

## It Was Getting Late

Daniel 5

By [Wiley Lowry](#)

Good evening. Glad to be with y'all. We're looking at Daniel chapter 5 tonight. In 1957, at the Sun Studios in Memphis, Tennessee, Johnny Cash recorded a song he wrote about this passage, about this chapter that we're going to read tonight. In it he sang these lyrics, "He had concubines and wives; he called Babylon paradise. On his throne he drank and ate, but for Belshazzar it was getting late." For Belshazzar it was getting late. And yet we really just got to know him. We're just introduced to Belshazzar in chapter 5 of Daniel and that's the way it goes for the kings and the kingdoms of this world. And yet God reigns, and His kingdom endures forever. And it's imperative for us to give Him our reverent devotion. So let's pray again and then we'll read chapter 5 of Daniel.

*Our Father, we do ask that You would help us to come to Your Word with reverence, with willingness to hear, and to be taught, and to grow by Your Spirit in Christ's likeness as disciples and as worshipers of You, and that You would use us for Your kingdom wherever You place us, in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Daniel chapter 5. We'll read the whole thing. You can find that, if you don't have your Bibles, on the back of your hymn sheet.

"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 king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them. 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. They drank wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone.

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. Then the king's color changed, and his thoughts alarmed him; his limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together. 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.' Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or make known to the king the interpretation. Then King Belshazzar was greatly alarmed, and his color changed, and his lords were perplexed.

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. 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, 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 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. 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. 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. 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.' 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. O king, the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father kingship and greatness and glory and majesty. 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. 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. 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. And you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this, 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.

'Then from his presence the hand was sent, and this writing was inscribed. And this is the writing that was inscribed: Mene, Mene, Tekel, and Parsin. This is the interpretation of the matter: Mene, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an

end; Tekel, you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting; Peres, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.'

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.

That very night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was killed. And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old."

Well I want us to see, look at this passage in three different ways tonight in the short time that we have together and I want us to see the disregard for the worship of God, disregard for the works of God, and disregard for the Word of God and see how God administers justice decisively.

### **I. Disregard for the Worship of God**

So first, the disregard for the worship of God. We see that in verses 1 through 6. In verse 1 we're told that Belshazzar had a feast for a thousand of his lords, a thousand of his lords. The first thing we notice in this passage, besides the fact that government bureaucracy is about as old as time itself, is that Belshazzar is now king on the throne in Babylon. It's a new king in Babylon. In the first four chapters of this book we read about Nebuchadnezzar; we're acquainted with Nebuchadnezzar. We get to know him in his ways and his life and what happens to him. Nebuchadnezzar, you would know, was the one who besieged Jerusalem. He was the one who pillaged the temple and took the vessels of gold and silver out of the temple in Jerusalem and took it to the temple of his god in Babylon and then he captured Jehoiakim, King of Judah, and he captured a number of the most promising of the nobility in the kingdom of Judah - among them were Daniel and Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. They were youths; they were young boys. They were brought in to learn the ways of Babylon and to serve and to be a part of that kingdom.

But when we get to chapter 5 we meet Belshazzar. He's successor to the king in Babylon and the queen in this passage we read tonight, and Daniel himself, they refer to Nebuchadnezzar as Belshazzar's father. Most likely that's a way of designating Nebuchadnezzar as his relative or as his ancestor. There would have been several, or at least a couple of different rulers that came in between Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar, and while the kings changed, the person on the throne had changed, not much about the ways of Babylon changed. And we see that in this passage. We see there were liberal portions of food and drink at this party. There were lax moral standards. They had a disregard for the things of God. It was a grand display of pride and arrogance. Things remain the same in Babylon.

