

DANIEL 1:1-21

IN THE ENEMIES' COURT!

“In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God. And he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his god. Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility, youths without blemish, of good appearance and skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king’s palace, and to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans. The king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate, and of the wine that he drank. They were to be educated for three years, and at the end of that time they were to stand before the king. Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah of the tribe of Judah. And the chief of the eunuchs gave them names: Daniel he called Beltshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego.

“But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king’s food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore, he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself. And God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs, and the chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, ‘I fear my lord the king, who assigned your food and your drink; for why should he see that you were in worse condition than the youths who are of your own age? So, you would endanger my head with the king.’ Then Daniel said to the steward whom the chief of the eunuchs had assigned over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, ‘Test your servants for ten days; let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then let our appearance and the appearance of the youths who eat the king’s food be observed by you, and deal with your servants according to what you see.’ So, he listened to them in this matter, and tested them for ten days. At the end of ten days it was seen that they were better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youths who ate the king’s food. So, the steward took away their food and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables.

“As for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams. At the end of the time, when the king had commanded that they should be brought in, the chief of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar. And the king spoke with them, and among all of them none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Therefore, they stood before the king. And in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his kingdom. And Daniel was there until the first year of King Cyrus.”¹

The nation had been conquered. The ruthless invaders were cruel beyond belief. Many of the people had been transported to a foreign land where they would serve the people who had conquered them. Young women were forced to gratify the fallen desires of their conquerors, young men were castrated and forced into slavery. No doubt, many people imagined that God had deserted them. God had not deserted the people, the people deserted God.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

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Daniel is the hero of the Book. Certainly, that is the conclusion we would naturally draw by listening to most sermons drawn from the Book. However, I suggest that we will miss a significant truth if we adopt that view. Three times in this first chapter, we read something quite different from the common perception. In the first verse, we read, “*The Lord gave Jehoiakim*” into the hand of the Babylonians. Then, in the ninth verse we note, “*God gave Daniel favour and compassion in the sight of the chief eunuch.*” Finally, in the seventeenth verse we read that, “*God gave [the four youths] learning and skill.*” If we wish to assign a theme to the book, it would be far more appropriate to speak of God’s sovereignty, His judgement of His wayward people and His watchful care over His servants, even when everything stands against them.

In this message, I invite each of us to focus on the Living God rather than on His servant. In our own lives, it is easy to become distracted as we look at what is happening in our lives. Rather than seeing the hand of God guiding and directing us, we see events around us and how they have an impact in our immediate lives. I’ve lived longer than I deserve, and I’ve witnessed some stupendous events during the few years of my life. I can say with conviction that I have done nothing of consequence, except to be an instrument of God’s grace. It is the Living God who has worked not only in my life, but in the life of all whom I have known through close association. We used to say down in Texas, “God can hit some mighty straight licks with some mighty crooked sticks.” Recognising that I am at best a crooked stick, I have made it my ambition to be a crooked stick in the hand of the True and Living God.

The message for this day focuses on God and on His sovereignty. Nothing is done in the account before us unless God dictates matters. It is a reminder that nothing occurs in the life of the child of God without God’s permission. Later in the Book of Daniel we would see Daniel say to King Nebuchadnezzar, “There is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries” [DANIEL 2:28a]. The Psalmist would note that mankind will one day be compelled to confess, “Surely there is a God who judges on earth” [PSALM 58:11b]. The purpose of this congregation is to say to our community, “There is a God who reigns, a God who reveals, a God who judges.”

GOD GAVE HIS PEOPLE INTO THE HANDS OF THE BABYLONIANS — “In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God. And he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his god” [DANIEL 1:1-2].

