

WHEN GOD CRASHES YOUR PARTY

The Handwriting is on the Wall

A Study through Daniel

Spring Series 2024

Texts: Daniel 5:1-31; Romans 2:1-8

Daniel 5:17-24 – Then Daniel answered and said before the king, “Let your gifts be for yourself, and give your rewards to another. Nevertheless, I will read the writing to the king and make known to him the interpretation. ¹⁸ O king, the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father kingship and greatness and glory and majesty. ¹⁹ And because of the greatness that he gave him, all peoples, nations, and languages trembled and feared before him. Whom he would, he killed, and whom he would, he kept alive; whom he would, he raised up, and whom he would, he humbled. ²⁰ But when his heart was lifted up and his spirit was hardened so that he dealt proudly, he was brought down from his kingly throne, and his glory was taken from him. ²¹ He was driven from among the children of mankind, and his mind was made like that of a beast, and his dwelling was with the wild donkeys. He was fed grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, until he knew that the Most High God rules the kingdom of mankind and sets over it whom he will. ²² **And you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this, ²³ but you have lifted up yourself against the Lord of heaven. And the vessels of his house have been brought in before you, and you and your lords, your wives, and your concubines have drunk wine from them. And you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which do not see or hear or know, but the God in whose hand is your breath, and whose are all your ways, you have not honored. ²⁴** “Then from his presence the hand was sent, and this writing was inscribed.

Daniel 5:25-31 – And this is the writing that was inscribed: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, and PARSIN. ²⁶ This is the interpretation of the matter: **MENE, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; ²⁷ TEKEL, you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting; ²⁸ PERES, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.** ²⁹ Then Belshazzar gave the command, and Daniel was clothed with purple, a chain of gold was put around his neck, and a proclamation was made about him, that he should be the third ruler in the kingdom. ³⁰ That very night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was killed. ³¹ And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old.

Introduction:

It might surprise you to know that many of our modern-day expressions have their origins in Scriptural texts or biblical narratives with which we are familiar. Here are some examples:

1. ***At the Eleventh Hour*** – means that someone comes and helps/rescues when it is almost over. It comes from the Parable of the Laborers in Mat. 20:1-16 where those who come at the very last hour are hired and paid as if they had worked all day.
2. ***At Your Wit's End*** – Psalm 107:23-27 which describes sailors and seafarers being tossed about in a storm and out of options to lighten the boat – *“They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man, and are at their wit's end!”*
3. ***The Blind Leading the Blind*** – Mat. 15:14 when speaking of the Pharisees, Jesus said of them, *“Let them alone: they are blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall into the ditch.”*
4. ***By the Skin of Your Teeth*** – Job 19:20 when Job cries, *“My bone clings to my skin and my flesh, and I have escaped only by the skin of my teeth.”*
5. ***Casting Pearls before Swine*** – Mat. 7:6 when Jesus taught on the folly of offering valuable truth to someone who will not receive or appreciate it by stating, *“neither cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet.”*
6. ***A Fly in the Ointment*** – Eccl. 10:1 *“Dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking savour.”*
7. ***The Land of Milk and Honey*** – Exodus 3:1-22 where God promised to lead His people out of Egypt and to a *“land flowing with milk and honey!”*
8. ***A Leopard Cannot Change Its Spots*** – Jeremiah 13:23
9. ***Like a Lamb led to the Slaughter*** – Isaiah 53:7
10. ***Faith To Move Mountains*** – Mat. 17:20 and 1 Cor 13:2.

But there are two familiar sayings that come right from Daniel.

A. Feet of Clay – Daniel 2:31-45. This expression refers to a fatal or foundational weakness in something that otherwise looks powerful and great. It is the kind of foundational weakness that will eventually bring that enterprise or person crashing down from the height of glory or power.

B. The Handwriting is On the Wall – Daniel 5:24-31 which means that the un-fortuitous end is near and cannot be avoided.

This is precisely what our text reveals to us this morning: the unfortunate, un-fortuitous, and unavoidable end has arrived for both the Babylonian regent, Belshazzar, as well as for the once mighty and glorious Babylonian Empire.

25 years or so have passed since we saw the amazing conversion of Nebuchadnezzar in chapter four – 23 years since his death in 562 BC. His testimony stands in inspired Scripture to remind us that God is able to humble even an arrogant and pride-filled king like Nebuchadnezzar who, after rising to the very heights of human success, fell into the profound depths of God's gracious mercy.

