

Daniel 5:1–16 (ESV)

1 King Belshazzar made a great feast for a thousand of his lords and drank wine in front of the thousand. **2** 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. **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. **6** 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. **10** 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 Belteshazzar. Now let Daniel be called, and he will show the interpretation."

13 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.”

Do your job.

This week we will focus mostly on the main characters in our story. Next week we will focus more on the situation from God’s perspective.

Do you want to seem like a pretty smart and informed guy for a short period of time? Then **be critical of the Bible**. There was a guy in 1850, Ferdinand Hitzig, who declared that Belshazzar was clearly a figment of the writer’s imagination.

James Montgomery Boice, Daniel: An Expository Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), 59.

For a while Ferdinand looked pretty smart because Belshazzar’s name did not show up on any of the ancient documents. Until it did. In 1854 JG Taylor found some inscribed cylinders. They were from the time when Nabonidus ruled Babylon from 555 to 539 BC. In an article in Biblical Archeology Review in May of 1985 there was an explanation of **what probably happened** based on all the **evidence** they found. Nabonidus was Belshazzar’s father. But the father was out fighting battles and vacationing in distant lands and not doing real well at doing his job. The father had abdicated his authority to his son. So Belshazzar was the acting king of Babylon, but since his father was still alive, the assumption was that he could come home and take his kingdom back at will. That fits everything the Archaeologists found. Evidently Nabonidus was not a very good king. And as we will see this morning, neither was his son.

We will see that Belshazzar offered Daniel to be made 3rd in power. Why third? Because probably Belshazzar himself was second. Nabonidus was first.

Ferdinand eventually had egg on his face. But for a while he looked pretty smart. Most mockers of Jesus and the Bible appeal to certain crowds as the voice of reason. But we just need to give it time and the mockers will be found to be eternal fools. Believe the Bible. **It’s authenticity outlasts all of its critics.**

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

Think about king Nebuchadnezzar for just a bit. He played a large part in building an empire. He was a courageous man who made military conquests. He was ambitious in his actions and built amazing structures. He was a competent man and he ran his empire effectively.

Nebuchadnezzar was a man who poured himself into his work. I am guessing there was not a lazy bone in this man’s body. He was an achiever. His Achilles heel was pride. But God addressed that sufficiently in His time.

While Nebuchadnezzar could **make an empire**, all his offspring could do was **make a party**.

There is something to learn here. Each generation has to learn the value of hard work. Work ethic is not genetic. It is learned behavior. It does not pay to pamper our children or grandchildren. They must learn some of the hard lessons that life will teach them if given half a chance.

At work I had a pet peeve. It always bothered me greatly when I had a boss that would not **put in the work it took** to maintain and improve the business they worked for. I had a few bosses who did the least amount possible. They were glad to spend the corporate dollar on themselves, but they would not spend the effort that it took to leave the company better than they found it. They really didn't care at all about the jobs they were paid to do.

I think **Belshazzar** was one of those people. **Belshazzar** probably knew that the enemy was at the gates. But he assumed that all was good. While he should have been carrying out his duties for the good of those he served as a leader, he was busy throwing a party. Any plans for his pleasure should have been cancelled due to the threat at his walls. But no. The **party** was the **priority**. Selfish pleasure was more important than his duty.

And not only that, he pulled 1000 of the people who should have been on call in this time of danger into his party. That is really the peak of **hedonism**. Belshazzar had no conception of what his duty to serve and lead his kingdom really was. He didn't show signs of feeling that weight of responsibility.

So the picture we get is that he first **tested the wine**. All eyes were on him as he did this remarkable feat of leadership. He tested the wine. How the people of his kingdom must have swelled with pride as they watched their king. Obviously this is sarcasm.

It looks like the people invited to the party may have shared the same values. They were all there, and they all seem to be enthusiastically involved.

So the King tasted the wine. There is no way of knowing **how much** he tasted. It is interesting that Adam Clarke, who has been dead for a long time, says that when **the wine got fully in, the wit went wholly out**.