The Babylonians had invaded Judah and the Judean army had been overwhelmed; the land was conquered, and the devastation was terrible. A puppet was placed on the throne—Israel no longer controlled its own destiny. The conquerors had even entered into the Temple of God, taking whatever they desired for their use in the house of their gods. The desecration was terrible, but the worst part was that the soul of the nation was desecrated. Many of the youth from among the nobility were deported to Babylon. They would be castrated, made eunuchs, without hope of ever fathering children of their own; and they would spend the remainder of their lives serving a pagan king. The humiliation of the nation was almost complete. To be certain, there would be a later invasion, and the devastation would then be complete.

Nevertheless, here is the essential truth to hold in mind—the Babylonian army didn’t conquer Judah because of better generals. The Babylonian army didn’t succeed in this invasion because they had better armaments. Nebuchadnezzar’s forces didn’t win these battles because they wore better uniforms. Judah was defeated because, “The Lord gave Jehoiakim ... into [Nebuchadnezzar’s] hand.” God delivered the land into the hands of the Babylonians.

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The Psalmist has given us insight into God's dealings in the affairs of nations when he writes,

“The king is not saved by his great army;
a warrior is not delivered by his great strength.
The war horse is a false hope for salvation,
and by its great might it cannot rescue.”

[PSALM 33:16-17]

Because the button on a president's desk is bigger than one possessed by the enemies of the nation does not deliver a nation from humiliation before her enemies. Mighty armies are a vain hope if the moral fabric of the nation is rotten. We must recognize that there is a God who rules in the affairs of nations, humbling ourselves before Him and seeking His deliverance.

I'm going to take a bit of a detour here; it will be helpful for understanding God's oversight of the nations. The Book of Daniel records a telling account that will help us understand God's oversight of national affairs. Daniel had been praying and fasting by refraining from eating delicacies, meat or wine. He had devoted himself to seeking an answer to his questions concerning future days for Israel. As he prayed while standing beside the Tigris River one day, an angel of the LORD appeared. Before the angel delivered the answer Daniel sought, he said, “Fear not, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand and humbled yourself before your God, your words have been heard, and I have come because of your words. The prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days, but Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, for I was left there with the kings of Persia, and came to make you understand what is to happen to your people in the latter days. For the vision is for days yet to come” [DANIEL 10:12-14].

After this holy angel had delivered the divine message, before leaving, he said to Daniel, “Now I will return to fight against the prince of Persia; and when I go out, behold, the prince of Greece will come. But I will tell you what is inscribed in the book of truth: there is none who contends by my side against these except Michael, your prince” [DANIEL 10:20-21].

In this brief exchange, we are provided insight into a realm we don't normally witness. The angel speaks of “the prince of the kingdom of Persia” and of “the prince of Greece,” referring to demonic powers ruling over these ancient kingdoms. It is not without reason that Satan is called “the ruler of this world” [see JOHN 16:11; 14:30; 12:31]. Paul refers to him as “the god of this world” [1 CORINTHIANS 4:4]. When the evil one offered Jesus “all the kingdoms of this world” [LUKE 4:5-6], Jesus did not rebuke him. When the evil one said, “It has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will,” he was not simply blowing smoke. For reasons known only to the Living God, Satan has been permitted to reign over the kingdoms of this world. That does not mean, however, that God has kept hands off.

The angel also spoke of “Michael,” whom he identified as “your prince,” implying that this angelic power had been assigned oversight of Israel. We are seeing that behind the veil that separates the physical world from the spiritual world are angelic powers directing the affairs of nations. Nations may not have as much independence as we imagine when it comes to their national character or to their interaction with other nations. In light of this revelation, we can easily imagine that there is a “prince of China,” a “prince of the United States,” a “prince of Afghanistan,” a “prince of Canada”—spiritual beings who influence the affairs of nations, even determining national character.

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These angelic and demonic powers are not all benevolent; but neither are all malevolent. Assuredly, these powers are not neutral in the greater conflict between God and the evil one. Paul, writing the Encyclical we have received as Ephesians, says that we Christians are engaged in struggle with the malevolent powers. Our struggle is through prayer and through proclaiming the Good News of Christ Jesus the Lord. These are the Apostle's words: "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" [EPHESIANS 6:10-12].