### **Overt Mockery: Belshazzar's Disdain for the Things of God**

And at this particular feast, Belshazzar commands his servants to go and get the vessels of gold and silver that had come from Jerusalem and to bring them into the

party. These pots and these bowls - they had been fashioned by the Israelites after the command of God and according to the command of God. We read about that in Exodus and in 1 and 2 Chronicles. They were set apart, they were sanctified for holy use, for use in religious matters, to represent the transcendence and the holiness of God; the immense privilege of approaching God, the privilege of worshiping Him and relating to Him. There was a beauty and a weightiness and a purity that came along with worshiping God. That was represented by these vessels of God and silver and yet Belshazzar brings these things out, these vessels, and he uses them in a very common and a vulgar way. They're drinking wine out of them and as they do so they're praising the gods of gold and silver and wood and bronze and all these sorts of things. This is an outright and complete defiance towards God. It's bold and it's brazen and unashamed mockery of the things of God; a disregard for the worship of God. Belshazzar is, in essence, proclaiming his supremacy over the things of God. He's proclaiming the supremacy of his gods over the Lord, over the true and living God. He could not have been more blatant in the message that he conveyed by doing this, by bringing these vessels out and drinking wine and praising these false gods. He's just outright blatant with the message that he's trying to convey.

And yet this is not anything that we're unfamiliar with. You may know about in 167 BC when Antiochus IV came into the temple and he set up an altar to the god, Zeus. It was a blatant act of idolatry, of "in your face" act of defiance against God. Or maybe you think about Christ on the cross. And what was it that was hung above the cross was the placard, here is "The King of the Jews." It's a mockery of Christ and who He is. And in our own day we see movies and Broadway musicals that have depictions of God or of Christ in a very mocking or crude and vulgar way. We see t-shirts with a representation of Jesus and some kind of line or tag with a comment of trying to have humor, make humor or make fun of Christ. We're surrounded by examples of sacrilege. It's in your face; there's almost nothing that's considered sacred. There's almost nothing that's taboo. This is not something that we're unfamiliar with.

And yet what we see in this passage is that, because of Belshazzar's overt mockery of God, in comes this hand. It's a hand not attached to a body and it's writing a message on the wall. It terrifies Belshazzar. If you look there in verse 6 you'll see his reaction. It says "The king's color changed and his thoughts alarmed him; his limbs gave way and his knees knocked together." We start to see how flimsy was his façade of self-confidence. He appeared to be bold and brazen and confidence in himself and yet the slightest thing comes in here, this hand writing on the wall, and it all falls apart. Maybe you can relate to that. You see somebody who seems like they have it all together, that they can be untouched by anything against them; maybe you're intimidated by this person. And yet to realize that that self confidence is very flimsy and it can be knocked down and destroyed by the slightest trial or test. It's thin; it's easily destroyed. And so that's what we see happening with Belshazzar. His confidence is not rooted, it's not grounded in anything. It can be shaken at a moment's notice.

**No Trivial Matter: Disregarding the Worship of God**

And yet this is no trivial matter. God does not let this act go unnoticed, this act of disregard for the worship of God. And I think before we move on and look at the main section of this passage we have to ask ourselves, "How often do we mishandle the things of God?" Are there times when we come irreverently to the worship of God? Do we come casually? Do we come drowsily? Do we come as if it's a compulsory thing for us to do, something to check off? How often do we find our tongues slipping and we take the Lord's name in a way which is not allowed, taking His name in vain? Or how often do we find ourselves maybe participating in a ceremony of the church that is being used to sanctify or maybe baptize a worldly relationship in a way that is not true? Do we mishandle the things of God? We need to have our attention directed back to the holiness and the power of God as Belshazzar was. For Belshazzar it was four words written by an unattached hand. Think of what we have. We have the entire counsel of God inspired by the Holy Spirit, written through God's chosen people to direct us on how to worship Him and how to approach Him. It shows us His holiness and the instructions He has given to us for worship that we would approach Him reverently, that we would not disregard the worship of God but that we would come appropriately and with a reverent joy before Him. Now that's the first thing we see in this passage.