2 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.

OK, this is a problem.

We see that Daniel later knew that Belshazzar **knew** some history. He would have known who the Most High God was. He would have known that his grandfather had some **unsettling experiences** until he knew that the Jewish God was the true God. Lots was written down. Surely Belshazzar would have been educated in this.

And Belshazzar knew where the temple vessels were **taken from**. Belshazzar's grandfather may have had an excuse for his arrogance. He truly had done some amazing things in his life. But Belshazzar was simply an arrogant underachieving fool. He did not even have any accomplishments that would **fool him** into thinking he was great. Belshazzar was an entitled brat. He took the plunder that his grandfather had won, although we know the part God played in it, but Nebuchadnezzar had at least done the effort to achieve this victory. And Belshazzar shows **no respect** for just exactly what this plunder meant, even though he **had lots of information** about what the God of Israel is like.

Now I don't know where the commentators get this from, but most describe this party as being very promiscuous in nature. So they are not only violating the sacredness of these vessels, but they are doing it in the context that hits the top ten sin list in any list God makes about sins.

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.

Keep in mind, these people knew what they were doing. They were mocking God. Intentionally. Willfully. They probably thought it was funny. They were taking the vessels of the most high God making toasts to Bel and Mardach and whoever. Ha ha ha. What fun.

These people really should have read their history books more seriously.

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.

Now really, what did they think would happen? What happens when you taunt the God who has a 100% track record of defending His glory? What happens when you play with a God who has shown over history to exert absolute power over the events of men? The most appropriate response to these people was, **"What were you thinking?"**. Or did their pride blind them to the sovereign control of God?

Imagine this. Imagine being in your living room one evening and a hand shows up and the pointer finger starts scraping letters in your wall.

One thing is for sure. This was not an invited guest. And the king is watching.

6 Then the king's color changed, and his thoughts alarmed him; his limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together.

What a huge contrast between King Nebuchadnezzar and this spoiled sissy. Stuff troubled King Nebuchadnezzar. But he at least has some composure. It was as if Belshazzar never experienced danger before. He fell apart. He turned white. He freaked out. He lost control of his body functions. And he was completely out of control. This man was not fit to lead a boy scout troop, none the less a country. Some commentaries suggest that the wording used would lead you to believe he peed his pants. I don't understand how they reach that conclusion, but watching his response it seems plausible.

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."

From what we see, I don't think the King had even the smallest sense of **composure**. He resorts to yelling. When you are the king of a country like this, you don't **need** to yell. You simply **say the word** and it happens. I think the king was losing it.

So he brought in Daniel's department without the benefit of Daniel. Here was a man who was **soresly missed** when he retired. He left an unfillable hole.

So the king tells them all the benefits they will gain by interpreting the handwriting. And it is no small thing. I am sure if any one of them could have pulled this off, they would have. But we will see that, even if they understood the symbols, the symbols would have made no sense. It would be like saying "should should fifty gerbels". It made no sense. So no matter what the reward, they are not going to risk their necks by giving the wrong interpretation. Had they only known they would only have to bluff for **a couple of hours**, maybe some of them would have guessed.

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.

OK King Belshazzar is not much of a **ruler** or much of a **man**. He is used to being bailed out of difficult circumstances. It is clear he has lived a life of ease, being given privileges that he has not earned by hard work. He has not built up the

capacity for this kind of difficulty. It is almost like he is ready to **throw a fit** because no one can bail him out of this problem. It is difficult to know if his color changed to brighter red or brighter white. But no matter what, the “wise man division”, as well as the rest of the king’s staff, were not going to fare well in this encounter. No matter how much they despised the king, he was still the king. So they were perplexed. The one thing everyone had in common is they had **no idea what to do**.

But there was one person in the kingdom who knew what to do.

10 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.

