

When You Miss the Writing on the Wall

Daniel 5

And you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this...

Introduction: History has much to teach us. One of the reasons why the study of God's Word is so enthralling is the fact that it lines up perfectly with the historical timeline and events of the world. Last week we celebrated one of the greatest historical events in history, the rising of Jesus from the grave, which took place in real time and space, under the political rule of Rome, the oversight of Pontius Pilate, and wrangling of the Jewish religious leaders. The soldiers, disciples, and ladies first to the tomb were real people, not simply pieces of a made up legend or bedtime story we tell children. The Bible IS historical, so studying it in its historical setting helps us understand it. This morning we will see how accurate, even down to the day, that it explains what happened.

History also informs us about ourselves. Mankind often repeats historical mistakes, but history itself is no cyclical, since time is marching toward a conclusion where Jesus will return, judge, and rule. But learning about civilizations and kingdoms of the past helps us see consequences of actions, ripple effects of decisions, and the inability of mankind to truly control his own destiny. Whether it is a study on OT Israel where we see rebellion and idolatry instead of worship, or an unwillingness to deal with terrible practices like slavery after the formation of the US leading to the Civil War, or a look at the rise and fall of Babylon, we are struck with vivid illustrations of lessons to be learned. In fact, even in our present day, we can see the **handwriting on the wall unless something gives**, unless there is a turning from a humanistic and individualistic view of life, our own successful and free nation will go the way of all others, into the annals of history past.

This morning we come to the swift and sure end of the Babylonian empire, which gave way to the Medo-Persians to rule. Daniel 1 started with Babylon storming into Jerusalem and taking away the young men who would become leaders in this foreign government. We saw how Nebuchadnezzar had grown a monumental empire, one that was depicted by a head of solid gold in a dream he had of future events (Dan. 2:37-38). We saw this king succumb to his pride and was driven out to the wilderness for 7 years until he humbled himself before the hand of the mighty and sovereign God. In **562 BC**, after reigning for 43 years, Nebuchadnezzar died, giving way to only 25 years before this once mighty nation fell to an outside foe. His son, **Evil-Merodach**, followed him to the throne only to be assassinated by his brother in law, **Neriglissar for 4 years**. He was succeeded by **Labashi-Marduk**, who was 'liquidated' within a month and one of the conspirators took the throne, whose name was **Nabonidus**, who ruled from 555-539, or until the events of Daniel 5. Why are all these names important? They are all a part of what went on in Daniel 5, yet none of them are mentioned by name. We also know about this from historical records of **Herodotus** (5th century BC) and **Xenophon** (4th Century BC), as well as archaeological finds over the past 150 years in Babylon itself. These do not simply affirm the Biblical record, but remind us the Bible is historical, happening in real time and space.

When Defiance Meets Divine Clarity (1-9)

"King Belshazzar made a great feast for a thousand of his lords and drank wine in front of the thousand. 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 kings and his lords, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them...they drank wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood and stone."

Living in a Fool's Paradise (1-4)

There are many things happening all at once in these short verses that set the scene on the last night of the Babylonian empire:

1. **Who was Belshazzar?** Once thought to be made up by the Biblical author since ancient historians did not talk about him, in more recent discoveries (see the work of A.L Oppenheim and P.A Beaulieu), 37 archival texts dated to the time of Nabonidus state that Belshazzar was his son and served as **co-regent**. At the time of Daniel 5, Nabonidus resided in Tema in Arabia (about 500 miles away from the capital city) and Belshazzar, the second in command, practically ruled in the city of Babylon. If you read the entire text of Dan. 5, you'll notice that Belshazzar offered one becoming the "*third ruler of the kingdom*" (5:7, 16, 29) if they interpreted the writing on the wall. That was the highest rank available.