## **II. Disregard for the Works of God**

Then in the largest section of this chapter, I want us to see Belshazzar's disregard for the works of God. That's in verses 7 through 28. And Belshazzar's bit of terror. What do his instincts tell him to do first? It leads him to go and to call for his cabinet, his group of wise men, the astrologers, the Chaldeans, the enchanters. Those are his first responders. Those are the people he calls in case of an emergency; these wise men or these magicians that had had on staff. I am convinced that these are the most overpaid, overrated, and unqualified group in the whole kingdom of Babylon. Over and over as we see them, we read about these guys in chapter 1, chapter 2, and chapter 4, and over and over again each time they're called they are completely useless. They are hopeless for the task that they are called to do. And they go away without having contributed anything to the problem, to the challenge, and yet over and over again they are the first ones called to come to the scene. This time is no different. The wise men are called in, they're presented with the challenge, they are offered a plush promotion, and then they're sent away not having contributed anything worthwhile to the cause. Verse 8 says, "They could not read the writing of make known to the king the interpretation." Whatever sense of confidence Belshazzar had in the confidence of this group quickly evaporated. He lost confidence again. His color changed and he's shaken up with alarm and fear.

### **An Overlooked, Forgotten, Unappreciated Ministry**

And it's at that point that the queen comes in. Most commentators think that this is probably not his wife the queen but it may have been the queen mother. It could have been his mother or it could have been Nebuchadnezzar's wife. Whatever it was, she was a figure of authority in the royal household and she knew something of the history of the kingdom. She knew something about Daniel - about who he was and about what he could do, about how God had revealed secrets through Daniel and how the king had

promoted Daniel and given him a position of prominence. Daniel did that over and over again. He consistently was faithful to the task that God had called him to do. He earned a reputation from the king and from the chief of the servants and yet throughout the book of Daniel a common theme is that he's overlooked and he's forgotten and he's unappreciated.

In a lot of ways he's like Mordecai in the book of Esther. Remember how Mordecai rescued the king. He found out about a plot to kill the king and he brought it to the attention of the authorities and they saved the king and yet that act was buried in the minutes of the royal court records and he went unappreciated, unnoticed for many years. And that's similar to what we find here in the book of Daniel. Daniel is ignored over and over again. Why is that? Why is Daniel ignored so often? I think one of the reasons is that he didn't seek earthly reward and reputation. In verse 17 you see that. He's offered a position of prominence and prosperity and it says that "He answered the king, 'Let your gifts be for yourself and give your rewards to another.'" He didn't want the rewards that the Babylonians could give him, the earthly rewards and recognition. But also I think there's something about goodness and faithfulness and honesty and sincerity that, when it's looked at from the outsider, seems boring. It seems unimpressive. Those aren't the things that make headlines. It's always the student who is acting out who the principal learns his name first. Maybe that's a little bit why we see Daniel is unrecognized - he's carrying on, he's steady, he's faithful, he's honest. And he goes unnoticed.

### **Serving Not as Man-Pleasers**

I was reading an article the other day about a Christian musician who had made some controversial remarks. And the writer of the article was questioning whether he may have made those remarks on purpose in order to drum up some publicity for his new album. And the writer quoted P.T. Barnum, which I later found that this quote has been attributed to a bunch of different people, but Barnum is attributed as saying, "I don't care what the newspapers say about me as long as they spell my name right." And it just highlights the fact that good behavior often does not equal to positive attention. And we see that Daniel is forgotten about and again. And again they're having to be reminded that here is this exile from Judah, the Spirit of God is with him, and he can reveal mysteries and he can interpret dreams; he can be a benefit in these kinds of situations. And so despite all the evidence of God's wisdom that have been revealed in Babylon that was available in Daniel, he was entirely disregarded by everyone except the queen.

I think there's a lesson for us here in that. Some of you may be in a situation, you may be in a relationship, you may be in a job in which you are doing the right thing - you are seeking to serve God, to be faithful in that context, and God is actually using you to be a blessing in that situation and yet it seems to be completely unnoticed. You've spent and you've spent and you've given and you've given and you've gotten nothing back in return. And what Daniel reminds us is to be faithful in the task that God's given to us. Don't seek earthly rewards and recognition. And as Peter tells us in 1 Peter, "It is better to suffer for doing good than to do evil." Daniel represents that for us.