Never underestimate the value of an older woman’s advice. It is not **always** good. But it is **often** good. This was probably not Belshazzar’s wife. It was probably his mother or grandmother. She somehow got wind of what was going on. She was probably aware of the ineptness of Belshazzar to handle a difficult situation. So she figures she better do something. And she has a very good idea of what to do. Look at what she says to the king. Do you think anyone would have said these words to King Nebuchadnezzar? I seriously doubt a person would have lasted another day if they did.

“O king, live forever! Let not your thoughts alarm you or your color change.

O king live forever was common enough. That is pretty much how you better address the king.

Then let not your thoughts alarm you may have been acceptable. King Nebuchadnezzar had heard similar ideas. He may have recognized he needed to settle his mind.

But the next phrase would be the one that might be your last. Let not your color change. That would be something only a mother could get away with. It would be similar to, “stop getting so bent out of shape Belshazzar.” “Quit acting like a baby.”

I think this woman knew what a real king looked like, what a real king was made of. And Belshazzar was not it.

You can almost hear her talking to him in a belittling voice saying, “Now calm down.” “Here is what you should do.” “It will be ok.” “Act like a king for goodness sake.”

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,
Here is what you need to do Belshazzar. Find Daniel.

Now Daniel appeared to believe that Belshazzar actually **already knew** the story of Daniel and King Nebuchadnezzar and the King's insanity. So this should not have come as news to Belshazzar. But this is what happens when someone thinks they are superior to their studies. They learn little. And when they **need** to know what they **should** know, they **don't** know. Here is another evidence that Belshazzar was a spoiled brat.

The queen continues. Daniel was a guy who had the spirit of the gods. He actually communicates with the gods. And he knows stuff like the gods do. This guy is not like **any other** guy. He knows stuff that he has no way of knowing. But watch carefully what the queen says here. Or more importantly HOW she says it.

She says King Nebuchadnezzar your father. Ok. At this point wouldn't you think the Belshazzar knows exactly who she is talking about? I think he would have. But listen closely to what she says next.

your father the king

I think that was a rub. I think she is rubbing in the fact that he was a **real** king. He was a **real** man. He was a **real** leader. Nothing like you Belshazzar.

A mother can get away with that kind of thing. Few else would be able to.

She goes on. King Nebuchadnezzar **made him chief of the magicians, enchanters, Chaldeans, and astrologers**

Belshazzar should have known this. But he was probably weak on his facts. So his mother made sure he knew **all** the pertinent facts. Daniel was the head of the Wise Man department. That would have been a very big deal in Babylon. He would have been a **big shot**. The fact that Daniel is still alive lets us know that it was not in the **distant history** that all these stories played out. These were very big events in the history of Babylon, and not that long ago.

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. Now let Daniel be called, and he will show the interpretation."

Then in verse 12 we are told **WHY** Daniel got such a high position.

Daniel had an excellent spirit, knowledge and understanding for three purposes.

He was exceedingly qualified for doing these three things.

Interpret dreams

Explain riddles

And solve problems.

Daniel should have been the “go to” guy. But my guess is that Daniel got **very tired of the nonsense that was happening under these incompetent kings**. He shows very little patience or compassion in his responses to King Belshazzar. But Belshazzar needs Daniel right now to explain a riddle. What do the words on the wall mean?

13 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.

Think about that response. What is the most demeaning thing the King could say about Daniel? This is **the** Daniel who served Babylon in an exemplary fashion. He was a trusted advisor of a real king in Babylon. He was promoted to top official status, not because of **who he was** but because of the **services he provided**. He was worthy of great respect, respect that a real king would have probably given him.

But this king was trying to **belittle** him. He was trying to put him in his place. He was trying to show Daniel his **superiority** over Daniel. This little runt of a king could only feel important by putting people better than him down. This King was clearly too stupid to know what **kind of man** Daniel was. By now Daniel was probably somewhere between 80 and 95. He could have cared less what Belshazzar thought of him or could do **to him** or **for him**. Daniel was in the superior position, but the king was so **full of himself** and was so **self indulgent** that he had no comprehension of what a man of dignity would look like. He had nothing in his mind to compute it. So he tries to put on a power play.

