

“Standing Before the King”

Daniel 1:1-21

Lanny Bassham was the Olympic gold-medalist in small-bore rifle competition in 1976. He tells us what concentration [and discipline] do for marksmanship: "Our sport is controlled non-movement. We're shooting at a bull's eye less than the size of a dime. We're doing it from 50 meters (165 feet) - over half a football field. If the angle of error at the point of the barrel is more than one five thousandths of a millimeter, you drop into the next circle and lose a point [from your score]. So, we must learn how to make everything stop.

I stop my digestion by not eating for 12 hours before the competition. I train by running to keep my pulse around 60, so I have a full second between beats. I stop my breathing. You do all of this and you have technical control. But you need some years of experience in reading conditions: the wind, the mirage. Then you have the other 80% of the problems – in your mind.”

It takes incredible discipline to become a master at any sport, to win the gold medal in the Olympics. Lanny's experience is proof of that. He spoke about years of training, not hours or days or weeks – years! And if someone is willing to do that for the temporary thrill of being the best in the world for a short time, what about those of us who are focused on eternity? Shouldn't we be willing to endure rigorous training so we can be the best possible servants of Christ?

You see, one day we will take our place on the “reviewing stand,” much like the athletes in the Olympics. Only this time, it will be about eternal rewards, not an earthly medal. We'll stand before our King and give an account of how we have stewarded the gifts, abilities, and resources He's given us. If we've used those gifts selfishly, those works will be burned up; if we've used them for His glory and the blessing of others, there will be an eternal reward.

The title for our study today is “Standing Before the King.” And our text is Daniel chapter one, verses one to 21. I invite you to listen as I read **Daniel 1:1 to 21** now.

Daniel chapter one shows us the PHASES of training each of us needs to complete in order to faithfully stand before our King.

Before we begin looking at the phases of training, I want to point out an interesting literary feature of this chapter. It uses something called a chiasm, with the first 14 verses presenting a

tension and the last 7 providing the resolution. If you could see the way this is laid out it would be easier for you to understand. But because you can't see, please listen carefully.

Here's how it is expressed:

A Babylonia assumes supremacy over Israel vv. 1-2

B Young men are taken and subjected to pagan training vv. 3-7

C Daniel seeks to remain faithful to his God v. 8-14

C' Daniel remains faithful to his God vv. 15-16

B' Young men triumph in their pagan training vv. 17-20

A' Daniel proves supreme over the Babylonians v. 21

So, the chapter begins by pointing out the supremacy of Babylon over Judah. The chapter ends by pointing out Daniel's superiority over the Babylonians; and that superiority is a result of Daniel's obedience and the supremacy of Daniel's God.

Let's look now at the phases of training needed to stand before the king.

The First PHASE of Training is,

Acknowledge God's Providence

Dictionary.com defines providence as *"God, especially when conceived as omnisciently directing the universe and the affairs of humankind with wise benevolence."* As we noted in last week's introduction to our study in the book of Daniel, God's providence is evident again and again throughout this book. He is superintending the affairs of all human beings and especially of those who give Him His proper place in their lives.

Here in chapter one, God's people found themselves in a circumstance similar to that of their ancestors, just before the Exodus from Egypt. Israel was in captivity, in bondage, and their God seemed impotent. But we know that God in His providence was using their hard bondage to build their endurance and equip them for their coming trek through the wilderness. Now, once again, God was at work in the darkest of circumstances.

God had called the people of Judah to repentance again and again through the prophets; but they paid little attention to Him. Now, God was using the heathen nation of Babylon to bring judgment on them. Verse two says that *"God **gave** Jehoiakim king of Judah into [Nebuchadnezzar's] hand."* God did that! Can you imagine how hard it must've been for the people of Judah to make sense of that; especially the godly ones like Daniel and his friends?

Judah's disobedience became an opportunity for God to demonstrate His providence, His wise benevolence. He hated the sin of His people - but He loved them. His goal in discipline was not annihilation, but repentance and restoration. So, He chose a nation that would take them into captivity and, in a sense, protect them, for the next seventy years. And when the seventy years were finished, He would send them back home - and have their captors pay for the trip! Isn't our God amazing?