2. **When did this all go down?** We know the exact date! This party thrown by Belshazzar for 1000 of his inner circle went down on **October 11, 539 B.C.** How do we know that date so specifically? As this feast of debauchery was happening, the city of Babylon was surrounded by the **Persian armies**. According to the "*Nabonidus Chronicle*", the Babylonian armies had been crushed by the Persians in the months leading up, and only this city remained to be conquered. We know exactly how it happened as well, since running through this massively walled city was the Euphrates River, which the Persians diverted in order to sneak men through the opening in the wall, conquering Babylon in a bloodless overthrow as its leaders partied like they did not have a care in the world.

3. **Why were they partying?** In the first 4 verses, the strange part is NOT the party itself. This was commonplace in the ANE. In Esther 1:1-4 we read that King Ahasuerus of the Medo-Persians had a 180 day feast to show off his riches. There were several palaces in Babylon, and it is believed that this particular palace was about 350 by 200 yards with a chamber of 170 by 56 feet. The disturbing part of this party was the fact that in a drunken stupor, the king decided to bust out the vessels from the Temple in Jerusalem and desecrate them (this would have been an orgy as well - since concubines as well as wives were present). They were celebrating the greatness of their gods! Talk about missing the writing on the wall (even before there was writing on the wall!). The city was surrounded, but they acted as if they were fine. They trusted in the immense fortifications of the city, with a double wall system, each being 25 feet wide and 40 feet high, enough for chariots to run on top. They tried to convince themselves by **numbing themselves** that everything was ok. *Isn't that what people often do today?* Issues of purpose, life, and death are in front of us, but we'd rather numb ourselves with activity, or relationships, or anything else rather than deal with the reality of our sin and eternity.

Learning when a Fool's Paradise is Lost (5-9)

As the party went on, fingers of a human hand began to write on the plaster on a wall, which were washed over with white gypsum (R. Koldewey, *The Excavations at Babylon, 1914*). It happened by a lamp stand so that all could see, especially the king. What he saw **changed his color, alarmed him, and made his knees knock together**. In other words, he was so scared that blood drained from his face and caused his legs to wobble, scared spitless. Notice that he ran the same play as Nebuchadnezzar decades earlier: **call out the worldly wise, the supposed experts of the day** to try to get some answers. But they could not read nor interpret the message on the wall. They had forgotten the prophecies against Babylon (Isa. 21:1-10; Jer. 51:34-39, 54-57), or simply did not care. The reality staring them in the face, however, was that something was going to give, and they knew it was not in their favor. Fear has to do with **judgment and fails to understand love**. *"There is no fear in love but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love."* (1 John 4:18) Belshazzar and his guests were gripped by fear because they knew judgment was at hand.

When Desperation Seeks Divine Foolishness (10-16)**Turning to the wisdom of years (10-12)**

Who do you call when you are in trouble, don't know what to do, or are in over your head? This is one of my favorite questions to ask our teenage kids at church in front of their parents: *which parent would you call if you got into a car accident, and you were ok, but it was your fault!?* Go ahead, and ask that of your kids a lunch today and see what they say. When Belshazzar was weak kneed and scared out of his gourd, he called his mom, the queen mother. This was not his wife but most likely Naboidus' wife, and she continued living in the palace as her husband was in another city (and had just fled the Persian army). Like so many who have the wisdom of years, she actually gave great counsel and advice: there is a man who helped your father Nebuchadnezzar, who not only interpreted dreams but who was made chief of all the magicians, astrologers, enchanters, and Chaldeans in the land. **Call Daniel.**

Now, you may be asking yourself where Daniel has been during this time? Most likely he was in a form of semi-retirement, since he was pushing all of 80 years old at this time. With the changeover in leadership, he not only was relegated to the back of the advisor hierarchy, but was largely forgotten by the younger generation. We remember that there is a vast difference between **wisdom and knowledge**, with wisdom putting knowledge into practice. The Bible is abundantly clear that it is foolish to refuse the wisdom of the older generation, and we are called to learn not only from the words but the action of those older than us (Titus 2). This is a fantastic reminder to both young and old in the faith: *we should always be engaged in multi-generational relationships since this is a pathway to true wisdom and discernment.*

Turning to the weakness of what seemed foolish (13-16)

Belshazzar was an obedient son. He called Daniel and it was clear he had some amount of understanding of who he was, as he addressed Daniel as *"an exile of Judah, whom the king my father brought from Judah."* Now as a note of linguistic clarification, it was clear that there were not only generations but also potential family breaks between Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar, yet he still referred to the great king as his father. There are several reasons: 1) There is no word for "grandfather" in Hebrew or in Chaldean, so forefathers were referred to as "fathers", or 'fathers fathers'. Nebuchadnezzar could have been Belshazzar's grandfather, if, as some have speculated, Nabonidus married Nebuchadnezzar's widow. 2) Father could have simply referred to a royal line of kings, a father in the sense of the scepter handed down.

