

Some of you sports fans might remember Dandy Don Meredith – a former great quarterback for the Dallas Cowboys and later a popular announcer for Monday Night Football with Howard Cosell. As an announcer, at the moment in the football game when Don felt that one team was too far ahead for the other team to catch up, he would sing a line from an old country song which says, “Turn out the Lights, the Party’s Over.” That’s a line from an old Willie Nelson song, and the expression “The Party’s Over” was a way of saying that whatever you were enjoying is over, it’s time for a reality check, and now you must face the consequences.

Some 2,600 years ago, there was a party in the city of Babylon, but there came a time at this party when reality set in as God made it clear the party’s over.

We are continuing with the book of **Daniel** this morning, but before we dig in, I really need to set the stage for you. Last week we concluded with King Nebuchadnezzar giving humble praise to the one true God. Well, some 23 years have since passed – Nebuchadnezzar has died, and Daniel is probably in his 80’s living in retirement. After the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, a succession of Babylonian kings had come and gone, with most of them experiencing untimely deaths, and now, at the time of **Daniel 5**, there are co-kings who share the Babylonian throne – and they are Nabonidus and his eldest son Belshazzar.

Now for centuries, historians and archaeologists knew that Nabonidus was the last king of Babylon – not Belshazzar, and of course the critics said the Bible got it all wrong; however, in 1854, while exploring the ruins in southern Iraq, several small clay cylinders were uncovered, and these cylinders contained inscriptions verifying that Nabonidus and Belshazzar were in indeed father and son, but not only that, during the last part of the reign of Nabonidus – he lived in Arabia and in his absence, he appointed the kingship of Babylon to his son Belshazzar. So, the Bible got it right.

Anyway, at the time of **Daniel 5**, Nabonidus has been captured by the Medo-Persian army under the command of Cyrus the Great. He’s a prisoner of war and will never to see the city of Babylon again, but his son Belshazzar is still in the city – a city that is completely surrounded.

For several months, the city of Babylon was besieged by the Medes and the Persians – that’s usually a bad thing, but historians tell us that the city had a 20-year supply of food stockpiled in storehouses and the Euphrates River ran through the city – so the Babylonians had plenty of food and water to hold out during the

siege. King Belshazzar was convinced they were invincible, he was confident that no army could break through the massive walls and the gates that guarded the city, he assumed the people within its walls were safe and could easily wait out the enemy, and so, it seemed to the king that there was no real cause for concern and the only reasonable thing to do was to throw a big party.

As crazy as that sounds, that sets the stage for us, so if you have your Bible, turn to **Daniel 5** and we will begin with **verse 1**. We are told,

¹Belshazzar the king held a great feast for a thousand of his nobles, and he was drinking wine in the presence of the thousand. ²When Belshazzar tasted the wine, he gave orders to bring the gold and silver vessels which Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken out of the temple which was in Jerusalem, so that the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines might drink from them. ³Then they brought the gold vessels that had been taken out of the temple, the house of God which was in Jerusalem; and the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines drank from them. ⁴They drank the wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone.

The party was hopping with a thousand **nobles** plus their female companions in attendance, the band was playing, and the wine was flowing – it's a public spectacle, and Belshazzar – who was the life of the party, gets a wild idea.

How cool would this party be if we drank our wine from the sacred gold and silver vessels taken out of the holy temple in Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. We can drink from them and make toasts to our gods – after all, our gods defeated the God of the Hebrews and our gods will also deliver us from the Medes and the Persians who surround us. This was Belshazzar's way of openly mocking the Most High God even though his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar had humbly praised Him.

Now, just for clarification, I said that Nebuchadnezzar was the grandfather of Belshazzar, whereas this passage says that Nebuchadnezzar was the **father** of Belshazzar. **Is there a mistake?** No, and let me explain. Just like last week, the original writing of this chapter is in Aramaic, and in Aramaic there was no word for *grandfather*, and sometimes in the Bible, you may read words like "*my father's father*" to suggest the same relationship. In this context, the word "**father**" can also be translated to mean *ancestor* or *predecessor* or *forefather*, and in the case of Belshazzar, he is most likely the grandson, on his mother's side, of Nebuchadnezzar.

So, the sacred vessels are brought out of storage, dusted off, filled with wine, and all of the party goers make toasts to their pagan gods as they drink up.

Well, a very patient God has a limit to how far He will allow people to continue in their sin, and this time, He's had enough. Let's pick up beginning with **verse 5**.

⁵ Suddenly the fingers of a man's hand emerged and began writing opposite the lampstand on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace, and the king saw the back of the hand that did the writing. ⁶ Then the king's face grew pale and his thoughts alarmed him, and his hip joints went slack and his knees began knocking together.

So, out of thin air, this hand mysteriously appears, it's visible to all, and it begins writing on the wall of the banquet hall. Everybody sees it, the place gets very silent and very serious, and we are told the shock of it apparently sobers up the king. His face turns pale, his legs go limp, and his knees start to knock. Everyone recognized something supernatural was happening, and it most certainly was – God was crashing the party and turning the banquet hall into a courtroom.