God also providentially allowed some of the gold and silver vessels to be taken from the Temple and carried to Babylon. Daniel uses the biblical term of *Shinar*. By definition it was a place hostile to God and to faith in God. Remember, the Tower of Babel was built at Shinar. So, the Babylonians took those vessels and placed them in the treasure houses of their heathen gods in Shinar. That signified to them that their gods were more powerful than Jehovah. Don't forget this detail because these vessels take on a special significance when we get to Daniel chapter 5.

There's an interesting contrast here at the beginning of chapter one between the disobedience of the nation and the obedience of Daniel and his three friends. But these contrasts give expression to God's providence.

God providentially chose Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah to be among the first captives taken to Babylon. I'm not sure they would have immediately understood their captivity as something that would turn out good. Their situation was very similar to that of Joseph in Egypt. All of the captives were expected to meet the king's criteria. They were to be without blemish, handsome, and intelligent. The training they had and the lessons in deportment, back home in Judah, made them suitable as officers to King Nebuchadnezzar. They were the cream of the crop of Judah's young men!

Once they were enrolled in Nebuchadnezzar's training program, they were given the very best of everything the kingdom had to offer. They lived in a highly controlled environment designed to produce capable and effective leaders. All of their physical needs were provided, along with rigorous cultivation of their intellect. Language, history, the sciences, mathematics, astronomy, and more, were all part of their daily training regimen.

You and I can be quite certain that many more than just these four young men from the ruling families were taken. But the biblical record follows these four, most likely, because they were faithful to God and obedient to His commands. These four, and especially Daniel, had a major impact on the kingdom of Babylon.

Now, what difficult experiences have you had that caused you to question God's providence? A difficult childhood, the tragic loss of a loved one, a debilitating health condition, the loss of a source of your livelihood? All those and more are things that make us ask; "is God really good all the time?" Many of you are familiar with the life and ministry of Joni Erickson Tada. As a young woman, faced with a life-long disability, she chose to focus on God's goodness and His purpose in allowing the accident that left her paralyzed. Countless lives have been impacted for Christ because of her choices!

We must remember that the God who made us is infinitely more qualified than we are to decide what our path through life should look like. I take a lot of comfort from verses like Ephesians 2:10 "*For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God **prepared beforehand** that we should walk in them.*" Each of us is God's masterpiece and He has prepared beforehand that our lives should bring Him praise and glory!

I think of a young man I know in his early 20s. He's confined to a wheelchair with an incurable disease. He knows he'll most likely never be able to do the things that his peers enjoy; sports, marriage, or physical labor to name a few. And yet, he has a bright, cheerful countenance and a ready smile. He has not given in to self-pity or a defeatist attitude. He is trusting in the goodness of God and living to the praise and honor and glory of his Heavenly Father. He is an inspiration to many people.

Like Daniel and his friends, you and I must also complete this phase of our training as servants of the King. We must embrace the reality of God's wise benevolence and His care for us as His children. The circumstances you and I face will not always make God's providence readily apparent, but we can, by faith, accept what He has planned and effectively serve Him. May it be said of us that we've been chosen providentially because of our obedience to Jesus and our desire to fulfill His plan for our lives – much like Daniel and his friends. If so, we will have no fear when it is our turn to stand before the King!

The Second PHASE of Training (to stand before the King) is,

Acknowledge God's Protection

When God providentially places us in an environment that's hostile or difficult, He will provide adequate protection for us so we can remain faithful to Him. Sometimes He does it supernaturally, without any input from those in that environment. At other times, He uses our

choices and responses to help provide that protection. Think of Joseph in Potiphar's house.

I know a man who worked for a major company in our area. They design and manufacture aerial work platforms and materials handling equipment. But in 2009, this company signed a contract with the US military to provide a specialized vehicle for the ongoing war in Afghanistan. The man I mentioned is a follower of Christ and based on his understanding of Jesus' teaching in The Sermon on the Mount, he felt like he couldn't participate in anything related to promoting or supporting the war effort. So, rather than violate his conscience he quit his job and found other employment.

Whether you agree with his choice or not, he had purposed, or resolved, to be true to God's Word as he understood it. For that, he is to be commended.

In our text, God's protection becomes evident through **Daniel's purpose**. Think of all the rationalizations for compromise that Daniel could've come up with. "Just think, if we eat the king's food and obey his commands, we'll be placed in important government posts. Then, think of the impact we can have for God on this heathen nation." Or, "under normal circumstances we should obey God's Law; but these are not normal circumstances."

