

“DON’T BE FOUND WANTING”
LESSONS FROM BABYLON #5
Daniel 5:1-31, March 6 & 7, 2021

We’re working our way through the first six chapters of the Old Testament book of Daniel, and there are many lessons available for us to learn in this journey. We’ve learned the importance of standing up to what is right according to God’s Law rather than conforming to the demands of this world. We’ve learned about going to God during seemingly impossible situations so that He can give us the guidance and information we need to resolve the issues at hand. We’ve learned the importance of standing strong in our faith and trust in the Lord God Almighty, especially when faced with possible imminent death, because the Lord is able to save us out of even the hottest furnace. We’ve learned that the Lord is able to humble any person, even the mightiest king, when pride drives us to think more highly than we ought to think of ourselves. And we’ve seen how God can use us if we remain faithful to Him in all our ways, obeying His commandments and stepping out boldly to do His work. And all that came out of the first four chapters of Daniel! Today we look at the danger of mocking God and disrespecting the greatness of His power and majesty.

King Nebuchadnezzar has died, and his kingdom and empire of Babylon has passed on to his son, Nabonidus. However, Nabonidus sought to defend the Babylonian empire against King Darius and the Medo-Persian army, and lost, having to retreat to Borsippa, home of the Babylonian god, Nabu (Nebo in Isaiah 46:1). In his place as king was his son, Belshazzar then the crowned prince, having been recognized as the second ruler of Babylon at that time. That’s the way that Daniel 5 starts, recognizing the change in leadership of the Babylonian empire from King Nebuchadnezzar to King Belshazzar.

However, Belshazzar does not seem to be a very wise king, because he calls a feast right at the time when the Medo-Persian army is at the gates of the city. He “*invited a thousand noblemen to a great banquet, and they drank wine together*” (Dan. 5:1). What a time for a feast! The Medo-Persian army “was outside the walls, besieging the city [of Babylon], just as Nebuchadnezzar had besieged Jerusalem. And this Belshazzar fancied himself secure behind the lofty and massive walls that

surrounded Babylon.”¹ Remember, they were three hundred and fifty feet tall, and over eighty feet thick. Belshazzar felt pretty confident that no army in the world could ever conquer a city with walls that high and that thick. He arrogantly held a feast as the opposing army sought to capture the city, thumbing his nose at all other powers and authorities.

Now, success can feed arrogance, as we begin to believe we are the reason for our achievements, instead of Almighty God. And since King Belshazzar had ascended to the throne on the heels of his father, he was celebrating the fact that it was now his turn to lead the great empire, without really knowing what it all involved and what the full responsibilities included.

He was so sure that the city was protected from any invading army that he invites his governors and princes, his lords and the mighty men of Babylon, together with his wives and concubines, to a great feast. He has no worry about the possibility of being conquered. And the city was so large that it could withstand any siege for a very long time. So the king carouses with the leaders of Babylon and the wine flows freely, almost in celebration of victory. So pompous was Belshazzar, so sure of power and position and authority, that he acts as if there’s not a care in the world. So these people gathered in the king’s palace, drinking and rioting and praising the “*gods made of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone*” (Dan. 5:4). Sure sounds a lot like today, with the leadership of many nations getting so drunk with power and position that they begin making poor decisions that impact the rest of those whom they are supposed to be governing.

Now, you all know what happens when people get drunk with alcohol – they lose their sense of inhibition, and they become daring and reckless. They begin treating each other with contempt, disrespect and arrogance, striving to be the biggest and the best, the strongest and the steadiest. Canadian journalist Graydon Carter says it best like this, “Arrogance, ignorance and incompetence. Not a pretty cocktail of personality traits in the best of situations. No sirree. Not a pretty cocktail in an office-mate, and not a pretty cocktail in a head of state. In fact, in a leader, it’s a lethal cocktail.”