We who follow Christ are not merely drifting along as casual observers of the cosmic battles taking place, we are combatants, though we are not always aware of the war that is raging about us. Occasionally, we catch a glimpse of the effect of the battle. We see a fellow believer wounded and left to the mercies of those who pick over the field of battle seizing trophies. Perhaps we have been wounded ourselves; and though we are not fully incapacitated, our injuries left us weak and limited. What we do witness comes in brief snatches, moments when the battle swirls around us. We are battling with powers who bring to the fray strength far superior to anything we possess. However, we are not helpless. We are on the winning side.

Paul continues by instructing Christians in the manner in which these battles are fought. "Take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints" [EPHESIANS 6:13-18]. It is to our advantage to pay attention to the weapons with which we fight and even to make ourselves aware of the conflict itself.

Paul addresses this cosmic struggle that defines our lives in another letter when he writes, "The weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ" [2 CORINTHIANS 10:4-5]. We do not fight as the world fights. We do not bring physical weapons to the battle. This means that not only do we not rely upon guns and explosives, but we do not rely upon caustic, abrasive speech as the world employs. We do not bring bitter vituperation and hatred to the conflict as we may have once used.

The difference between the weapons a follower of Christ might use and the weapons used by those living in the world, is demonstrated in an event that Jude described. The half-brother of our Lord was addressing the insinuation of wicked people into the churches. He exposed the character of the evil men who seek to assume power among the churches and had spoken of the demonic powers that are now incarcerated "in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day" [JUDE 6b]. Then, Jude provided readers a glimpse of what spiritual warfare looks like, contrasting that warfare to war in the world. Jude wrote, "When the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, was disputing about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a blasphemous judgment, but said, 'The Lord rebuke you.' But these people blaspheme all that they do not understand, and they are destroyed by all that they, like unreasoning animals, understand instinctively" [JUDE 9-10]. Michael, Israel's Guardian, did not pronounce a blasphemous judgement against the devil, a weapon often used by the world.

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Let me say that I am deeply disturbed at the thought that any Christ-follower would imagine that railing against Satan somehow enjoys God's approval. Perhaps we each have witnessed fellow saints who, in the midst of prayer, break into a rant against the evil one. They order Satan around, as though they possessed power. The most powerful angel among God's host, Michael, the Guardian of Israel, does not presume to pronounce a blasphemous judgement against the devil. Michael recognises that it is sufficient to call on the Name of the Lord, saying, "The Lord rebuke you." I'm not judging those who do such things, I'm not in the position to judge the reality of their faith. I am saying, however, that they find no justification for what they are doing through appeal to the Word of God.

The thirty-third Psalm to which I referred earlier reminds us of Who actually rules over the nations when the Psalmist writes,

"The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing;
he frustrates the plans of the peoples.
The counsel of the LORD stands forever,
the plans of his heart to all generations.
Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD,
the people whom he has chosen as his heritage!"

[PSALM 33:10-12]

For a moment, an evil nation may appear to be ascendant; however, we are assured that in due time, the Living God will hold the wicked to account. For a brief time, once righteous nations may move away from pursuing righteousness, redefining goodness until it can no longer be recognised as good. Nevertheless, we may be assured that in due time, the Living God will call to account even those who once professed to be good but turned toward evil. Political might, vast armies and powerful munitions all fail ultimately. Only the Living God and His Word endures forever. I am not saying that a nation should not have a strong army—the nation should field the strongest force it can afford to protect its borders and its interests. I am saying that a nation must never depend on armed might alone, as though that is sufficient to protect against evil. No nation can be stronger than the morality that marks the citizenry of that nation.