So Belshazzar **demeans** Daniel. I hear you are one of the slaves brought here because your puny country was conquered. Like that is going to make Daniel uneasy. This king was a fool. And he did not learn from history. He did not consider what **Daniel’s God** did to the real king. He was just a fool prattling on, acting all powerful. But he was like a little child in the presence of this real man of God.

We need to understand that there was no sincerity in King Belshazzar. Everything was a game, an act. And up to this point he has been able to get away with that nonsense because he had power. But not today.

He goes on.

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.

Belshazzar acts like he is really not convinced of this. As if he is pushing a button in Daniel and Daniel in his pride will feel the need to prove himself. I have heard you are impressive. But the verdict is still out. It is up to you to prove yourself. Now here is the situation.

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.

The rest of the experts could not deliver. I have heard you can. I don't really believe it. But that is what I heard. He goes on.

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."

Now if you can.... Can you see how this is oozing with an air of superiority by the king? Can you see how offensive and disrespectful this would have been to a man like Daniel. This king is an utter fool. He has no idea whatsoever **what makes Daniel tick**. Even how he seeks to bribe him to perform is offensive. Really, if he did his homework, what could he give Daniel that Daniel did not already have? But Belshazzar was not big on homework, or probably work of any kind. He could not possibly know how a man like Daniel ticked.

As I was studying this material, I was getting worked up. And I had to ask myself why? The more I thought about it, the more I concluded that I have great disregard for lazy leaders. I had a few bosses who were lazy. They did not live up to their promises. They would not fulfill their promises because that would have required **hard work** and **self control**. They were not willing to do the work of understanding their environment. They did not build anything. And when hard work was called for, they were unavailable. I am not in love with work. I have a tendency to want to be lazy. But I understand that I must fulfill my responsibilities, my obligations, no matter how I might feel about them. I cannot bail out on them no matter how I feel. Because when I bail out, someone else always, always has to pay a price for my escape. That is how life is. If I don't do what is in front of me to do, someone else will have to do it. And no matter how I am tempted to think about it, that failure falls on me. And that is patently unfair of me.

King Belshazzar was the ultimate of a bad authority. He could plan a party. But he could not plan a defense to protect his city of people. He could not lead a defense against the enemy at his gates. He did not do his **homework** because his homework required **work**. He expected everything to come easy to him. So when hard things came, he was not prepared. He bailed out. And when a hard thing arose in his responsibilities, he was completely unprepared to deal with it. He was unprepared because he never allowed himself to stick to the hard work earlier in his life. He took the easy route.

You may find better applications, but here is one. We need to **do our jobs**. We cannot be like this king hoping to make up for **substance** with **style**. He wanted to be something without the process it takes to become something. We cannot allow ourselves to place our **preferences** over our **responsibilities**. We cannot run to those things we like, or prefer, or feel we need, when we have responsibilities to carry out for the good of those God has placed in our care. The people **we serve** are a higher priority than our **pleasure** or **convenience**. So the question arises, are we actively protecting those under our care, or are we doing the easy thing? I think that question would be a good one for us to consider this week.

On the flip side of that, when we, like Daniel, have done our jobs well over a lifetime, we can walk into any situation with the **dignity** that an **obedient life offers** and **speak truth** to the situation. It is the people who have faithfully done their jobs that will often be called upon, when there is great need, **to provide solutions**. Now, it is true that God **chose** Daniel and **empowered** Daniel to do great things. But it is also true that Daniel was a principled man who woke up and obeyed God day after day after day, no matter what. Daniel was a man who **did his job** and **obeyed his God** and in the end he was the one needed by a King who spent a lifetime of **doing neither**.

This week, maybe we should rejoice at the jobs God has given us. Because those jobs are **His plan for us**, to **make us** what He wants us to be. He is building up capacities that will be useful to others over our lifetimes. When we run from those responsibilities, we limit our growth to help others. When we face them head on, we increase our usefulness for God's kingdom and for the good of those under our care.