¹ (Dwight L. Moody, *Daniel, Man of God*, [Abbotsford, WI: Aneko Press, Revised Edition, 2018] pg. 43)

Built up with all that arrogance, King Belshazzar then makes a decision that sets his fate. He had forgotten “the power of the God of the Hebrews, as shown in the days of Nebuchadnezzar. Heated with wine and lifted up with pride, they laid their sacrilegious hands on the gold vessels, which had been brought out of the temple of the house of God which was at Jerusalem, and they drank from those sacred cups. And as they drank to their idols, one can readily believe that they scoffed at the God of Israel. I could almost picture the scene before me and can imagine I hear them blaspheming His holy name. They made merry and were in the midst of their boisterous revelry,”² partying hearty, with no care or concern in the world. They believe they are invincible, unconquerable, and they may have made the same kind of comments we’re hearing from our own governmental leaders today. Like Rep. Jerrold Nadler, stating “what any religion ascribes as God’s will is no concern to this Congress,” (He said that in defense of the “Equality Act’s” attack on religious freedom.)

We can be sure that when we blaspheme against the Lord God Almighty, consequences will come. And that’s exactly what happened that night in the banquet hall in the palace of King Belshazzar. *“Suddenly a human hand appeared and began writing on the plaster wall of the palace, where the light from the lamps was shining most brightly. And the king saw the hand as it was writing”* (Dan. 5:5).

You ever wonder where some of our catch-phrases come from? Well, this is one of them. It’s the handwriting on the wall! Literally! God was giving His verdict to all those in the banquet hall that night for the result of not only displacing God, but disrespecting and blaspheming God. Not only were they praising and glorifying pieces of metal and wood and stone as “gods,” they were going so far as to say that THE God of the Universe had no power, no position, no authority, and no reality! If you look at any civilization or “empire” that has totally dismissed God, their history shows that it is very cruel, very self-centered, and very short lived in the scale of history. Whenever the people abandon faith and loyalty to the Lord God Almighty, that nation is soon to come to an end. The fall usually begins from within the empire, and then the weakness within leads to being conquered from the outside.

² (Dwight L. Moody, *Daniel, Man of God*, pg. 44)

Well it doesn't take a person considering this too long to see that the United States of America is on a slippery slope toward destruction if it continues in the way it is heading. There is godlessness dominating our government, there is godlessness dominating medicine and science, there is godlessness dominating the media, and there is faithlessness dominating our own United Methodist denomination. When God is wiped away from any society, that society implodes upon itself, because without God at the center of that society - guiding it, correcting it, encouraging it, empowering it - there is nothing left except human strength and human wisdom to depend upon. And human wisdom and strength are in very short supply, because they are given by God. Combined with arrogance and ignorance, incompetence always leads a faithless nation into ruin.

And we see that here in this chapter of Daniel, where God brings condemnation to the city and empire of Babylon because they have refused to turn to the Lord God and follow His commands. But when the writing on the wall is there for everyone to see, everyone is scared at it, but no one can read it, because it is written in the language of the divine. It is written by the same hand that fashioned the tablets of stone on Mt. Sinai.

Belshazzar was so shaken by the event that he calls in his advisors - magicians, wizards and astrologers - to come tell him what it means. But they are men of the world, practicing the dark arts of Satan, so they can't read it either. Even when the king offers an outstanding reward to anyone who can interpret the writing, no one there can even come close to giving an explanation. One after another attempts to decipher the meaning, but nothing is revealed. Who else could possibly give its meaning? If the wisest of the kingdom cannot make sense of it, who can bring the message of its meaning? "They couldn't make out the meaning any more than an un-renewed man can make out the Bible. They did not understand God's writing; they could not comprehend it. A man must be born of the Spirit before he can understand God's Book or God's writing. No uncircumcised eyes could decipher those words of fire"³ on the wall of the palace that night. But oh, what a warning they held!

