

## The Handwriting on the Wall

Daniel 5:1-31

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If you have your Bibles I'd invite you to turn with me to Daniel, chapter 5. We're in Daniel and we're contemplating a valiant stand which the aged Daniel makes against Belshazzar, the king of Babylon, and it is perhaps a word of encouragement for Christians today who are facing opposition for the Lord in their own lives individually and corporately, up against overwhelming odds, up against times which look dark and unpromising and yet the Lord shows his faithfulness even in this passage. Let's attend then to the word of God beginning in Daniel 5, verse 1:

### Daniel 5:1-31

*O Lord, our hearts are stirred when we see the hand of Your providence revealed. Humble us before You in Your sovereignty, that we might taste of Your sovereign grace and not of Your sovereign judgment. Teach us the truth of this word by the Spirit and apply it to our hearts. Comfort us where we need comfort, strengthen us where we need strengthening, humble us where we need humbling and we'll give You the praise and the glory for we ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.*

This is a strange and perplexing passage in many ways. Out of nowhere comes this Belshazzar. No introduction, no conclusion after the last words of this chapter are spoken. He's here for one chapter. We meditated upon the foibles and the messages of God to Nebuchadnezzar for four chapters and then suddenly Belshazzar is here. It reminds us again that Daniel is primarily concerned with the spiritual conflicts between God and His people and His messengers and the children of this world. Rather than giving us the intricate details of Jewish chronology and even world history of his time, he wants to focus our hearts on the spiritual conflict which God and his people face. And that is one reason why the story of Belshazzar is introduced and concluded so abruptly. No word of explanation, no word of background or context, just one chapter.

Let me say in passing that many debate the issue as to who this Belshazzar was. If we look at the list of kings in Babylon, there was no king over all of Babylon

named Belshazzar and so there have been many speculations on who this Belshazzar is. Is that a name that was given by the Jewish exiles to a person who was named otherwise in the list of the kings of Babylon. And there are have been various suggestions. Some have suggested that this was Evil Meredach who was overthrown in a palace coup in 560 B.C. But there seems to be an even better suggestion. There was a man named Bel-sar-usur who was the son of the last king of Babylon, the King Nabonidus. Nabonidus was unpopular in Babylon, so he moved his capital to another city, and apparently he left his son, Belshazzar, behind to rule. He, too, was unpopular. We know that, because on the night in which he was slain the people of the city rejoiced. It is interesting, is it not, in this passage that this man, Belshazzar, promises to make Daniel not the second man in the kingdom, but the third man in the kingdom. And that would fit nicely with the fact that he himself was the second man in the kingdom under his father, Nabonidus.

Whatever the case is, we see a clear contrast between Belshazzar and Nebuchadnezzar. God is patient with Nebuchadnezzar. He waits long for Nebuchadnezzar to learn the spiritual lesson. But against Belshazzar His judgment is swift. Sinclair Ferguson says to us, "It is a reminder that we dare not presume upon the grace which God has shown to others. To know that God is gracious and yet not to turn from our sin in the light of that grace is to fall under His righteous judgment. Such was the experience of Belshazzar." And that is one of the great lessons that we learn in this, the 5th chapter of Daniel.

You remember so far, God has shown His sovereignty over nations and individuals in chapter after chapter of Daniel. In Daniel 1, God shows His sovereignty by giving wisdom to His servant Daniel to interpret and to save the faithful servants. In Daniel chapter 2, the interpretation of the dream is supplied so that Nebuchadnezzar's dream is interpreted by Daniel. In chapter 3, the three witnesses, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah are spared by God in His providence, even in the fiery furnace, and last week we saw the confession of Nebuchadnezzar of the sovereignty of God. Even this heathen king confesses the sovereignty of God. And so God's sovereignty is a theme throughout the book.

## **I. God sees injustice and deals with it in His own way and time.**

Now God's sovereignty in both grace and in judgment is going to be set forth here in Daniel 5 most dramatically. Two things in particular I draw your attention to and the first you'll see in the first nine verses. Those verses which contain for us the account of what happened that night in the king's banqueting hall where the finger of God's judgment was written against the nation of the Babylonians and against Belshazzar. There we learn that God sees injustice and He deals with it in His own way and His own time. It may have looked like to the captives of Israel that God had forgotten them and that He had forgotten His

righteousness and holiness in judgment, because there was an exceedingly wicked man on the throne whereas there had been a time when Daniel, one of the choice servants of the Lord had been highly respected in the kingdom. It's very apparent from the first nine verses that Daniel has been forgotten. In his age he has moved to the sidelines. Perhaps Belshazzar and his father, perhaps they like Rehoboam have chosen young counselors and have spurned the wisdom of age and have gone after young men who would tell them what they wanted to hear. Whatever the case is, Daniel is on the sidelines. Though a man of great influence once, he doesn't even seem to be remembered by the contemporaries of Belshazzar in the court. And we have a picture here of a king who was unteachable. Belshazzar, we are told in verses 2 through 4, was clearly a man who had learned nothing from the history of God's dealing with Nebuchadnezzar.