It is my stated conviction that we who are followers of the Risen Saviour must be good citizens. That means that we will work hard to make our nation better, to make her stronger. However, loving our country does not mean that we are to be blind to the sin that contaminates our national identity. We must be vocal about the errors that are embraced by culture that is divorced from righteousness. We must be engaged, voting wisely and encouraging those who are moral and good to participate in the political process. However, we must never forget that over all that goes on, the Living God reigns and ensures that His will is accomplished. God punishes the wicked of this world; they shall not always be in ascendancy. In the same way, God has never left Himself without a witness, but He has raised up from time-to-time, and He is still raising up, individuals and churches to proclaim His majesty, calling people to righteousness.

GOD GAVE DANIEL FAVOUR AND COMPASSION IN THE SIGHT OF HIS ENEMIES — "God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs, and the chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, 'I fear my lord the king, who assigned your food and your drink; for why should he see that you were in worse condition than the youths who are of your own age? So, you would endanger my head with the king'" [DANIEL 1:9-10].

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I find this to be a hopeful truth, that in the midst of chaos and devastation, God still works for those whom He loves, just as He always works through them. Daniel's life was detoured, but it was not destroyed. It is only as one focuses on the flesh and on this dying world that anyone could say that Daniel's life was devastated. He had no way of knowing what lay before him and how he would become such a powerful instrument in the hand of the Living God. Similarly, you have no way of knowing precisely how God will work through you to accomplish His will. What you can know is that if you are wielded by the hand of the omnipotent God, you will be wielded as an instrument of righteousness.

I think of the resiliency of Daniel and I see the words of the Apostle being played out. You remember that the Apostle wrote, "This priceless treasure we hold, so to speak, in a common earthenware jar—to show that the splendid power of it belongs to God and not to us. We are handicapped on all sides, but we are never frustrated; we are puzzled, but never in despair. We are persecuted, but we never have to stand it alone: we may be knocked down, but we are never knocked out! Every day we experience something of the death of the Lord Jesus, so that we may also know the power of the life of Jesus in these bodies of ours. Yes, we who are living are always being exposed to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be plainly seen in our mortal lives. We are always facing death, but this means that you know more and more of life. Our faith is like that mentioned in the scripture: 'I believed and therefore I spoke'" [2 CORINTHIANS 4:7-13 PHILLIPS]. Surely, Paul's summation of life as an Apostle vividly describes the challenges Daniel faced. What is important to remember is that neither the Prophet nor the Apostle gave in to despair. Each saw himself as God's servant appointed for that time.

Among the Psalms is one Psalm that establishes a truth that has encouraged me greatly since the day my attention was first drawn to what was written.

"I trust in you, O LORD;
I say, 'You are my God.'
My times are in your hand!"

[PSALM 31:14-15a]

I vividly remember the account of a brave testimony which illustrates this Psalm. It was almost fifty years ago when I first heard this story. The account related the capture and torture of a missionary to China during the days of the Communist's war against the Nationalist Army.

Rather than fleeing, as would have been prudent, the missionary had remained with his flock as the Communist forces approached the village in which he had labored. The Christians were seen as a threat to the Communist agenda. Many of the Christians were tortured and even executed. The missionary was tortured in hope that he would recant his faith and provide a propaganda win for the Red cause. One day, after suffering horribly, the missionary was brought before a Commissar and commanded to renounce his Faith. He refused and was beaten for his refusal. As he was beaten, he murmured the words of this Psalm. "I trust in You, O Lord; I say, 'You are my God.' My times are in Your hands."

His words appeared to mock the Commissar, who slapped him and demanded of him, "What did you say?" Again, the battered missionary spoke the words—boldly, not hesitantly: "I trust in You, O Lord; I say, 'You are my God.' My times are in Your hands."

At this, the Commissar rushed out of the room. After some time, he returned with a Bible in his hand. Throwing the Bible on the table before the missionary, the Commissar demanded, "Show me those words, now! If you cannot show me those words, I will shoot you, now!"

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The missionary picked up the Bible. In his weakened state—his fingers stiff from brutal torture and his eyes swollen almost shut, he pulled the Bible toward himself and allowed the book to fall open on the desk before him. He let his finger fall on the passage that reads,

“I trust in you, O LORD;
I say, ‘You are my God.’
My times are in your hand!”