³ (*Daniel, Man of God*, pg. 46)

There was one who remembered just such an individual, however. Belshazzar's grandmother comes forward to inform the king of a man who lent wisdom to his grandfather, King Nebuchadnezzar. She tells the king, *"This man showed good sense, knowledge, and wisdom like the wisdom of the gods...He has unusual ability and is wise and skillful in interpreting dreams, solving riddles, and explaining mysteries; so send for this man, Daniel, whom the king named Belteshazzar, and he will tell you what all this means"* (Dan. 5:11-12).

Daniel has not been in the picture for many years, even decades, so he is not well known to the people. We're not told what he is up to, but he has been in the background of the empire for a long time. The leaders of the empire had forgotten Nebuchadnezzar's proclamation about the Supreme God of the universe delivering him from his seven years of insanity. They had so focused upon making themselves their own gods, making their own rules and laws independent from God's laws, and intentionally leading the people further away from God's influence, they had no more need for one greater than themselves. So when God brings judgment to them, written in the language of God, only one remembers of the one who can read that writing, and so Daniel is finally summoned.

Listen to the rest of the account in Daniel 5. This is verse 13 to verse 31. (READ Daniel 5:13-31) As Daniel enters the palace and stands before Belshazzar, his eyes grow wide at the words written on the wall. He can read the message written. The King explains the reward to anyone who can read the writing, but Daniel is not interested. He says, *"Keep your gifts for yourself or give them to someone else. I will read for Your Majesty what has been written and tell you what it means"* (Dan. 5:17).

However before he interprets the language on the wall, Daniel gave the king a piece of his mind. Having seen the digression of the leaders after Nebuchadnezzar's death, Daniel may have prayed for an opportunity to advise the king to change his ways to warn him of the consequences of rejecting God. Now he stood before the king and it was his time to confront the king, and all those within the palace. Though he had observed Nebuchadnezzar's insane discipline from God, Belshazzar had not learned from his grandfather's experience, and was repeating the pride and arrogance of the power and position

given to him from the Lord God Almighty. He had forgotten that because Nebuchadnezzar “*became proud, stubborn, and cruel, he was removed from his royal throne and lost his place of honor. He was driven away from human society and his mind became like that of an animal*” (Dan. 5:20-21). And because he had not learned from that experience, because he had grown so proud and arrogant himself by bringing out the sacred cups and bowls taken from God’s Temple and had drunk “*wine out of them and praised gods made of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone...that cannot see or hear and that do not know anything*” (Dan. 5:23), God had sent a message to him, given by the hand that had written the message on the walls of the palace.

After giving this message to the king, Daniel continues by reading the message and then giving the meaning. In the New American Standard translation, it goes, “*MENĒ, MENĒ, TEKĒL, UPHARSIN!*” And the meaning is: ‘*MENĒ;*’ God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; ‘*TEKĒL;*’ you have been weighed on the scales and found to be deficient; ‘*UPHARSIN;*’ your kingdom is divided up and given to the Medes and Persians” (Dan. 5:25-28).

The room would have been so silent you could have heard a mouse squeak. The words of doom echoed throughout the palace as an awful warning, but Belshazzar, like his grandfather, is so intent upon rewarding Daniel that he misses the imminent disaster.

You see, while the king’s party was going on, Darius was diverting the Euphrates River from its regular course and channel, thereby emptying the riverbed that flowed beneath the walls of the city. Once the water was gone, the Medo-Persian army flooded right into the city. But rather than wiping out the population, the army went directly to the palace of the king, where they beat back the palace guard, forced their way into the banqueting hall, and killed the ones there.