Regardless, the king who just a few hours earlier had **desecrated the vessels of the Temple of the God of Israel**, who now was groveling at the feet of Daniel for help. In all of his puffed up pride and bravado, Belshazzar was relegated to asking a despised class of Hebrew for help, and his desperation was so great, that he offered the #3 job in the entire kingdom (what was left of it). He even tried to 'butter him up', saying the "spirit of the gods is in you", and "that light and understanding and excellent wisdom are found in you" (v. 14). He quickly turned against his own disbelief and faith in his own gods to try to gain favor with Daniel and his God.

This is exactly what has to happen to everyone that comes to God in Christ through the gospel. **"For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."** (1 Cor. 1:18). The gospel does not come to people through their own worldly wisdom or intellect, just as no one can **discover** God without Him first revealing Himself to them. *"For since, in the wisdom of God the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ and Him*

crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." (1 Cor. 1:21-24) The cross is foolishness. The Jews wanted a powerful Messiah, and the non-Jews wanted one that made sense to them, and Jesus did not live up to either expectation. Coming to God in Christ means that cast off our idolatrous view of God (Jews wanted signs...Gentiles wanted wisdom...Americans wanted therapy, a god that helps them feel better) and bow ourselves completely to Christ, embracing His death on the cross for us, rising again to prove His claims, and in **Him alone** are we saved. Desperate sinners can see the **handwriting on the wall: we cannot save ourselves, are in a desperate plight because of our sin, and need a substitute Savior who died in our place.**

When Denseness Ends in Divine Judgment (17-31)

Scathing words from an elder (17-23)

This is my favorite part of the story. There is something to be said that we speak a little more freely about life when we reach a certain age. This was true of Daniel. A young man came to him in obvious flustered fear, was trying to butter him up, and he saw the real need of the moment. In fact, this was not Daniels first encounter with a **fearful, insecure, offer-the-moon king**. So he pulled absolutely no punches but gave Belshazzar the straight story. We can learn from this approach when we are faced with an opportunity to speak truth to people. Sometimes we beat around the bush so much trying not to hurt someone's feelings that we actually fail to deliver the life giving, soul changing Biblical truth to them, thinking we are being loving, but instead are simply **self-preserving**.

Daniel started with saying the king could keep his gifts and rewards ("son, you can keep that stuff to yourself"), and said he would answer his question by interpreting the message on the wall. But **before he did that**, he took the opportunity for both a **history lesson** and a **personal challenge**.

First, Daniel reviewed the testimony and story of Nebuchadnezzar (18-21). Belshazzar would have been alive at the end of Nebuchadnezzar's reign so would have known the story not only in a history book but by observation. The king was the quintessential ruler of the world, achieving greatness, glory, and power beyond any living being. At his word people lived or died. He had control over all peoples throughout the world. He had what most people actually dream of, the opportunity to do **whatever he wanted**. But all of this power went to his head and heart, and instead of glorifying God, he exalted himself, operating in pride, and allowing his heart to be hardened toward the Lord. Because of this, God **humbled him graciously**, sending him out with the wild donkeys to eat grass like the cows. God did this purposely, so that Nebuchadnezzar would come to the end of himself, would look up and yield to the God most high, and turn from his pride. The king experienced what so many of us have gone through: **God humbling us by taking away, by bringing us to the end of ourselves, by stripping us of our self-will, reliance, and power** so that we turn to Him and Him alone. If God can turn a man like Nebuchadnezzar, He can turn ANYONE. However, EVERYONE must come to God the same way, by depending on Christ alone and yielding their own strength and reliance.