But no, verse 8 tells us that Daniel purposed, or resolved, in his own heart that he would not defile, or pollute, himself with the portion of the king's food and drink. The kind of purity Daniel and his friends were concerned about was something that only the most faithful Jews cared about. And the use of wine in the Bible was a normal part of an agrarian society. These young men would've been accustomed to drinking wine back home in Judah.

Why do you suppose they thought the king's food and drink were unacceptable? First, the king's food and drink were most likely offered to the gods of Babylon before it was served to the king. So, in the Babylonian way of thinking, to eat the food was to worship the god it had been offered to. But what's the big deal? Didn't Paul say in First Corinthians chapter 8 that an idol is really nothing, a figment of man's imagination?

Yes, he did say that. But these men were living in an earlier time and they needed to hold onto their identity as the people of God. I skipped over verses 6 and 7 earlier. They tell us that the king replaced the Hebrew names of the captives with Babylonian names. The Hebrew names of the four young men all had some reference to the true God, Jehovah. Nebuchadnezzar renamed them with names that referenced the Babylonian gods. And unfortunately, it's by their Babylonian names that we commonly remember Daniel's 3 friends.

So, what was happening here was what we might call “a full court press” to change the identities of these young men! It wasn’t just the food; it was the language, the dress, the entire culture of their captors. Nebuchadnezzar wanted them to become fully assimilated into the culture of Babylon. He wanted them to forget their godly upbringing. And that’s exactly what Satan wants to happen to every Christian young person today! Join the crowd, follow your peers, get ahead. Or they could do what they knew would please their God though it might involve persecution and cost them advancement opportunities.

Let me ask you, would the average 17 or 18-year-old in your church be able to withstand the kind of pressure Daniel and his friends faced? I mean, here were 4 youth facing the most powerful adult on earth! Are your young people sufficiently grounded in their faith in God and His Word to stand against the world? Is the church, their parents, and their school equipping them with an understanding of Scripture and helping them develop solid, biblical convictions? Are they resolved, like Daniel, to remain faithful to God?

Sadly, all too often, I know the answer to these questions. Huge numbers of our young people are walking away from the church and from faith in Jesus Christ. But there are those, praise God, who have resolved to be faithful; and God is pouring out His blessing on them and equipping them for His service, just like He did for Daniel and his friends.

H. A. Ironsides wrote “...where there is faithfulness in separation from that which is opposed to the mind of God; where His word is allowed to sit in judgment on all your ways, you will learn that *'the path of the just is as a shining light, which shines brighter and brighter unto the perfect day.'* The Word will illumine each step... as you take the one already pointed out.”

Daniel’s purpose, his resolve, became part of God’s plan of protection. And my friend, your resolve to follow God wholeheartedly will become part of your protection too!

But God wasn’t finished yet. No, God worked in the heart of the king’s steward. Part of God’s protection was through the **steward’s permission**.

You don’t think it “just so happened that way,” do you? Look at verse 9. “*Now God [gave] Daniel favor and goodwill with the chief of the eunuchs.*” The KJV says *tender love*. God was using the character of these four young men to impact Nebuchadnezzar’s officials. God is at the center of everything happening in this book!

As I was meditating on this text, I was reminded of Proverbs 16:7. “*When a man’s ways please the Lord, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him.*” God was working in the

heart of this steward so that Daniel's resolve could be honored, and his purity protected. It's true, this fellow was afraid of losing his head if these captives didn't turn out well. He had a job to do, and he was going to carry it out. So, he refused Daniel's appeal to abstain from the king's food.

Daniel's response to the rejection of his appeal is instructive for us. He didn't sulk, or whine, or complain. He didn't go on a hunger strike - but he didn't give up, either.

Daniel knew the chief steward wasn't able to oversee everything. He had helpers. In fact, there was a different steward who was given the specific charge for Daniel and his 3 friends. And it was to this man that Daniel made his second appeal. He asked for a dietary test; a test in which the steward had nothing to lose. God's continuing protection of His faithful servants would be provided through **dietary probation**.

Daniel asked that they be given water to drink and vegetables to eat; essentially a vegetarian diet, for 10 days. We're not sure exactly why Daniel asked for this kind of diet. It's possible that the meat was from animals that would've been considered unclean. Or perhaps it wouldn't have been handled according to the guidelines God had set for His people. And, as we mentioned earlier, that it would've been offered to idols; but the vegetables could've been offered to idols too.