And at the very end of his testimony Nebuchadnezzar has a word of comfort as well as warning to proud people in every kingdom: *"I Nebuchadnezzar praise and extol and honor the King of Heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride, he is able to humble (4:37)."*

Which brings us to the second major example of how God is able to humble proud kings – the story of Belshazzar. And perhaps the best way to hear the story is to see it as drama told from four perspectives.

I. Perspective One: A Wicked Ruler Defying God (5:1-9)

We have moved seamlessly from the humbling and conversion of the great Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar to the reign of another king named Belshazzar with the only bridge between these two monarchs being the final words of Nebuchadnezzar's testimony: *"Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of Heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to humble!" (4:37)*

We are immediately transported to a scene where another king of Babylon, Belshazzar, is doing the exact opposite of his illustrious

predecessor – he is hosting a lavish banquet for the purpose of praising, extoling, honoring the worthless, powerless, lifeless gods of Babylon – the very gods that Nebuchadnezzar had renounced at the end of his life.

And the living God – the King of Heaven – has something to say to this arrogant, proud, and wicked prince who:

- Thinks more highly of himself than he should;
- Has despised the goodness and mercy of God;
- Has defied the statutes and defiled the worship of God;
- And has therefore treasured up for himself wrath from God!

A. Historical Significance (5:1)

King Belshazzar made a great feast for a thousand of his lords and drank wine in front of the thousand.

1) His name “Belshazzar” – “*May Bell protect the king.*”

2) His position – 3rd in the kingdom which means he was “regent.”

- 4 kings had ruled Babylon since Neb
Evel-Meredoch (562 – 560)
Neriglissar (560-556)
Labashi-Marduk (556 – 2 months)
Nabonidus (556-539)
Belshazzar (553-539)
- Daniel had been in Babylon for more than 60 years and is approximately 80+ years old.
- The end of the 70 captivity predicted by Jeremiah is at hand.

3) His time – at the very end of the empire. The events in this chapter took place on the very last day of the kingdom and of his personal life – Oct 12, 539 BC.

- The Persian army led by Cyrus the Great has been on a steady path to victory as they marched throughout what was left of the once might Babylonian Empire. Ten days earlier they had defeated the Babylonian army and Belshazzar’s

father the king had fled in abject fear. Now Cyrus and his army were camped outside the massive walls of Babylon.

- And so, Belshazzar decides to host a massive, lavish banquet for more than 1000 lords and officials of what was left of his kingdom. ***But why a feast under these dire circumstances?***
- Perhaps he called for a feast to show bravado in the face of the Persian army who surely would not be able to break through Babylon's walls. More likely the feast fell on a day sacred to the gods of Babylon and to avoid displeasing them and in an effort to curry favor with them . . . he held this mandatory, religious feast.

B. Arrogant Defiance (5:2-4)

Belshazzar, when he tasted the wine, commanded that the vessels of gold and of silver that Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken out of the temple in Jerusalem be brought, that the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them. ³ Then they brought in the golden vessels that had been taken out of the temple, the house of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines drank from them. ⁴ They drank wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone.

- Whatever his motive for hosting a feast of this nature, it was no innocent action on his part against the one God who had helped Nebuchadnezzar and could truly help him in his hour of need.
- Instead of humility before the God of his father, Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar arrogantly ***defies the authority, defiles the worship, and dismisses the power and ability*** of the God of heaven!

1) His Sensuality – “*when he had tasted the wine. . .*”

- Infers immense Drunkenness – “tasted”
- Portrays gross Lasciviousness – “*with his wives and concubines*”

2) His Blasphemy and Sacrilege

- Called for the temple vessels of Yahweh the God of Israel.
- He and his lords drank from them at an orgy.
- He and his lords drank from them in praise to his gods.

3) His Idolatry – *and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone.*

- The use of the vessels was a calculated mockery of God
- The use of the vessels was intended to placate the wrong gods who had no power because they had no life.
- He turned away from the God who could protect his life to the gods who had no life themselves – the height of folly!
- He is not making an innocent mistake – He is knowingly and openly defying the Most High God – ***about whom he had ample knowledge and from whom he had received abundant mercy (5:22).***

How will God respond to this public affront of His glory and majesty? Will He respond to the wicked folly of this worldly king?

C. Divine Invasion – the hand of God appears (5:5)

Immediately the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace, opposite the lampstand. And the king saw the hand as it wrote.

