

A Study in Daniel 5

Belshazzar's Feast and the End of Babylon

We are reading tonight in Daniel chapter 5, beginning at verse 1.

"Belshazzar the king made a great feast to a thousand of his nobles and drank wine before the thousand. Belshazzar, while he tasted the wine, commanded to bring the golden and silver vessels that Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken out of the temple which was in Jerusalem, that the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines might drink in them."

"Then they brought the golden vessels that were taken out of the temple of the house of God which was at Jerusalem, and the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines drank in them. They drank wine and praised the gods of gold and of silver, of brass, of iron, of wood and of stone."

"In the same hour came forth fingers of a man's hand and wrote over against the candlestick upon the plaster of the wall of the king's palace, and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote. Then the king's countenance was changed, and his thoughts troubled him, and the joints of his loins were loosed, and his knees smote one against another."

"The king cried aloud to bring in the magicians, the Chaldeans, and the astrologers. The king spoke and said to the wise men of Babylon, Whosoever shall read this writing and show me the interpretation thereof shall be clothed with purple, and have a chain of gold around his neck, and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom. Then came in all the king's wise men, but they could not read the writing nor make known to the king the interpretation."

"Then was king Belshazzar greatly troubled, and his countenance was changed in him, and his nobles were confounded. The queen, by reason of the words of the king and his nobles, came into the banquet house. The queen spoke and said, O king, live for ever, let not thy thoughts trouble thee, neither let thy countenance be changed. There is a man in thy kingdom in whom is the spirit of the holy gods, and in the days of thy father light and understanding and wisdom, like the wisdom of the gods, was found in him. And king Nebuchadnezzar thy father, even the king thy father, made him master of the scribes, magicians, Chaldeans, and astrologers. For as much as an excellent spirit and knowledge and understanding, interpreting of dreams and showing of hard sentences

and solving of problems, were found in the same Daniel, whom the king named Belshazzar. Now let Daniel be called, and he will show the interpretation."

"Then was Daniel brought in before the king. The king spoke and said unto Daniel, Art thou that Daniel, of the children of the captivity of Judah, whom the king my father brought out of Judah? I have heard of thee, that the spirit of the gods is in thee, and that light and understanding and excellent wisdom is found in thee. Now if thou canst read the writing, and make known to me the interpretation thereof, thou shalt be clothed with purple, and have a chain of gold about thy neck, and shalt be the third ruler in the kingdom."

"Then Daniel answered and said before the king, Let thy gifts be to thyself, and give thy rewards to another. Yet will I read the writing to the king, and make known to him the interpretation."

"O thou king, the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar thy father the kingdom, and greatness, and glory, and majesty. And for the greatness that he gave him, all peoples, nations, and languages trembled and feared before him, whom he would he slew, and whom he would he kept alive, and whom he would he exalted, and whom he would he humbled. But when his heart was lifted up and his spirit hardened unto presumption, he was deposed from the throne of his kingdom, and they took his glory from him. And he was driven from the sons of men, and his heart was made like the beasts, and his dwelling was with the wild asses. They fed him with grass like oxen, and his body was bathed with the dew of heaven, till he knew that the Most High God ruleth over the kingdom of men, and that he appointeth over it whomsoever he will."

"And thou, Belshazzar, his son, hast not humbled thy heart, although thou knewest all this, but hast lifted up thyself against the Lord of the heavens. And they have brought the vessels of his house before thee, and thou, and thy nobles, thy wives, and thy concubines, have drunk wine in them. And thou hast praised the gods of silver and gold, of brass, iron, wood, and stone, which see not, nor hear, nor know. And the God in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, hast thou not glorified."

"Then from before him was sent the part of the hand, and this writing hath been written. This is the writing that is written: Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin."

"This is the interpretation of the thing. Mene: God hath numbered thy kingdom, and finished it. Tekel: Thou art weighed in the balances, and found wanting. Peres: Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians."

"Then Belshazzar commanded, and they clothed Daniel with purple, and put a chain of gold around his neck, and made proclamation concerning him that he should be the third ruler in the kingdom. In that night was Belshazzar the king of the Chaldeans slain, and Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old."

The End of the First Empire

This chapter marks the end of that first empire — Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom, the head of gold in the great image of Daniel 2. Belshazzar appears to have been Nebuchadnezzar's grandson rather than his direct son, as Jeremiah 27:6–7 speaks of Nebuchadnezzar's son and his son's son, suggesting three generations. The term father, as is often the case in scripture, is used in the sense of forefather or progenitor. The exact relationship is uncertain, but he could not have been far removed, since he was well acquainted with the judgments that had fallen upon Nebuchadnezzar.

The queen who remembers Daniel in verse 10 is almost certainly the queen mother — Nebuchadnezzar's own queen — which explains why it is she, and not Belshazzar himself, who has any recollection of Daniel. Belshazzar himself has no memory of him at all.

None of these events were a surprise to the Lord. Isaiah 13:17 records a prophecy given long before these events, in which God says, "Behold, I stir up the Medes against them." Everything that unfolds at the end of this chapter — the coming of a Median king, the fall of Babylon — was exactly what the Lord had lined up, entirely in accordance with what Isaiah had prophesied and what Daniel had already interpreted from Nebuchadnezzar's dream.

Belshazzar and Nebuchadnezzar: A Study in Contrast

It is worth drawing out the contrast between these two men. Nebuchadnezzar, before the Lord laid him low, was arrogant and filled with pride — but there is a telling difference. At least two or three times we read of Nebuchadnezzar saying good things about the God of Daniel or the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. He never directly desecrated what was holy. His great sin was pride — "Is not this great Babylon that I have built?" — but he did not engage in open contempt for the things of God.