Normally, a vegetarian diet wouldn't leave these young men looking healthier than their peers. On the other hand, overindulgence in the rich food and drink that was provided for them definitely can lead to negative health consequences. What does seem clear is that Daniel was giving God an opportunity to provide supernatural results from this test. He asked for the test but left the final decision up to the steward. He consented to let them take the test and provide the evaluation at the end of the 10 days.

Notice what happened. At the end of 10 days Daniel and his friends were better looking and more muscular than ALL their peers! So, the steward took away their daily portion from the king's table and allowed them to eat things that were grown in the soil; vegetables, grains, and fruits. Evidently, they ate that diet for the whole 3-year training period. I believe God blessed these men because of their obedience - not because they ate vegetables instead of meat.

Through Daniel's purpose, through the steward's permission, and through this dietary probation, God protected the 4 young men and their caretaker! They were being prepared to stand before the king with no fear of being disqualified.

The Final PHASE of Training (to stand before the King) is,

Acknowledge God's Provision

At the end of their 3-year curriculum these 4 faithful young men stood for their final examination that included an oral testing by Nebuchadnezzar. These men were now approximately 20 years-old and they passed at the head of their class! The king proceeded to give them positions of significant responsibility in his administration. In those positions, they proved far superior to any of the other officials.

We must not miss the fact that in each phase of this training, Daniel gives God credit for what is happening. God, in His providence, *gave* Judah into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar. God in his protection *gave* Daniel and his friends favor and tender love with the chief steward. And now, God, in His provision, *gave* these four young men knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom. In addition, God *gave* Daniel understanding in all visions and dreams.

Another word that's mentioned numerous times in the later verses of this chapter is the word, **all**. Healthwise, these 4 young men were better than **all** the other trainees who accepted the king's food (verse 15). When these young men were examined by the king, verse 19, there were none among **all** their peers who could compare to them. And in **all** matters of wisdom and understanding they were 10 times better than all the rest (verse 20)!

God gave these young men knowledge and skill. They studied the learning and literature of the Chaldeans. They needed a thorough understanding of what the Chaldeans believed and insight from God to know what was true and what was superstition. You may remember that Moses had a very similar experience being raised and educated in Egypt.

Today, this is much like a person preparing for mission work among people of another religion and culture. The more you understand how people think and the reasons for their actions, the more successful you can be in presenting the Gospel to them.

The wisdom these young men had wasn't worldly wisdom; it was godly wisdom. The Hebrew terms for wisdom that are used in this chapter have ethical and religious overtones. Without wholehearted commitment to the Lord and without obedience to His will there can be no genuine wisdom!

And therein lies the secret to God's blessing on the lives of these young men. God used their unfailing obedience to provide miraculously for their superiority over all their peers. Nebuchadnezzar's testimony of these young men being 10 times better than all the magicians and astrologers in his realm is astounding – even if it is hyperbole – I don't think it is!

Nebuchadnezzar was an exceptionally intelligent man and was well known for his building programs and his military exploits. He was quick to recognize the superior character and wisdom of these young men. God had blessed and gifted these young men so they could serve the king – but ultimately, so they could serve the purposes of Jehovah, the Most High God.

In addition, God gave Daniel skill in the interpretation of visions and dreams. That detail becomes very important as we progress through the book. Chapter one closes by stating that Daniel served in the king's court until the reign of Cyrus, the Persian. Daniel lived a long and eventful life; faithful to his God and to his people.

Now, most likely, your circumstances are different than Daniel, Azariah, Hananiah, and Mishael. But as you reflect on your life, can you see these phases of your training to stand before your king?

Can you see God's providence, His guiding hand in the experiences you've had? Can you see how God has blessed you for your obedience? Or conversely, how He's disciplined you for your disobedience?

Can you give testimony to His protection over you? Are there specific incidents in your life where you can clearly see how God kept you from deception, from poor decisions, or from physical harm and danger? Can you see how God used your obedience to protect you and keep you headed in the right direction? Can you see how he used the authority figures in your life as part of that protection?

My friend, God wants and needs more servants like Daniel and his 3 friends. Are you willing to endure these rigorous phases of training to prepare you for His service? If you are, then you will be able, on that final day, to stand with confidence before your King!