D. L. Moody explains it like this: “It was King Belshazzar’s last night. One short chapter gives us all we know of that young monarch. His life was short. The wicked do not live out half their days. An impious young man, he had neglected or forgotten the holy Daniel; he had set aside his [grandfather’s] counselor and friend; he had turned away from the best adviser and most faithful servant

that Nebuchadnezzar had ever had – the one who probably had done more than anyone else to build up and consolidate his kingdom. But this was his end.”⁴

But the warning goes out to each one of us as well. Arrogance will lead us to destruction. Ignorance of the power of our Almighty God brings condemnation to all who try to usurp His power and authority. Incompetence in leading others brings ruin and desolation.

It is the warning that cardiothoracic surgeon, Dr. Mehmet Oz, gives in his statement about the arrogance we see in our society today. He says, “As a surgeon you have to have a controlled arrogance. If it’s uncontrolled, you kill people, but you have to be pretty arrogant to saw through a person’s chest, take out their heart and believe you can fix it. Then, when you succeed and the patient survives, you pray, because it’s only by the grace of God that you get there.”

The same is true for us. Uncontrolled arrogance puffs us up bigger than life and we end up killing ourselves or others. Unless we acknowledge and submit ourselves to the Lord God Almighty, in all our ways, unless we repent of our attitude of thinking we know better than God, unless we humble ourselves to the commands of the Word of God found in the Bible, we are lost forever. And then we have only one end result – Death and Hell! When we thumb our noses at God, when we mock Him and belittle His commands we pay the ultimate price – eternal destruction.

God did not give Belshazzar another opportunity to repent from his arrogance. Death came to him that very night! It can happen to each one of us, for we do not know the day or the hour of our last breath. But what we do know is that at this very moment we have the chance to humble ourselves before the Almighty God, the One who Was, and Is, and Is to Come. We have the chance right now to repent of our sinful ways, to give up on our rebellion against God, and instead, turn to Him. We have the chance to confess our sin before the cross of Jesus Christ so that as we acknowledge His sacrifice for our sin, we might find forgiveness through His mighty grace. We have the chance to turn from our wicked ways and return to the Lord our God, so that He might bring His mercy over us and guard us and

⁴ (D. L. Moody, *Daniel, Man of God*, pg. 48)

protect us and grant us long life in service to Him. We have the chance to be redeemed from everything false in our lives so that we might be allowed to stand before the Holy, Perfect God of the universe and rejoice in His presence with us.

This day we celebrate the Sacrament of Communion, remembering Jesus' work to free us from the sin that condemns us to death. Hear the words of the Apostle Paul, "...on the night He was betrayed, took a piece of bread, gave thanks to God, broke it, and said, 'This is My body, which is for you. Do this in memory of Me.' In the same way, after the supper He took the cup and said, 'This cup is God's new covenant, sealed with My blood. Whenever you drink it, do so in memory of Me.' This means that every time you eat this bread and drink from this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. It follows that if anyone eats the Lord's bread or drinks from His cup in a way that dishonors Him, he is guilty of sin against the Lord's body and blood. So then, everyone should examine himself first, and then eat the bread and drink from the cup. For if he does not recognize the meaning of the Lord's body when he eats the bread and drinks from the cup, he brings judgment on himself as he eats and drinks. That is why many of you are sick and weak, and several have died. If we would examine ourselves first, we would not come under God's judgment. But we are judged and punished by the Lord, so that we shall not be condemned together with the world" (I Corinthians 11:23-32).

The season of Lent is for us to evaluate ourselves, to see if we have anything in us that would separate us from the Lord or from one another. As you take this bread to remember Jesus' body broken for us for the forgiveness of our sins, let Him have all the sin within you, so that you might be clean. (Eat the bread together.) As you drink this cup, remember the blood of Jesus was shed onto the earth for the payment of your sin, so that you might stand before God, redeemed and restored in His image. (Drink the cup together.) Let's pray: Father, we are so prone to arrogance and ignorance and incompetence. We so easily dismiss You from our life, at our own expense. Forgive us, Father. Remove our sin today, and make us into brand new creatures in Christ, for Your glory, and for Your service. This we pray in Jesus' precious and Holy Name. AMEN.