- Belshazzar has profaned and desecrated the holy vessels from God's House so God now invades and will destroy Belshazzar's house and his kingdom!
- The God from whose house the sacred vessels had been taken is still very much in charge of them! He is the one who gave them into Nebuchadnezzar's hand (1:2); and, when Belshazzar took them in his own hand, God intervenes decisively and devastatingly by writing a death sentence on the king's wall.
- The hand that wrote on the wall is the very hand in which holds Belshazzar's life-breath and determines all his ways (5:23-24).
- The king who thought he could dismiss God is nothing more than a puny potentate in the hand of the Supreme Sovereign of the Universe! And when the finger of this Great God wrote out the sentence against him, not one of the gods of Babylon could lift a finger to help him or deliver him from the judgments that had been written against him.

- The “Finger of God” (4x in Bible) that brought about the plagues in Egypt (Ex. 8:19); carved the 10 commandments (Ex. 31:18, Dt. 9:10); created the Heavenly objects (Ps 8); and cast out demons (Lk. 11:20) – now appears in Belshazzar’s palace and writes on his wall with a message for all to see (cf., the lampstand)!
- God gave him written revelation that could only be understood by a truly wise individual (Daniel vs the magi).

D. Humiliating Desperation (5:6-9)

Then the king’s color changed, and his thoughts alarmed him; his limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together. ⁷ The king called loudly to bring in the enchanters, the Chaldeans, and the astrologers. The king declared to the wise men of Babylon, “Whoever reads this writing, and shows me its interpretation, shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around his neck and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom.” ⁸ Then all the king’s wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or make known to the king the interpretation. ⁹ Then King Belshazzar was greatly alarmed, and his color changed, and his lords were perplexed.

- His Fear – his color changed, and he was greatly alarmed.
- His Humiliation – the “knots of his loins” were loosed (lost control of his bowels).
- His Desperation – he screamed out for the magicians; when they were not able to interpret the writing, he was even more alarmed, and so were the 1000 nobles in his kingdom!

II. Perspective 2: A Wise Woman sent by God (5:10-12)

The queen, because of the words of the king and his lords, came into the banqueting hall, and the queen declared, “O king, live forever! Let not your thoughts alarm you or your color change. ¹¹ There is a man in your kingdom in whom is the spirit of the holy gods. In the days of your father, light and understanding and wisdom like the wisdom of the gods were found in him, and King Nebuchadnezzar, your father—your father the king—made him chief of the magicians, enchanters, Chaldeans, and astrologers, ¹² because an excellent spirit, knowledge, and understanding to interpret dreams, explain riddles, and solve problems were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Beltshazzar. Now let Daniel be called, and he will show the interpretation.”

God interjects a small mercy by bringing all of this desperation to the attention of the one person who could influence Belshazzar in his state of terror: his mother.

A. Her Position – Queen mother

- Most likely a daughter of Nebuchadnezzar who married Nabonidus.
- The mother of Belshazzar (his wives and concubines were already present at the banquet).
- An eyewitness of
 - Nebuchadnezzar's true glory
 - Belshazzar's sham glory
 - Daniel's high esteem and true ability

(Note the use of the name Daniel – God is my judge)

B. Her Intervention

- She speaks **forcefully** before all – *“the queen declared”*
- She speaks **frankly** about him – *“Let not your thoughts alarm you or your color change!”* In other words, “Pull yourself together and act like the kind of king Nebuchadnezzar was when these sorts of things happened and alarmed him!”
- She speaks **wisely** to him – *“There is a man in your kingdom!”*
 - ⇒ She calls attention to Daniel's attributes (vs. 11)
In the days of your father, light and understanding and wisdom like the wisdom of the gods were found in him, and King Nebuchadnezzar, your father—your father the king—made him chief of the magicians, enchanters, Chaldeans, and astrologers,
 - ⇒ She calls attention to the abilities that come from these attributes (vs. 12)
because an excellent spirit, knowledge, and understanding to interpret dreams, explain riddles, and solve problems were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Belteshazzar.
 - ⇒ She calls attention to the source of the attributes that allow him to perform these abilities (vs. 11)
There is a man in your kingdom in whom is the spirit of the holy gods

C. Her Suggestion (vs. 12)

In essence, her advice was simple and sound:

- Seek the right person – “summon Daniel”
- Request his insight – “he will tell you what this writing means.”