Furthermore, this Belshazzar was arrogant and foolish simultaneously. We learned in the 30th verse of this chapter that the city was already under siege when Belshazzar threw his party. Sheer folly and pride and arrogance, while the enemies of the kingdom are at the gates of the city. He is feasting in drunkenness and debauchery with his nobles in his hall. And really, in these first few verses, we can develop a brief catalog of Belshazzar's sin. Daniel, by the way, is going to directly comment on it later when he responds to the king's request. But here we see at least three things.

In verse 1, it is clear that Belshazzar has blatantly disregarded his responsibilities as a monarch. Whereas he ought to be concerned about defending his kingdom, he has thrown a lavish feast, and it's not so much the size of the feast as it is the motive behind it, to exalt himself, to show himself, to be the center of attention, to show himself to be in complete control even though the enemies are at the gate.

Secondly, we see that Belshazzar is blatant and deliberate and public in his blasphemy. He not only misrules, but he blasphemes the living God. Those instruments of the temple which would have been reserved to the most holy of purposes, he draws out of the treasury and he uses them for wantonness and drunkenness. Those instruments and the people who those instruments came from, the people of Israel, represented the presence and power of God most high on earth, and he used them for debauchery. Ferguson has said, "His heart was a factory of rebellion against God."

And thirdly, in verse 4 you see that his sinful heart had caused his spiritual blindness. It wasn't the wine that night that caused Belshazzar's blindness. It was his own heart. He anticipated no judgment from God and no judgment from man, and yet it came.

From verses 5 to 7 this man goes from a break with reality to a check with reality. Suddenly, Belshazzar is yanked into the reality of the seriousness of the moment. A finger writes on the wall words that he cannot understand and words that even his wise men will not be able to understand. Edward Fitzgerald, in the

*Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, says this: “The Moving finger writes; and having writ, moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line, Nor all thy tears wash out a word of it.” The kingdom was ended. Belshazzar was ended.

This blind king then called his blind counselors, and for all their worldly wisdom, they are blind to the things of God, even His judgment. They can't even read His judgment when He comes.

And so Babylon, the type of all rebellion against God, is humbled even before His judgment with not enough spiritual sense to know that it is being judged. It's a picture of the world in rebellion and there are so many important things for us to learn from it.

I think the first thing that we learn is that we must never fear. When it seems like the forces of God and of His kingdom and of our Lord Jesus Christ, the forces of good in this world, when it seems that those forces are being trampled under we must never fear for the city of God remains. It may have looked as if Belshazzar and his hosts were in control, but they were not. God was in control and His judgment was ready to come.

We also learn that God rules, and He overrules nations and men, and He will bring His own justice in His own way and in His own time. We must never doubt that the judgment of God will come. What an encouragement it would have been to the children of the exile in a strange land, living under godless rule, to know that God had not forgotten what they were experiencing, and He had not ceased to be concerned for righteousness in the world. And they saw with their own eyes in the judgment of Belshazzar the concern of God to set that which is right in the world. John Knox once said, “Because nations do not have souls, God must bring all their judgment in this world.” Here we see the judgment of God against a nation.

Finally, this passage teaches us that we may never presume on the grace and the patience of God. Belshazzar, a grandson of Nebuchadnezzar, had seen God humble his father, his grandfather, his great ancestor, the great builder of Babylon and yet his heart was proud and hard and arrogant. He had not learned the expensive lesson that his grandfather had been taught, and there was apparently only one in the court who remembered it. And the Lord sent her in, in verse 10. But we learn from this passage never to trifle with God. Just because He is gracious in showing patience and mercy does not mean that we can monkey with Him or with our sin, for He will bring judgment on those who are presumptuous.

**II. God's servants though obscure in the world's eyes are instruments in His hands.**

There is a second thing we learn in this passage tonight. You'll see it in the remainder of the chapter. In verse 10 to the end of the chapter, through various means, Daniel is brought to the center of the stage again. And we learn there that God's servants, though they are obscure in the world's eyes, are instruments in his hands. The queen appears. We are not told which queen. Is this the wife of Belshezzar? Is it the queen mother appearing on the scene to offer some wisdom or is this even the queen grandmother, the wife of Nebuchadnezzar, still exercising influence in the court? We don't know, but we do know this. She wasn't at the party. She showed a great deal of wisdom. She wasn't there. There were other wives and concubines there. She wasn't there. Perhaps her clarity of thought was helped by the fact that she had not been engaging in debauchery all night.