## **Disregarding the Work of God in the Life of King Nebuchadnezzar**

The second thing we see is that Belshazzar disregarded the work of God in the life of Nebuchadnezzar. If you look at verses 18 and following it says, "O king, the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father kingship and greatness and glory and majesty." He's telling us this episode from the life of Nebuchadnezzar. The full account is found in chapter 4 of Daniel and in verse 20 Daniel says about Nebuchadnezzar, he says, "When his heart was lifted up and his spirit was hardened so that he dealt proudly, he was brought down from his kingly throne." Nebuchadnezzar had what we could call a "Les Miles" moment. If you know Les Miles, he's a football coach at LSU and he has a habit of eating grass before the games. And when a reporter asked him about it one time he said, "It humbles me as a man. It makes me feel a part of the game and a part of the field."

That's what Nebuchadnezzar had been reduced to. He'd been reduced to eating grass like an ox and the dew of the field had drenched him and he was living like beasts. There's a clear lesson in humility there. There's a clear lesson in God's reign and power. It's very clear. And yet Belshazzar missed it. He was completely unaware of it. It says in verse 22, "And you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this." You know, undoubtedly that would have been a pretty famous family story that that happened to the king, that he was cast down - he lived in the field like a beast. You know surely some of you may have a crazy uncle or crazy childhood friend and you have a story and you use that story and you weave it into a morality tale. It's like Aesop's fable. And you teach your kids, "Don't be like this crazy uncle." Well surely they could have used that; that would have been an indelible story in the canon of Babylonian literature.

On top of all that, Nebuchadnezzar had made a declaration. Look back at chapter 4 with me. The very last verse - Nebuchadnezzar wrote it down, he sent it out to all the nations, and he says about God, "Those who walk in pride he is able to humble." He wrote it down. It was clear that this is the lesson to learn from my account, from this incident in my life. And yet Belshazzar ignored it. I'm sure there's many different reasons that he would have given for why he ignored that incident in Nebuchadnezzar's life. It could be what C.S. Lewis calls chronological snobbery - you know, that the current generation knows better than the past. He might have thought, "What Nebuchadnezzar knew and what he believed was good for him but we know better than that. We're more sophisticated, we're more refined now. I can't buy into all that stuff that Nebuchadnezzar was saying." It could be just plain snobbery. He thought, "I'm better than Nebuchadnezzar. I'm wiser than he is; I'm more powerful than he is. This could never happen to me." It could be that Belshazzar had just grown up in the kingdom. Nebuchadnezzar had had to fight and to build the kingdom of Babylon and Belshazzar just assumed the throne at some point in his life. It was all he ever knew. Maybe he'd never been able to conceive of anything other than being in charge, in power, on the throne. Whatever it was, he had a disregard for the works of God.

## **The Verdict**

And so Daniel announces the verdict on Belshazzar. He says in verse 23, "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 in whose are all your ways you have not honored.” He points to his drinking out of the temple vessels and he points to the praising of the false gods at the time and he’s saying, “Here is arrogance, here is pride, here is blasphemy. Here is irreverence and here is idolatry.” It’s all engaged in this overt, “in your face” kind of way. And the response that God sends is this mysterious hand, this enigmatic message, “MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN.” There are three Aramaic nouns that probably designate various weights. There would have been no vowels; it would have been all consonants. And when all these other advisors came in they couldn’t understand and they couldn’t put it together; they couldn’t figure out the message. And so Daniel interprets it for them. He says, “God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end. You have been weighed in the balances and found wanting. Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and the Persians.” It’s a clear warning of judgment, all because he failed to give God the honor that He’s due. It sounds a lot like [Romans 1:21](#), doesn’t it? [Romans 1:21](#), Paul writes, “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.” It’s a serious warning and it requires a response.