III. Perspective 3: A Bold Witness Speaking for God (5:13-28)

Then Daniel was brought in before the king. The king answered and said to Daniel, "You are that Daniel, one of the exiles of Judah, whom the king my father brought from Judah. ¹⁴ I have heard of you that the spirit of the gods is in you, and that light and understanding and excellent wisdom are found in you. ¹⁵ Now the wise men, the enchanters, have been brought in before me to read this writing and make known to me its interpretation, but they could not show the interpretation of the matter. ¹⁶ But I have heard that you can give interpretations and solve problems. Now if you can read the writing and make known to me its interpretation, you shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around your neck and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom."

Belshazzar has **defied Daniel's God**. And here in this text he **demeans Daniel's status** – *"You are that Daniel, one of the exiles of Judah, whom the king my father brought from Judah."* However, Belshazzar **cannot deny Daniel's ability or dismiss his influence** – *"I have heard of you that the spirit of the gods is in you, and that light and understanding and excellent wisdom are found in you!"*

Belshazzar desperately wants an answer to the riddle on his wall, but God gives him what he most needs – a very pointed and personal theological history lesson about an even greater king who learned what it was to disregard God's wisdom and defy God's purposes. And God sends His faithful servant, Daniel, to teach Belshazzar this lesson.

A. Unwilling to compromise the truth – keep your rewards (5:17)

Then Daniel answered and said before the king, "Let your gifts be for yourself, and give your rewards to another. Nevertheless, I will read the writing to the king and make known to him the interpretation."

B. Willing to confront with the truth (5:18-24)

*O king, the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father kingship and greatness and glory and majesty. ¹⁹ And because of the greatness that he gave him, all peoples, nations, and languages trembled and feared before him. Whom he would, he killed, and whom he would, he kept alive; whom he would, he raised up, and whom he would, he humbled. ²⁰ But when his heart was lifted up and his spirit was hardened so that he dealt proudly, he was brought down from his kingly throne, and his glory was taken from him. ²¹ He was driven from among the children of mankind, and his mind was made like that of a beast, and his dwelling was with the wild donkeys. He was fed grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, **until he knew that the Most High God rules the kingdom of mankind and sets over it whom he will.** ²² And you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this, ²³ but you have lifted up*

yourself against the Lord of heaven. And the vessels of his house have been brought in before you, and you and your lords, your wives, and your concubines have drunk wine from them. And you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which do not see or hear or know, but the God in whose hand is your breath, and whose are all your ways, you have not honored. ²⁴ *“Then from his presence the hand was sent, and this writing was inscribed.*

1) The lesson itself – *“The most High God rules the kingdom of mankind and sets over it whom He will” (vs. 21)*

- God (not you) rules over this kingdom you are about to lose!
- God and not Bel is the only one who can protect you and He is about to judge you!

2) The personal application – *“And you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this!” (vs. 22)*

- You knew the facts about Nebuchadnezzar’s reign including the stories about his interactions with the God of Israel.
- You saw the way God humbled him personally as you served in his administration as a young man.
- You read his own testimony about how God saved Him!
- And instead of learning from Him, you set yourself up against the God of Heaven and worshipped dead idols as evidenced by the goblets you are using for your debauchery (*note the word for exalting yourself is the same term used in 11:36 of the king who exalts and magnifies himself above every god – a reference in that chapter to the anti-Christ*).
- You did not honor God even though he holds your breath in his hand – instead you gave honor to lifeless idols who are useless, lifeless, and damning to your soul which is about to be required of you by the hand of the God whose vessels you have defiled.

C. Able to interpret the truth (5:25)

And this is the writing that was inscribed: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, and PARSIN.

- The inscription contained four enigmatic words used in Babylon's monetary and accounting system – numbered (counted); numbered; weighed; divided.
- But no one in the realm not even the magi had a clue about who had sent these words or what message they were intended to communicate.
- Just as Nebuchadnezzar had been unable to remember his first dream (chapt. 2); Belshazzar cannot read the writing on the wall though it was in Aramaic – it made no sense.
- The magi continue to be as useless in giving the wisdom that really counts as they were in Nebuchadnezzar's day! And once again, Daniel alone has access to the wisdom from God and can understand the writing.

D. Bold to deliver the truth (5:26-28)

This is the interpretation of the matter: MENE, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; ²⁷ TEKEL, you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting; ²⁸ PERES, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians."