[PSALM 31:14-15a]

God watches over His people. Among the passages of Scripture that teach this truth are the following. First, I note that among the promises found in the Psalms is one which states,

“The arms of the wicked shall be broken,
but the LORD upholds the righteous.”

[PSALM 37:17]

Here is a promise that the LORD upholds the righteous. Clearly, even when the wicked appear to prevail, God works to ensure that His own child is preserved to accomplish the particular work to which the LORD appointed that one.

Later, in this same Psalm, David has recorded God’s promise that states,

“The steps of a man are established by the LORD,
when he delights in his way;
though he fall, he shall not be cast headlong,
for the LORD upholds his hand.”

[PSALM 37:23-24]

Here, we witness God promising that the one serving Him shall not be utterly thrown down. Wicked people may disparage the child of God, and the child of God may question how effective her or his witness is; nevertheless, God will use the witness of His own to accomplish His will; and the servant of God shall not stumble because the LORD upholds Him.

Among the sayings of the Wise Man is this one,

“When a man’s ways please the LORD,
he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him.”

[PROVERBS 16:7]

In this proverb, God promises to work even in the life of those opposed to His servant to ensure that peace ensues for the servant of God.

There is an aspect here that may be neglected. Even though some people are just hateful, refusing to be mollified, your responsibility as a follower of the Christ is to be righteous, to be holy. Remember what Peter wrote concerning our manner of life. “Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation” [1 PETER 2:12]. Even if wicked people distort your words and your motives, they cannot deny your good deeds. Therefore, they will be compelled to glorify God on the day in which He holds them to account, and you will be vindicated.

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The instruction presented is in keeping with Peter's later admonition, "In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil" [1 PETER 3:15-17].

It is important for us to recognise that Daniel was not kept *from* trials, rather, he was kept *in* trials. Just so, you will not necessarily be kept from trials, but we are on solid ground to say that God's child will be kept in trials. That is the precious promise given through Isaiah.

"Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour."

[ISAIAH 43:1b-3a]

How precious is God's promise! It is believed that the music director of the Carter's Lane Baptist Church in London incorporated these promises in the hymn, "How Firm a Foundation." Dr. John Rippon, Pastor of the Carter's Lane Church, in 1787, included the song in a hymnal entitled "Selection of Hymns." In time, the hymn would become a Baptist standard throughout the English-speaking world.

How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,
Is laid for your faith in His excellent word!
What more can He say than to you He hath said,
You who unto Jesus for refuge have fled?

In every condition,—in sickness, in health,
In poverty's vale, or abounding in wealth;
At home and abroad, on the land, on the sea,
"As thy days may demand shall thy strength ever be.

"Fear not, I am with thee, oh, be not dismay'd!
I, I am thy God, and will still give thee aid;
I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,
Upheld by My righteous omnipotent hand.

"When through the deep waters I call thee to go,
The rivers of grief shall not thee overflow:
For I will be with thee, thy troubles to bless,
And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.

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“When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,
My grace all-sufficient shall be thy supply;
The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.

“E’en down to old age, all My people shall prove
My sovereign, eternal, unchangeable love;
And when hoary hairs shall their temples adorn,
Like lambs they shall still in My bosom be borne.

“The soul that on Jesus hath lean’d for repose,
I will not, I will not desert to his foes;
That soul, though all hell should endeavour to shake,
I’ll never, no never, no never forsake!”²

Perhaps upon reading the account of Daniel’s life, especially the trials that he was forced to endure, you might be tempted to commiserate, to imagine that his life ran into a dead-end. However, I counsel you that what must be seen is that God was directing Daniel’s life, even when it appeared that he was a victim. Let me say quite clearly, the follower of the Son of God is never a victim—Christ’s servant is a victor, always! “God gave Daniel favor and compassion” [DANIEL 1:9a]. And if you are His child, He gives you favour and compassion; He watches over you, guarding your way and guiding your step.