### **III. Disregard for the Word of God**

And yet what we see, and as we see the last point here, is that Belshazzar displays one more act of arrogance. Verse 29 - he shows a disregard for the Word of God. Daniel tells him this warning, and then what does Belshazzar do? He goes about to give him the place in the kingdom and to give him prosperity, to reward him - the thing Daniel had not wanted anything to do with. What good is this promotion, what good is all of this acclaim, this proclamation, by the one who is making the proclamation, his days are numbered and his kingdom is coming to an end? What good is any of this? And then look back, if you look back at verse 6 of the passage you see this phrase about the king’s color changed. Verse 6 - “The king’s color changed and his thoughts alarmed him.” That happened when he saw the writing on the wall. And then if you look again at verse 9 it says, “When the wise men couldn’t bring an interpretation his color changed and the lords were perplexed.” And then verse 10, the queen comes in and says, “O king, live forever! Let not your thoughts alarm you or your color change.” You see how he’s unsettled throughout the passage. And then you come to the end and he gets this message, this warning of God’s judgment. And you would almost expect for what? For his color to change and him to be alarmed and his limbs to shake and all these sorts of things and that’s not at all what we find. He just goes about carrying on his business as usual. It’s like he completely dismisses what Daniel had just said to him. It’s like he snickers and he scoffs at God’s Word. He pays no attention to it. Instead, he should be seeking and pleading for a way to avoid the outcome on him and that’s not at all what he does. And so what we find in the last few verses of the chapter is that he’s immediately overthrown. That very night he’s killed. The Babylonian Empire was no

more; the Persian Empire was established and Darius the Mede was placed in authority.

**Application: The Justice of God is Unavoidable**

So I just want to close with two quick thoughts in conclusion. The first is that the justice of God is unavoidable. God reigns and He is sovereign over the kingdoms of men. He humbles the proud and He gives grace to the humble. And His patience that we see in this passage is opportunity for repentance. Think of all the opportunities that Belshazzar had been given to repent. He saw the works of God, he saw the warnings of God, the words on the wall, and yet he neglected all those opportunities. And what do we see? It's that God's judgment was swift. It came that very night. God's patience does not allow for delay, but His warnings are a call to repent, to turn to Him and to trust in Him and to give Him praise and honor. And that justice that's unavoidable is a great comfort for us as people as we face what Daniel faced - persecution and being neglected and overlooked, to know that God's justice is coming and we can sojourn on, we can live for God and honor Him in all circumstances, looking for His reward and not for the reward of the kingdoms of the earth.

**Application: Reverence for God is indispensable**

And that leads us to the last thing. It's that reverence for God is indispensable. J.I. Packer wrote a book published a year ago I believe called, *Taking God Seriously*. And the publisher for the book produced a video to kind of promote the book. And Packer says in that video, he says this. He says, "The church is in trouble. The trouble is that we are not taking our God seriously enough. What's the proof of that? We're not taking His Word seriously enough and we're not making sure that our faith matches the teachings of Scripture. We don't even seem interested in finding out. That's not good enough." How do we recover that sense of reverence and to take God seriously? I think we can start by looking at this verdict on Belshazzar through the limbs of the Gospel, to know that, outside of Christ, that's the verdict on us. We've been weighed in the balances and found wanting. The consequences are death and the duration is eternal, and yet in Christ, as we rest in His merit and in His work, the verdict on us is, "You've been weighed in the balances and found full - full of Christ's righteousness. You're accepted, you're cherished, you're secure for all eternity with life in His presence." That's the message of the Gospel. That's the verdict of the Gospel for us and that should lead us to a joyful reverence in all that we do to give Him praise and honor.

Let's close in prayer.

*Father, we do thank You for Your verdict on us in Christ. We ask that You would lead us to worship You now in this time of prayer, that we would bring glory to You and that You would equip us to serve Your church well. We pray these in Jesus' name, amen.*

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