

The Writing's On the Wall

Daniel: When Kingdoms Collide

Daniel 5:1-31

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Good morning church family. Today we will be exploring Daniel 5. Over the last five weeks we've been reading the book of Daniel together. Daniel is a book that gives us tales and visions from a group of Israelites who were exiled from their home, but more than that it gives us a window into what happens when the kingdoms of man and kingdom of God collide. It's a collision we experience even today. And so, the story of Daniel is an appeal for us to perceive and act in the world in a particular way.

Our story started in chapter 1 when we were introduced to the kingdom of Babylon and its great king, Nebuchadnezzar, as God gave Judah into his hands. So far our narrative has been under that reign, and last week we heard from Nebuchadnezzar for the last time. It was a story of transformation, as one of the mightiest rulers ever to live was shown his pride and humbled to know the God who reigns over the kingdoms of man.

And he didn't keep this transformation to himself, but told the known world. He sent it to you and to me.

So the big question as we move to chapter 5 is: Did it have any impact?

What about in your life? Did the story of Nebuchadnezzar's humbling have an impact on you? Did you come to know that God reigns and thus humble yourself before him this last week?

In Daniel's narrative we expect the next chapter to showcase this dramatic turning of the pagans to humble themselves before the God who humbled their king. That this country, Babylon, would finally get going in the right direction.

Yet the truth we are confronted with is quite the opposite. Rather than humbling themselves before God they end up worse than before. They didn't learn and now in chapter 5 we hear of their end.

The message of chapter 5 to us is simple, though terribly difficult. Chapter 5 implores us to learn from the past and humble ourselves before God, or risk no future.

And this appeal may just be one of the most important chapters for us and our spiritual growth. Because we are much more like the character of our chapter today, Belshazzar, than we are like Nebuchadnezzar. Neb was larger than life and one who saw and experienced all these dramatic works of God, while Belshazzar is one who only heard about what God has done.

Have you ever said, God, if you would just give me a sign to let me know you're real? If you would just speak to me.

If you can relate, then this chapter is for you.

So this morning is going to be very simple. We will first work through the story of the writing on the wall and then reflect together on how we might respond.

THE STORY

From Daniel 4 to Daniel 5 we jump forward in time by at least a couple decades. Nebuchadnezzar is gone, several other kings have come and gone, Daniel is practically an old man, and now Belshazzar sits on the throne.

Historically there has been a lot of confusion about Belshazzar. Scholars would point to Daniel 5 as a reason not to trust Scripture, since there was no outside source that mentioned Belshazzar's rule. Then in the late nineteenth century several cuneiform pieces were discovered that mentioned Belshazzar as the oldest son of Nabonidus. It also mentions how Belshazzar held the throne while his father was away from the kingdom for over ten years.

I mention this as an aside that we might have confidence in the history of the Bible. Our Scriptures are incredibly historical, and if external historical sources don't corroborate them, then it probably means we just haven't uncovered the right text yet, or that there is some issue with the external source rather than Scripture.

So then, Belshazzar is on the throne and chapter 5 tells us he is throwing a party. Yet, it's a party at a strange time.

At this time the Medo-Persian army had made its way to Babylon and had laid siege to the city. Surrounding it until they surrendered or starved.

However, Babylon was seemingly impregnable. The walls were massive. There was a river that flowed under the walls and through the city. There were stores of supplies as well as land within the walls for crops and livestock.

They could outlast any army.

In fact, the ancient historian Herodotus says the Babylonians mocked the siege down below because they were so confident in the strength of their city.

So now this party takes on new meaning. For this lavish feast is really a visual act of defiance in the face of this impending threat. It's a testament to their lack of fear and supreme pride in their own security.

Belshazzar gathers a thousand of his lords and drinks wine in front of them. The head of the party. Then we hear:

Daniel 5:2-4¹

²Belshazzar, 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. ³Then 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. ⁴They drank wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone.

Belshazzar, in the middle of his drunken rager, has a thought; he commands the vessels of the Jerusalem temple to be brought out. We first heard of these vessels in chapter 1 and they play an

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

important role as we'll see because this party isn't just an act of defiance to the Persian army, but also against the Most High God.

At this point a very strange thing happens:

Daniel 5:5-6

⁵Immediately 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. ⁶Then the king's color changed, and his thoughts alarmed him; his limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together.

Nothing crashes a party like a disembodied hand showing up. This apparition unravels Belshazzar from head to toe. He goes pale. His "limbs gave way." Which literally means something like his bowels were loosened. That's right, he had the poop scared out him.

And so again the king of Babylon needs help deciphering a message. He shouts for his wise men, though none of them are able to read and interpret the writing, and Belshazzar ends up in an even worse state.

Enter the queen. She arrives and says:

Daniel 5:10-12

¹⁰"O king, live forever! Let not your thoughts alarm you or your color change. ¹¹There 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, ¹²because 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."