Clearly, she is a brave woman, and a wise woman and a woman of no little influence because she addresses the king directly and she calls upon the king to remember certain important things. Her words about Daniel speak worlds about him and about God's care and love for His servants. Daniel seems to be forgotten by Belshazzar and his court. He seems obscure now in the reign of King Nabonidus, but the queen clearly remembered him. Maybe she had seen his deeds and his performance with her own eyes.

The queen has tremendous respect for Daniel and you'll see that respect in three ways in this passage. First of all, this queen remembers his name. She does not call him like Nebuchadnezzar did, Belteshazzar. She calls him, "Daniel, whom the king had called Belteshazzar." This queen saw the true identity of the servant of God and she called him by his real name. God's blessings to His servants are sometimes small but they are sweet. Daniel had been used by the Lord and now he's forgotten. I wonder what Daniel felt like in that circumstance? So many things that he had to offer, so much wisdom. At least this pagan queen remembered his day.

Notice also, that she saw the spiritual energy in this man. She said "this man has the spirit of the holy gods in him." He was a man who manifested the fact that he was indwelt by the Holy Spirit. It showed in the energy of his life, even at this age. He was a man who worked tirelessly for the kingdom of God. And he had spiritual wisdom. What a compliment. How the servants of God are testified to by outsiders here.

And thirdly, she testifies to his life because she sees his holiness. She says a spirit of the Holy God or a spirit of the holy gods is in this man. I don't know what she thought about Daniel's monotheism, I don't know what she's professing there. But notice the adjective *holy*. She knows Daniel's God must be holy. How does she know that? Well, it's true. Nebuchadnezzar had confessed that Daniel's God was holy. But you know what? She had seen the holiness of Daniel and she knew that such a holy man must serve a holy God. And it's a testimony to his

character. She knew God was holy, because Daniel was holy.

She brings Daniel in and the king addresses him. And the king makes some comments. Aren't you one of the captives? Yes. But he's a servant of the Lord. And the king attempts to buy Daniel with his great prizes and wealth.

Daniel says to him, 'I don't want your gifts. The spiritual gifts that I have cannot be bought and God's servants cannot be bought.' And he rejects the bribes of Belshazzar.

Then he lays out before him three words of judgment. He first of all reminds him in verses 18 through 21, of the pride of his grandfather, Nebuchadnezzar, and he reminds him that that pride brought about Nebuchadnezzar's fall. That the Lord humbled him under his pride. In verses 18 through 21 he shows him pride, humbled before God's sovereignty.

Then in verses 22 and 23, he brings directly against Belshazzar a divine accusation. "You have not humbled yourself before God, despite all that God has done." He shows him his sin. You've raised up your heart before the living God and He is now going to bring you down.

And then he pronounces a divine judgment against Belshazzar in verse 24. His words "MENE, MENE, TEKEL UPHARSIN" are basically this: "Numbered, Numbered, Weighed and Divided." Your kingdom has been numbered, you have been weighed in the balance and found lacking. The kingdom will now be divided and given to the Medes and the Persians. The judgment of God was there. There was no more discussion. The hand had writ and not all the tears of the world could wash out what it had written. Daniel realized that God had weighed the kingdom's moral and spiritual levity and decided that it would be handed to the Medes and the Persians.

I want you to notice here that Daniel treats Belshazzar as a covenant breaker. Belshazzar was not a Hebrew, he was not a recipient of the covenants of promise, but all mankind is in covenant with God. Through that covenant of works made in the garden with Adam, all mankind has an obligation to our Creator to honor Him as He is. And Belshazzar hadn't honored his Creator and now his Creator was judging.

The Lord uses His choice servants like Daniel like an arrow in His quiver. And even though His servants may seem obscure and insignificant in the eyes of the world, yet they are used to deliver the blows of God.

We learn from this passage that we ought to number our days lest God number them for us. For Belshazzar is a veritable Old Testament version of the rich fool of which Jesus speaks of in Luke, chapter 12, "Tonight your soul is required of you." God does not forget His servants, and though they are slight in the sight of

the world, yet they are used in His own way, in His own time to establish His justice and judgment on earth.

Perhaps God is calling you to stand against overwhelming odds for the sake of the kingdom of God. Don't forget the handwriting on the wall. Don't forget the God who wrote and don't forget how God upholds His servants and honors them even of the face of kings. Let us pray.

*Our Lord and our God, You are awesome and we delight to serve you and we long to see every knee bowed and to stand on that side of the shore with all those of whom the world was not worthy and to praise Your name forever, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.*

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