So, what does the life of the party do? Let's read on beginning with **verse 7**.

⁷ The king called aloud to bring in the conjurers, the Chaldeans, and the diviners. The king spoke and said to the wise men of Babylon, "Any man who can read this inscription and explain its interpretation to me shall be clothed with purple and have a necklace of gold around his neck, and have authority as third ruler in the kingdom." ⁸ Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the inscription or make known its interpretation to the king. ⁹ Then King Belshazzar was greatly alarmed, his face grew even paler, and his nobles were perplexed.

The king shouted for his wise men, and if they were at the party, they probably sobered up pretty fast as well. The king offered up a great reward to the anyone of them who can read the writing on the wall and explain its interpretation, but consistent with their track record of being completely useless, they can't read the writing nor interpret what it means. It seems that God is keeping these wise men in the dark, and in doing so, God shines a light on His old faithful servant Daniel – who wasn't invited to the party.

Beginning with **verse 10**, we are told,

¹⁰ The queen entered the banquet hall because of the words of the king and his nobles; the queen spoke and said, “O king, live forever! Do not let your thoughts alarm you or your face be pale. ¹¹ There is a man in your kingdom in whom is a spirit of the holy gods; and in the days of your father, illumination, insight and wisdom like the wisdom of the gods were found in him. And King Nebuchadnezzar, your father, your father the king, appointed him chief of the magicians, conjurers, Chaldeans and diviners. ¹² This was because an extraordinary spirit, knowledge and insight, interpretation of dreams, explanation of enigmas and solving of difficult problems were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Belteshazzar. Let Daniel now be summoned and he will declare the interpretation.”

The **queen** – who we might call “*the Queen Mother*” hears all the commotion or better yet, maybe it’s the eerie silence from a once rowdy party that gets her attention. The queen is likely a daughter of Nebuchadnezzar and the mother of Belshazzar – and she enters the banquet hall.

The queen learns what has happened and she gives Belshazzar some encouragement and then some advice. She explains that in the days of Nebuchadnezzar, there was a great wise man who had the ability to interpret dreams and to solve difficult problems. He was once the head magi, his interpretations were always correct and his prophecies were always fulfilled, and his name is **Daniel**. She tells the king to summon Daniel to get an answer.

That brings up a good point. As a Christian, you may not be invited to many parties, but when trouble comes, don’t be surprised when you are the one who is called. Well, Daniel is called, and beginning with **verse 13** we read,

¹³ Then Daniel was brought in before the king. The king spoke and said to Daniel, “Are you that Daniel who is one of the exiles from Judah, whom my father the king brought from Judah?” ¹⁴ Now I have heard about you that a spirit of the gods is in you, and that illumination, insight and extraordinary wisdom have been found in you. ¹⁵ Just now the wise men and the conjurers were brought in before me that they might read this inscription and make its interpretation known to me, but they could not declare the interpretation of the message. ¹⁶ But I personally have heard about you, that you are able to give interpretations and solve difficult problems. Now if you are able to read the inscription and make its interpretation known to me, you will be clothed with purple and wear a necklace of gold around your neck, and you will have authority as the third ruler in the kingdom.”

Daniel is brought into the banquet hall before the king – he’s front and center before all of the party goers, and the king asks, **“Are you that Daniel who is one of the exiles from Judah, whom my father the king brought from Judah?”** I am guessing that Daniel nodded his head to confirm to the king who he was, and then the king continues and says,

“I have heard that the spirit of the gods is in you and that you have insight, and intelligence, and wisdom. My wise men have nothing for me, but I hear you can help, and if you do, I will reward you with power, and prestige, and possessions. Look, Daniel, here’s everything a man could ever want, just tell me about that writing on the wall and it’s all yours.”

Essentially, Daniel is told he is the last resort – this man of God has been ignored by this king for many years, but be that may, Daniel has something to say, and here it is beginning with **verse 17**,

¹⁷ Then Daniel answered and said before the king, “Keep your gifts for yourself or give your rewards to someone else; however, I will read the inscription to the king and make the interpretation known to him. ¹⁸ O king, the Most High God granted sovereignty, grandeur, glory and majesty to Nebuchadnezzar your father. ¹⁹ Because of the grandeur which He bestowed on him, all the peoples, nations and men of every language feared and trembled before him; whomever he wished he killed and whomever he wished he spared alive; and whomever he wished he elevated and whomever he wished he humbled. ²⁰ But when his heart was lifted up and his spirit became so proud that he behaved arrogantly, he was deposed from his royal throne and his glory was taken away from him. ²¹ He was also driven away from mankind, and his heart was made like that of beasts, and his dwelling place was with the wild donkeys. He was given grass to eat like cattle, and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven until he recognized that the Most High God is ruler over the realm of mankind and that He sets over it whomever He wishes. ²² Yet you, his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, even though you knew all this, ²³ but you have exalted yourself against the Lord of heaven; and they have brought the vessels of His house before you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines have been drinking wine from them; and you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which do not see, hear or understand. But the God in whose hand are your life-breath and all your ways, you have not glorified. ²⁴ Then the hand was sent from Him and this inscription was written out.