Notice the similarities in these two men's Babylonian names: Belshazzar vs. Belteshazzar. They mean virtually the same thing, "may Marduk protect the king." In our narrative Belshazzar chooses to call Daniel by his Hebrew name rather than risk the similarity. Little does he know that Daniel, which means "God is my judge," is the very thing that is about to happen. Belshazzar addresses Daniel:

Daniel 5:13-14

¹³"You are that Daniel, one of the exiles of Judah, whom the king my father brought from Judah. ¹⁴I 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."

Belshazzar treats Daniel the same way he treats the vessels—with disdain. What was once important to Nebuchadnezzar is no longer important to him. He belittles Daniel by reminding him he is just a Judean slave boy.

He then tells Daniel that if he can read and interpret the writing he would be greatly rewarded; his status elevated to third in the kingdom—right below himself.

Daniel won't accept rewards from this wicked king, though he does agree to read and interpret the writing. But first he is going to give a history lesson.

You know that older uncle or grandfather you have? When you ask a simple question, like, "Are you going to the family reunion this year?" and they don't answer you until they've spent an hour telling you the whole history of the family?

That's the image I have in my head when I hear his response. Wise old Daniel telling a story before he gets to the answer. And yet this is crucial for us because it gives the point of this whole narrative. Before Belshazzar can know the interpretation he has to know why. Look with me starting in verse 18:

Daniel 5:18-23

¹⁸ *“O king, the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father kingship and greatness and glory and majesty.*

¹⁹ *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.”*

Let me pause for a second. The implication in this is to show how great Nebuchadnezzar really was, and thus how miniscule Belshazzar is in comparison. Nebuchadnezzar did as he pleased but you're trapped in your city. At the same time Daniel stresses that Neb's greatness wasn't his own, but given to him by God. He continues:

²⁰ *“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. ²¹He 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.”*

Neb was humbled, and in his humility he knew the Most High God rules. This was our big idea from last week. Then comes the main indictment:

²² *“And you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this, ²³but 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.”*

Daniel says, you should have known better. You should have learned from the past—from Nebuchadnezzar—that God rules the kingdoms of man and gives it to whom he will. You should have learned that your right response is to humble yourself before this God. Whereas Nebuchadnezzar was ignorant of me, you are not. Nebuchadnezzar was proud but you are blasphemously self-exalting. Rather than humbling yourself, bringing yourself under my rule, you raised yourself up against the Lord of heaven by defiling the vessels. Though God holds your very breath you have treated him worse than lifeless gods.

You see, it wasn't on a whim that Belshazzar took those vessels. He knew the stories of Nebuchadnezzar, the great ruler. He knew of the proclamation we read in chapter 4. But rather than learn from it and humble himself, he rejected it. He said in his heart, I'm not like him. In fact, I'm greater. I'm safe and secure. Nothing can touch me. This God Neb worshiped isn't real or a threat, any more than the surrounding Persians are a threat.

He rejected this God so emphatically he publicly denounced the Most High God by taking these sacred things of God and using them to worship idols.

And so in a stroke of irony, the vessels which marked God giving the kingdom into Babylon's hand in chapter one, now signal Babylon's end. An indictment against their unwillingness to humble themselves and the pride that now condemns them.

The blasphemy of Belshazzar is not just a story about an individual, but Belshazzar represents the whole nation of Babylon. The epitome of man and the kingdoms of man.

And so this hand of God that holds his life now declares his judgment on him and the nation. The writing is on the wall. Judgment is swift. Daniel continues:

Daniel 5:24-28

²⁴“Then from his presence the hand was sent, and this writing was inscribed. ²⁵And this is the writing that was inscribed: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, and PARSIN. ²⁶This is the interpretation of the matter: MENE, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; ²⁷TEKEL, you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting; ²⁸PERES, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.”

These three words declare God's sentencing of Belshazzar and his kingdom. Since he did not learn that God rules the kingdoms of men, but instead lifted his heart against God, God will now take it all away from him, even his very life.

Of course Belshazzar responds like we all often do. He tries to buy his way out. But the writing on the wall had become like the writing of a tombstone for Belshazzar, the final words about him. And so our chapter ends:

Daniel 5:30-31

³⁰“That very night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was killed. ³¹And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old.”

OUR RESPONSE:

Now, if you are an Israelite listening to this story your first response is laughter. Probably not what you expected. But Belshazzar is portrayed as the ultimate foolish king. The once great Babylon—prototype for the kingdom of man—reduced to a circus with a clown for a ruler. It reminds us that the kingdoms of man are no match for the kingdom of God; and eventually they all will fall.

But after you stop laughing, a deeper message starts to sink in and you begin to wonder if you're all that different. Because only a fool would look at this story and say, Thank goodness I'm nothing like that guy. In chapter 9 we find a prayer of Daniel made less than one year from the fall of Babylon. In it Daniel repents for Israel's rebellion against God. He repents that they didn't listen and heed the words of those who came before them.

You see, the lesson of this chapter sets a backdrop for chapter 9. It's a warning for God's people and a lesson for us today: Learn from the past and humble yourself before God, or risk having no future.