Belshazzar is entirely different. The very first thing he does is command that the holy vessels be brought out of the treasury — vessels taken from the temple in Jerusalem — and turned into cups for a drunken feast. This is a direct affront to God. There is not even an outward form of religiosity, as there was in Nebuchadnezzar. There is only a contemptuous desire to mock. In Nebuchadnezzar there was at least the semblance of reverence toward the things of God; in Belshazzar there is none whatsoever.

And yet, even as we note this, we observe the hand of God in fairness. The condemnation of verse 23 — "the God in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, hast thou not glorified" — makes clear this was not a capricious judgment. God can never be charged with caprice. The record of this chapter gives adequate evidence that Belshazzar absolutely deserved what came upon him. It was righteous that Darius the Mede should receive the kingdom.

The question of whether Nebuchadnezzar was saved is addressed by what he himself wrote — and his words, preserved by the Spirit of God in Daniel 4:34–37, do not sound like something an unsaved person could produce. The natural man is not capable of genuinely looking up to heaven and crediting God the way Nebuchadnezzar did. The fact that those words are included in inspired Scripture says a great deal. He did that because he was regenerate — not the other way around.

The Fear of Belshazzar and the Testimony of Conscience

When the fingers of a man's hand appear and write on the wall, the reaction of Belshazzar is striking. One might expect mere curiosity at something so strange. Instead, verse 6 describes the most visceral fear imaginable — his countenance changed, his thoughts troubled him, the joints of his loins were loosed, and his knees smote together. This is abject terror, and the reason for it is conscience. He had an immediate sense of having been caught — a feeling of impending doom.

Compare this to Nebuchadnezzar's reactions in his various circumstances: he was puzzled, amazed, troubled — but never described in terms like these. Nebuchadnezzar was a strong personality, bold, never at a loss. Belshazzar, by contrast, appears to be a much weaker character, for all his impiety. His one notable act — bringing out those sacred vessels — reads more like youthful impetuosity or lust of the eyes than the action of a strong man.

Daniel's Response: Refusing the Gifts

Great rewards are promised to Daniel if he reads the writing. His response is unambiguous: let thy gifts be to thyself and give thy rewards to another. He will not be a hired prophet — he will not be a Balaam. As Jude writes, woe to those who have given themselves up to the error of Balaam for reward.

This recalls Abraham and the king of Sodom. When the king of Sodom offered Abraham a reward for having helped him, Abraham refused even a thread or a sandal strap, lest anyone say that the king of Sodom had enriched him. Daniel understands the same principle: to accept gifts from this man would be an unrighteous thing. The honors men bestow honor the person, not the Lord. Daniel was scrupulous that the credit should belong to God alone — as becomes clear when he immediately tells this heathen king, boldly, that it was God who gave his father the kingdom.

The Symbolism of Gold, Silver, and Bronze

A small but interesting detail runs through this chapter. In verse 2, Belshazzar commands that both the golden and silver vessels be brought. But in verse 3, only the golden vessels are brought. In the tabernacle and temple, gold speaks of divine righteousness — the perfection of God's character, as seen most clearly in the Ark of the Covenant overlaid within and without with gold. Silver speaks of redemption, as in the thirty pieces of silver. Bronze, being an alloy, is associated with judgment — that which survives the fire of God's judicial righteousness.

In these terms, Belshazzar is playing with the things of God without any redemption. And there is a striking irony in the Isaiah 13 description of the Medes, the very people God would use to judge Babylon, as those who do not regard silver and have no delight in gold. They are thoroughly natural men, having no interest in either righteousness or redemption.

This also connects to the larger picture of the image in Daniel 2. Gold, silver, bronze, iron, clay — these successive metals speak not of moral goodness but of a progressive decline in the quality of government. Nebuchadnezzar was an absolute dictator: the strongest possible form of human rule, concentrated in one man. The Medo-Persian kingdom, which followed, was subject to laws that even the king could not override. The king of that empire could not unmake his own decrees. That is a degradation from absolute power. The further down the image you go, the more the strength of government diminishes.

Lessons in Forgetfulness and Lasting Effect

There is a pattern in Scripture of those who receive blessing through association with the Lord, and yet are left with no lasting impression. Belshazzar had the entire history of his grandfather before him, and it meant nothing to him. Saul had a similar problem: David played his instrument and calmed Saul's troubled spirit, then felled Goliath before the whole army, and yet when Saul was asked, "Whose son is this young man?" he had no recollection of him at all.

It is easy, even for the lost, to praise the benefits of some association with the Lord. They might say, yes, he was wonderful, he was a religious man, it was very good — but it has no real or lasting effect on them. The Lord fed the crowds in the wilderness, and they wanted to make Him king — but only because their bellies were full. In every case, the Lord has to do a quickening work in order for any of this to actually have an effect on the soul.

This is a lesson for us too. We forget the goodness of the Lord to us. We remember Him when the chips are down and forget Him when things are going well, with the unspoken attitude: I can take it from here. The chapter is not only about Belshazzar's forgetfulness.

The Judgment Declared and Executed

The words Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin are cryptic, but Daniel reads them without hesitation. God has numbered the kingdom and finished it. Belshazzar has been weighed in the balances and found wanting. The kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.

In a sense, this is another phase of the testing of the first man. God committed responsibility into the hands of man — first Adam, then Noah, then Israel, and now the Gentile powers — and in every case man failed immediately and utterly. This history of failure establishes, by the time we reach the cross, that the heart of man is completely lost and irrecoverable apart from God. For there is no difference: all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.

That very night, Belshazzar the king of the Chaldeans was slain, and Darius the Mede received the kingdom. The prophecy came to pass precisely as Daniel declared. God is not mocked, and He uses even the wrath and profaneness of men to accomplish His righteous purposes.

Lord willing, we will continue with another historical account next time, before moving into the prophetic chapters that follow.