This lead to a personal challenge, and it was a powerful one. **"And you his son, Belshazzar, have NOT HUMBLING YOUR HEART, though YOU KNEW ALL OF THIS, but you have lifted up yourself against the Lord of heaven.** (v. 22-23) Notice the issues that Daniel brings out in dealing with Belshazzar's heart. **First**, he refused to humble himself. We either wait to be humbled by God by force, as He bows our knee down to the Lordship of Jesus (Phil. 2:9-11), or we humble ourselves before the powerful hand of God. We stubbornly hold onto our pride thinking that we know best or that we can do it ourselves (we never really graduate from our 3 year old self), rather than experience the freedom of humility in Christ.

Second, it was NO A LACK OF KNOWLEDGE that was his problem. "*For although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.*" (Rom. 1:21). Belshazzar knew the story of Neb. He knew the consequences of pride. He knew that there was a Mighty God, but continued to play the fool with stupid god who could not hear or know. The same is true for those that refuse to humble themselves before God today. We know there is a God, both externally by looking at creation and internally, knowing that we have a conscience that both affirms and convicts us, accuses and excuses us (Rom. 2:15). No one here today can claim it is a lack of knowledge as the reason they refused to turn to God. It was a lack of humility, a stubbornness of heart, a selfish desire for control, but not a lack of knowledge. Belshazzar refused to honor God, and instead pursued vain pleasure even to the last hour of his life, like a man drinking and partying while the Titanic goes down.

Sobering words from the Lord (24-29)

Daniel then obliges and interprets the three different words written on the wall, with the first written twice for emphasis: **Mene, Mene, Tekel, and Parsin**. **Mene** meant *numbered*, **Tekel** meant *weighed*, and **Parsin** meant *divided*. Belshazzar's life and days had been numbered and been brought to an end, he had been weighed in the balance and found wanting, and the kingdom was about to be divided to the Medo-Persian empire.

But he was dense. He missed the writing on the wall. All around him life was crashing down but he still acted out of vanity and pride. His legs and arms were chopped off and still was claiming it was only a flesh wound. He did what so many do today who claim their life is great, that they are happy, or have it all under control (at least that's what they claim on social media) while their lives are miserable, hopeless and falling apart. This is the height of pride. Even in the end, when they could turn to the Lord, they claim their independence and freedom as they go down to the grave. The irony of this scene is Daniel is promoted to the **third rank of a kingdom that was going down in a matter of moments**.

Settled words that were missed (30-31)

In the late hours of **October 11, 539 BC, Belshazzar was chopped down in his palace, mere hours after receiving a message**. The next day, October 12, Cyrus entered the city without any calamity, and the once great kingdom was transferred to the Medo-Persian empire.

As World War II raged on the Western front between Germany and the Allies, Adolf Hitler had set up plans to open up an Eastern Front to push the Soviet Union back and open up living space for his expanding empire. Trusting non-aggression pacts signed between the Soviet Union and Germany, Joseph Stalin believed Hitler would never attack, since he had a massive army and did not believe Hitler would want a 2nd front. However, on June 22, 1941, Operation Barbarossa began, which led to some of the most heinous atrocities of the war and over 5 million Soviet casualties. Though he was given no fewer than **100 warnings** by both Allies and Axis parties, Stalin refused to believe, even after the battles began. He was not without knowledge, but he refused to take action with the clear information he had.

This morning, the hand writing is on the wall. We are all faced with the reality that God is sovereign and holy, that He demands holiness from us, but that we have fallen short of His glory because our sin. He **MUST** punish our sin, and He will either have satisfaction of wrath in our death and judgment, or will have it in Jesus Christ on our behalf. The truth is that Jesus died for us, and if we believe in Him, repent of our sin, and ask for forgiveness, we can have it. Or we will simply believe we have more time, that things are ok, or will turn around on their own. Today is a day to respond to the writing on the wall: God is a gracious loving God, giving us Jesus Christ, but He will judge our sin one way or the other.