For those of us who've put our faith in Christ this warning sounds harsh, but the New Testament itself is full of warnings, even for Christians, not to fall into past ways of sin. So, lest we treat our salvation like the walls of Babylon—something that keeps us secure so that we can do whatever we want—we should feel the weight of this warning and be challenged to continue in learning to humble ourselves before God and his rule each day.

What should we learn?

Now you might ask what exactly are we supposed to learn from the past? Because the takeaway is not some general aphorism like “those who forget the past are bound to repeat it.”

No, we are supposed to learn specifically in order to know God more fully. And Belshazzar was meant to learn particularly that God rules the kingdoms of men and gives it to whom he will.

Isn't it fascinating that the writing on the wall essentially declares what he was meant to learn in the first place? It's not just a sentencing, but also the accusation. The fact that the kingdom is passing from him, for God gives it to whom he will. His days are numbered, for the hand of God holds his breath. And most supremely, he doesn't measure up; which sounds very much like Neb's earlier praise to God when he says “all the inhabitants of earth are accounted as nothing” (4:35).

The real indictment against Belshazzar isn't that he wasn't moral enough, mighty enough, wealthy enough. The real indictment is that he never recognized he would never measure up to God in the first place.

Belshazzar is a man living in the shadow of the great Nebuchadnezzar. Never quite measuring up. He's a man chasing significance and fame. For himself and his nation. And he'll go to any lengths to get it.

And I have to imagine many of us are caught in the same cycle. Pursuing significance in all the wrong places. Trying to be strong enough or moral enough. Trying to measure up to our friends, family, coworkers. Trying to be the life of the party. Trying to build an empire.

But he should have learned from Nebuchadnezzar. You could have all your heart's desire but you will still never measure up to God.

Our worth is not found in measuring up; it's found in the one we humble ourselves before. Because in the sight of God we will never measure up; but at the same time we are of infinite worth.

What keeps us from learning?

It is hard to learn this message from the past. For us it's often because we don't listen to the past.

This passage calls us to know Scripture. For God has given us all we need. This passage encourages us to learn from others. To learn from the stories of those who've gone before us. For parents to instruct kids and tell them about their walk with God.

But Belshazzar's problem isn't that he didn't know; rather that he rejected what he knew. And in this blatant rejection we see what so often keeps us from learning.

After Nebuchadnezzar's letter you expect the country to worship God. But that's not the case. For man and the kingdoms of man are enticed not just for significance but to assert themselves over God, to use the good things God gives for our own ends, our own glory. This is the very nature of sin and pride that keeps us from learning.

In chapter 1 God gives the vessels into Babylon's hands as a recognition of giving them power and authority. And by chapter 5 Belshazzar is using the holy vessels to publicly assert his own power over God.

Our blasphemies and sacrilege are typically much subtler than Belshazzar's, but the same sin pulls us to take God's good gifts and use them for our own worship. Whether that is the worship of ourselves or the worship of other things.

What are the vessels in our day that we use for unholy means? What are things set apart for God's use that we defame? What about our bodies, vessels of the Holy Spirit, used for our own means? Or just how do we bend Scripture or Christianity as a way to gain power over individuals, in our vocations, or the political arena?

The trajectory of chapters 1-5 show how humanity and the kingdoms of man so often lift themselves up over the God who gave them authority in the first place.

What happens when we don't learn?

When we don't learn judgment comes. For kings, kingdoms, and everyone in between.

Judgment is not a popular topic, but it is a reality. The fact that God will judge those who lift their hearts against him is a relief to the oppressed. It reminds us that God is just and that evil will not have the final say.

And as believers, we should approach judgment with sobering realism. Judgment is not just something out there, for someone else, but it is meant for us as well. We know that we will never measure up, and we cast our faith and our hope on the only one who can measure up.

This is the good news for us. If you are here and you've yet to trust this God, then today is the day. If you are tired of constantly trying to measure up and find significance in life, then our passage today invites you to come before a different king. A king who does measure up. As Romans 8 tells us, this king, Jesus, is the one who fulfills the righteous requirement of the law on our behalf.

And when we learn to give up trying to measure up and stop glorifying ourselves, we can then humble ourselves before him and know his salvation. For he is the only one where true security can be found. He is the only one who will never leave us or forsake us. He is the only one who can save us from the judgment due our sin.

As we conclude this morning, I want us to consider for a second what would happen if we learned from the past and humbled ourselves before God. What would change in us and around us? You see we don't just learn from the past, but we leave a past behind that others learn from as well.

Belshazzar had four final words written about him. What will yours be? What lesson will you leave for others to learn? Will it be a negative lesson of pride and sin or a story of humility for others to emulate?

Because if you learn from the past and humble yourself you have the possibility of showing others a different future. One where the kingdom of man crumbles and a new creation has come.

Prayer:

Lord, we know that it is hard to learn from the past and humble ourselves. May this story of Belshazzar and Babylon instruct us. That we would see the folly of the ways of our world and the peril it leads to. Would we find freedom in knowing we will never measure up; and grace in knowing our eternal worth in your sight. In Christ I pray. Amen.