- **4 enigmatic words:** numbered, numbered, weighed, and divided.
- **MENE:** God has numbered and counted you and your kingdom and now you must give an account!
- **TEKEL:** He has weighed you in His omniscient and just scales and you are lacking and so are your gods – the gods who are supposed to deliver you and to whom you have given blasphemous honor. Remember, this God was able to deliver His servant's from the hand of your grandfather – but your gods can't even deliver you from the hand of the Medes and Persians, much less from the God of Heaven's hand!
- **PERES:** He has divided you from your kingdom and will bring it to an end by the Persians.
- God had carefully and accurately assessed (term repeated 2x) Belshazzar and when he weighed him he was lacking therefore

- the judgment was that he would be parted from his kingdom and his kingdom would be divided and given to the Medes/Persians.
- Belshazzar was about to find out that a man can so harden his heart against the mercy and truth of the God of Heaven that instead of leading him to repentance as it had Nebuchadnezzar; it can actually lead one to utter destruction under the wrath of the living God! (Romans 2:1-8)

IV. Perspective 5: The God Who Acts for His Glory (5:29-31)

Then Belshazzar gave the command, and Daniel was clothed with purple, a chain of gold was put around his neck, and a proclamation was made about him, that he should be the third ruler in the kingdom. ³⁰ That very night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was killed. ³¹ And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old.

In contrast to the idols Belshazzar honored and praised who powerless because they were lifeless, the God whose finger wrote on Belshazzar's wall is both Living and Powerful as we have seen this throughout the book of Daniel. And this God acts and does whatever He wills in the kingdom of mankind (as testified to by Nebuchadnezzar in 4:34-35)!

A. He honors His servants (5:29)

- Note that this is almost the very same reward that Pharaoh gave to Joseph (Gen 41:38-44).
- But unlike Pharaoh, Belshazzar despised Daniel and did this only that he might not lose face before his lords.
- When you despise the "Joseph" God sends to humble you that He might bless you, you are left to face the judgment of God.

B. He judges His enemies (5:30)

- The judgment was swift and fierce – "that very night."
- The judgment was personal and final – "Belshazzar was slain."
- That very night the kingdom fell and Bel was executed – date was Oct 12, 539 B.C.

- God makes an example of Belshazzar and an end to the Babylonian empire and with that the book moves into the 2nd kingdom represented in the dream from chapter 2.
- And to put a finality to all of this . . . Darius the Mede (probably Cyrus the Great) was 62 years of age when all of this occurred.

C. He accomplishes His purposes (5:31)

And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old.

- The enigmatic writing had a numerical monetary value represented by the number 62 . . . Darius the Mede was 62.
- The head of gold on the statue in Nebuchadnezzar's dream had toppled and we now enter into the second empire – that of the Medes and Persians.

Conclusion: What are we to learn from this famous narrative?

We have been given two powerful examples to consider in the Aramaic portion of Daniel – God's Wisdom for the Nations.

1. An example intended to encourage us to repent before God (Nebuchadnezzar in chapter 4).

2. An example intended to warn us of the consequences of failing to repent when God confronts us (Belshazzar in chapter 5).

- Belshazzar gave no thought to the eternal consequences of his temporal transgression! And neither do some of us!
- Belshazzar gave no thought to the incredible gracious opportunity God had given him:
 - Moral example of Neb
 - Historical Record of Neb
 - Inspired Testimony of Neb
 - And he had them for more than 20 years!!
- He had no idea when he got up that morning that by evening his soul would be called into account for his sins ***by the very God he despised, denied, and defied!***

- If Belshazzar's last day on earth teaches us anything it should teach us to number our days and not presume on God – we should repent while we still have breath.
- And while this is wisdom for the Gentile nations; there is also wisdom for God's own people in a story like this!

*Romans 2:1-8 – Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, **because you, the judge, practice the very same things.** ² We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things. ³ **Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God?** ⁴ **Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?** ⁵ **But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.** ⁶ He will render to each one according to his works: ⁷ to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; ⁸ but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury.*

1. Are we guilty of the same sins we despise in others?
2. Do we believe we will escape the just judgement of God on our lives when we sin with impunity against God?
3. What are we doing with the immense mercy God has abundantly granted to lead us to repentance? Are we like Nebuchadnezzar who was led to repent by this mercy?
4. What has so hardened our heart against the kindness of God that we continue to defy Him and dismiss those He sends to call us to repentance?
5. How long will we resist God before we exhaust His patience and come to the end of His forbearance as Belshazzar did in this story?