GOD GAVE HIS SERVANTS LEARNING AND SKILL — “As for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams. At the end of the time, when the king had commanded that they should be brought in, the chief of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar. And the king spoke with them, and among all of them none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Therefore, they stood before the king. And in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his kingdom” [DANIEL 1:17-20].

Focus on these final verses of the first chapter of Daniel. Viewing the account from the standpoint of the world, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah were ruined, their lives were destroyed. They were captives of a pagan nation. After deportation to Babylon, the young men were brutalised by their vicious captors—they would never have progeny; their family lines would die with them. Reading the account of their torment, many people would bemoan their fate, questioning whether they should even continue living. However, God was not finished with these four men; in fact, God was just beginning with them.

The text reads, “God gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom.” They were being prepared as ambassadors of the Living God, to encourage those who would follow hard after the Lord so long as people were on this earth. Nothing comes into the life of the child of God except that which God permits. Though we may hurt, and though we cry out, “Why?” a more proper question is, “How?” “How may I fulfil the will of God? How may I live so as to focus on eternity? How may I honour the One who loved me and gave Himself for me?”

² “The Firm Foundation,” as recorded in C. H. Spurgeon, *Our Own Hymn Book: A Collection of Psalms and Hymns for Public, Social and Private Worship* (Passmore & Alabaster, London 1883)

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God worked in the lives of these four men; and yet, those aspects of life that we consider definitive for a man, those aspects we would be inclined to argue as being essential for defining someone as a man—sexual prowess, individualism, physical stamina, were all taken from them. The original text indicates that these men were emasculated, they were made eunuchs, they were castrated so they would not be distracted when serving the king, they could serve him without focusing on their own desires. That is a dreadful fate in our understanding; we want to believe that we will leave progeny, that we will leave a legacy of life after we are gone from the earth. Though difficult to accept, we know that the world can only take those things that are transient; the world can never rob us of what is eternal.

The young men were divinely given “learning,” or we might say “knowledge;” they were endowed with “skill in all literature and wisdom,” we might say they “prospered in wisdom,” or that they enjoyed “success in wisdom.” One contemporary translation renders this verse in this fashion, “As for these four young men, God gave them knowledge, aptitude for learning, and wisdom. Daniel also could understand all kinds of visions and dreams” [DANIEL 1:17 ISV]. Focus on the fact that each possessed wisdom, and the LORD ensured that they would be successful in the employment of their wisdom. Their prosperity in what truly mattered was a divine gift. The world would say that they had been abandoned by God; but in the long run, God was watching over their lives, ensuring that what really counted was accomplished in each of their lives.

I doubt that any of us have been injured as these four men were injured. I doubt that any of us have ever experienced the degradation these young men endured. And yet, I know that each of us has been hurt at one time or another. We each bear our secret scars; we keep them covered, often refusing to reveal them even to our spouse. We don't wear a sign saying, “I'm scarred,” but we have each known what it is to hurt deeply. For you who are deeply wounded, I plead with you to recognise that in your pain, God does work. You may well have been positioned in a unique place where you can accomplish some great thing for the glory of the Master, perhaps not at this moment, but in His time your pain will become a means of honour and glory. Are you willing to permit Him to use your pain, to use your grief, to use you to the praise of His glory? You may be assured that God is well able to work in your brokenness to glorify His Name.

I cannot tell you how God will use your sorrow, your pain; but I am confident that God will never waste your grief as you turn it over to Him. The Psalmist testified,

“You have kept count of my tossings;
put my tears in your bottle.
Are they not in your book?
Then my enemies will turn back
in the day when I call.
This I know, that God is for me.”

[PSALM 56:8-9]

God takes note of my sorrow, writing down even the tears that splash from my eyes. My little sorrows are remembered by the LORD God, Creator of Heaven and earth. He will give me what is required for His glory and for my good. I will serve Him, and He will be honoured in me. With the Psalmist, I can testify, “This I know, that God is for me.” Amen, and Amen!