Daniel could care less about the king's rewards, nevertheless, he did have something to tell the king – the painful truth.

After Daniel refused the rewards, he told the king that he was personally familiar with his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel reminded Belshazzar of how great and mighty his grandfather had been, but when his pride got the best of him, Nebuchadnezzar was reduced to thinking and acting like an animal until he finally humbled himself and acknowledged the sovereignty of the Most High God.

Nebuchadnezzar had to learn his lesson the hard way, and in front of all the party goers, Daniel accused Belshazzar of intentionally repeating the same prideful sins of his grandfather.

“O King, you know the story of your grandfather all too well, and now you are making the same mistake he did – you have exalted yourself and set yourself up against the Most High God of heaven by openly mocking Him and praising your false pagan gods. And the handwriting on the wall you just saw, that came straight from God. Belshazzar, you should have known better, you should have learned from the past, but apparently that history lesson from your grandfather was ignored and lost by you.”

Then beginning with **verse 25**, Daniel interprets the handwriting on the wall. He says,

²⁵ “Now this is the inscription that was written out: ‘MENĒ, MENĒ, TEKĒL, UPHARSIN.’ ²⁶ This is the interpretation of the message: ‘MENĒ’—God has numbered your kingdom and put an end to it. ²⁷ ‘TEKĒL’—you have been weighed on the scales and found deficient. ²⁸ ‘PERĒS’—your kingdom has been divided and given over to the Medes and Persians.”

Written in Aramaic across the wall were these words: **“MENĒ, MENĒ, TEKĒL, UPHARSIN.”**

The word **MENĒ** means *counted* or *numbered*. Here, God was telling Belshazzar his life and his kingdom were “numbered” – *“God has counted your days and your number is up. Your time on this earth is finished. All that you strived for, all that you built, all that you took, all that you own – are for nothing. It’s all over, and to confirm it – God wrote it twice.*

The word **TEKĒL** means *weighed*. On God's scales, according to God's holy standards of what is right and wrong, the king himself has been weighed and he is found wanting. For Belshazzar, all of his defiance and disobedience and idolatry and blasphemy – all of his sin has been weighed, and he has fallen short. He has failed and will be condemned.

Lastly comes the word **UPHARSIN** which is a plural form of the word **PERĒS**. In a nutshell, **PERĒS** means *divided*. God is taking the kingdom from Belshazzar and is going to divide it between the Medes and the Persians whose armies surround the city of Babylon. Everything Belshazzar thought was more important than God will be stripped from him and he will leave this earth empty-handed.

So, God has said to Belshazzar, your number is up, you are weighed short, and your kingdom is divided up. Yes, it's your party, but your party is over.

²⁹ Then Belshazzar gave orders, and they clothed Daniel with purple and put a necklace of gold around his neck, and issued a proclamation concerning him that he now had authority as the third ruler in the kingdom. ³⁰ That same night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was slain. ³¹ So Darius the Mede received the kingdom at about the age of sixty-two.

Belshazzar didn't seem to get the message, because he ordered Daniel to be clothed in royal robes with a gold chain around his neck and to be proclaimed the third-highest ruler in the kingdom. Daniel had told him he wasn't interested in that stuff – for he knew these honors would be short-lived as that very same night the city of Babylon would fall and Belshazzar would be killed.

So, let me tell you what happened. As I have already said, the city of Babylon was surrounded, it was under siege for several months. The Medo-Persian army couldn't break through the walls and the gates, and they couldn't stay there forever, so a brilliant plan was devised.

If you recall, the mighty Euphrates River ran under the wall and through the city, so the best soldiers of the Medo-Persian army were stationed at the north wall where the river entered the city and at the south wall where the river exited the city. The rest of the army were already far upriver at a place where the Euphrates passed a large swamp, and far out of sight from the city, a huge canal was secretly dug to divert the river to the large swamp.

That night, on October 12, 539 B.C., they finished the canal, and then they cut into the bank of the river and the water started flooding into the swamp. Like somebody turning off a faucet, suddenly the water of the Euphrates River stopped flowing into the city, and when the water level sank well below the walls, the Medes and the Persians simply walked into the city under the walls without being noticed. The city was captured without a fight – the Babylonian Empire had fallen that very night, and Daniel tells us that Belshazzar was killed and **Darius the Mede** was appointed to govern Babylon.

Well, this chapter began with a party – it started out festive and carefree, but it ended with fear and finality, and I’m afraid that’s the way it will be for many who live as if this life is nothing but a party and do not understand that one day, for them, the party will be over. We know this life is short – but for some, it’s much shorter than they might think. When Belshazzar got out of bed that morning and went to his party later on, he had absolutely no idea that would be his very last day on this earth. It’s true, and you know what – it’s just true for you and me as well.

Our lives are in the hands of God, and He has numbered our days. It’s just a matter of time when our number is up, and the question is – **are you ready?** Don’t let the handwriting on the wall find you unprepared. Get right with God through His Son Jesus Christ, and when you leave this earth – well then, let me say – *“the party’s really just getting started.”*

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