single-lens reflex camera (SLR).

The single-lens camera, as I've had it explained to me, was a significant breakthrough in camera technology when it first came on the market, primarily because of one innovation. Other camera styles in use at the time required the photographer to look through a viewfinder positioned above or to the side of the lens rather than through the lens itself. And so, no matter how long or how carefully you stared at the object in view, the best you could do was guess at what the picture would ultimately look like. Because the real picture wasn't what you saw in the viewfinder. The real picture was only on the other side of that lens, where reality lived. Where the real picture was happening.

You and I, in looking at what's going on in our world, in our home, in our relationships, or in our bodies, have a variety of viewfinder options we can choose from, different ways of trying to perceive and interpret what we're seeing, to imagine where all of it is going and why. But though we inevitably “see through a glass darkly,” as Scripture tells us (1 Cor. 13:12 KJV), we will see a lot more clearly if our eyes are on what's actually taking place,

not on the many earthly, temporal viewpoints masquerading as what matters most.

And here's what truly matters: Heaven rules.

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Put that picture on your wall and see if it doesn't bring a new focus to your whole life.

A PRESENT FROM THE FUTURE

Let's go back to the story of Nebuchadnezzar that opened this chapter. This fiercely independent ruler who fancied himself master of his own fate needed to come face to face with the fact that he was utterly at the mercy of the God of heaven. And Daniel told him just that.

After explaining that the dream about the luxuriant tree being cut down was a warning to the proud king, Daniel earnestly appealed to him and offered hope if he would humble himself and repent: "Separate yourself from your sins by doing what is right. . . . Perhaps there will be an extension of your prosperity" (Dan. 4:27).

God gave Nebuchadnezzar ample opportunity—a whole year after the dream (4:29)—to bow before Heaven's rule. But when he persisted in his delusion of autonomy and self-grandeur, God deposed him from his throne and left him to rummage for food on his hands and knees like a soulless animal.

Seven years later, the once-arrogant king of Babylon had finally come to see life through a completely different lens. “At the end of those days,” he said, “I . . . looked up to heaven, and my sanity returned to me” (4:34). Finally. He’d wasted all those years pushing back against what the angel and Daniel had said about the Most High being ruler. And yet all these years later, the truth was still the same. It was right where the truth had always been. Right where the truth always is. Just waiting for an ancient king, or maybe the person we see in the mirror each day, to “acknowledge that Heaven rules.”

Heaven ruled then.

Heaven rules today.

Heaven will rule tomorrow.

And Heaven will rule through all eternity.

How much better, rather than living seven—or more—years in unnecessary, self-inflicted turmoil and humiliation, if we just go ahead and live now inside the comfort and courage of God’s forever rule. It’s where the future meets the present. Where His omnipotence meets our frailty. Where comfort meets courage. And where nobody ever has to go crazy in the process.