

***1 Daniel 5 The Hand Writing On The Wall**

A premonition, portent, or clear indication, especially of failure or disaster; used by numerous authors in history. (Dickens's *Hard Times* and Stevenson's "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" An ominous moment when a person knows that judgment from God is coming.

***2 Daniel 5** ¹ Many years later King Belshazzar gave a great feast for 1,000 of his nobles, and he drank wine with them.

***2a** “In the ruins of Nebuchadnezzar’s palace archeologists have uncovered a large throne room 56 feet wide and 173 feet long which probably was the scene of this banquet (could hold 1000). Midway in the long wall opposite the entrance there was a niche in front of which the king may well have been seated. Interestingly, the wall behind the niche was covered with white plaster as described by Daniel, which would make an excellent background for such a writing.” Walvoord, p. 120. Cf. Montgomery, p. 253; Kraeling, p. 327.

***3** Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 B.C. after ruling 43 years. The ensuing years of Babylonian history till its overthrow by Cyrus in 539 B.C. were marked by progressive deterioration, intrigue, and murder. Nebuchadnezzar was succeeded by his son Evil-Merodach who ruled for two years (562–560 B.C., 2 Kings 25:27–30; Jer. 52:31–34). Evil-Merodach was murdered in August 560 by Neriglissar, Nebuchadnezzar’s son-in-law and Evil-Merodach’s own brother-in-law. Neriglissar then ruled four years (560–556 B.C.). He is the Nergal-Sharezer mentioned in Jeremiah 39:3, 13. At his death, he was succeeded by his young son Labashi-Marduk, who ruled only two months (May and June 556) before he was assassinated and succeeded by Nabonidus, who reigned 17 years (556–539 B.C.). See the chart “Kings of the Neo-Babylonian Empire,” in the *Introduction*.¹

“The last actual Chaldean king, Nabonidus, ‘entrusted the kingship’ in 539 B.C. to his son Bel-sar-usur during his ten-year absence from Babylon, returning as the threat from Cyrus grew.” Goldingay, p. 106. See also N. W. Porteous, *Daniel: A Commentary*, p. 76; Young, pp. 115–19; Keil, pp. 162–79; Leupold, pp. 208–13; Whitcomb, pp. 70–72.²

***4** Belshazzar hosted this banquet on the night the city of Babylon fell. **The invading Medes and Persians, led by Ugbaru, commander of the Persian army, would have already taken the surrounding countryside, and everyone in the city would have known of their intentions.** However, Babylon had not fallen to an invading army for 1000 years because of its strong fortifications. According to the ancient Greek historian Herodotus, Babylon was about 14 miles square with a double wall system enclosing a moat between the two walls. The outer wall was 87

¹ J. Dwight Pentecost, “[Daniel](#),” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 1344.

² Tom Constable, [Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible](#) (Galaxie Software, 2003).

feet thick, wide enough for four chariots to drive abreast on. It was 350 feet high with 100 gates, plus hundreds more towers reaching another 100 feet above the walls.

What a picture of our world today: judgment is about to fall, yet people are making merry and worshiping their false gods. “When they say, ‘Peace and safety!’ then sudden destruction comes upon them”.³

***4a 1 Thessalonians 5:1-3 (NIV84)** ¹ Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, ² for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³ While people are saying, “Peace and safety,” destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

***5 Daniel 5** ² While Belshazzar was drinking the wine, he gave orders to bring in the gold and silver cups that his predecessor (lit. father), Nebuchadnezzar, had taken from the Temple in Jerusalem. He wanted to drink from them with his nobles, his wives, and his concubines. ³ So they brought these gold cups taken from the Temple, the house of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his nobles, his wives, and his concubines drank from them.

***5a** [“Father”: Nebuchadnezzar was Belshazzar’s grandfather rather than his father, but the original language commonly used “father” in the sense of ancestor. “Neither in Hebrew, nor in Chaldee, is there any word for ‘grandfather,’ ‘grandson.’ Forefathers are called ‘fathers’ or ‘fathers’ fathers.’ But a single grandfather, or forefather, is never called ‘father’s father’ but always ‘father’ only.” E. B. Pusey, *Daniel the Prophet*]

The banquet itself showed Belshazzar’s contempt for the power of men. Then, to show his contempt for the power of the true **God**, he ordered that **the gold and silver goblets that Nebuchadnezzar ... had taken from the temple in Jerusalem** (cf. 1:1–2) be brought to the banquet hall so the assembled revelers **might drink from them**. Walvoord

***6** Belshazzar “tasted the wine.” The text actually suggests a bit more than that. Driver paraphrases: “When Belshazzar began to feel the influence of the wine.” This suggests a degree of inebriation. [S.R. Driver, “Daniel” in *The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*]

Several kings in the OT suffered through indulging in wine and YaHWeH warned His kings of the dangers.

***6a Proverbs 31:4–7 (NLT)** ⁴ It is not for kings, O Lemuel, to guzzle wine. Rulers should not crave alcohol. ⁵ For if they drink, they may forget the law and not give justice to the oppressed.

***6b Ecclesiastes 10:17 (ESV)** ¹⁷ Happy are you, O land, when your king is the son of the nobility, and your princes feast at the proper time, for strength, and not for drunkenness!

³ Warren W. Wiersbe, [*Wiersbe’s Expository Outlines on the Old Testament*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1993), Da 5:1–4.

***7 Ephesians 5:18 (NLT)** ¹⁸ Don't be drunk with wine, because that will ruin your life (**debauchery, dissipation – disorganization and ruin**). . . Instead, be filled with the Holy Spirit,

***7a** John Trapp wrote of drinking “**all the three outs**” – “**that is, ale out of the pot, money out of the purse, and wit out of the head.**”

***8 Daniel 5** ⁴ **While they drank from them they praised their idols made of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone.** ⁵ Suddenly, they saw the fingers of a human hand writing on the plaster wall of the king's palace, near the lampstand. The king himself saw the hand as it wrote, ⁶ and his face turned pale with fright. His knees knocked together in fear and his legs gave way beneath him.

***9 As the text unfolds, it becomes clear that this was a religious feast.** The disastrous defeat of Babylon's armies at Opis and the consequent unimpeded advance of Cyrus against the capital convinced the king that the gods of the realm were offended. Belshazzar was calling for a pagan revival. He wanted his people to placate the offended gods of the realm, especially the god Marduk. The drunken king gave orders for the Temple vessels which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from Jerusalem to be brought to the banquet hall. Belshazzar and his nobles and their consorts wished to drink wine from those vessels. **The king's intention here was to please his own gods by insulting the God of Israel.** James Smith ⁴

***9a Isaiah 42:8 (ESV)** ⁸ I am YahWeH; that is My name; My glory I give to no other, nor My praise to carved idols.

Like King Herod in Acts: **Acts 12:22–23 (ESV)** ²² And the people were shouting, “The voice of a god, and not of a man!” ²³ Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, **because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last.**

***10 Daniel 5** ⁷ The king shouted for the enchanters, astrologers, and fortune-tellers to be brought before him. He said to these wise men of Babylon, “Whoever can read this writing and tell me what it means will be dressed in purple robes of royal honor and will have a gold chain placed around his neck. **He will become the third highest ruler (Behind Nabonidus & Belshazzar) in the kingdom!**” ⁸ But when all the king's wise men had come in, none of them could read the writing or tell him what it meant. ⁹ So the king grew even more alarmed, and his face turned pale. His nobles, too, were shaken.

***11 Daniel 5** ¹⁰ But when **the queen mother** (Nitocris – daughter of Nebuchadnezzar) heard what was happening, she hurried to the banquet hall. She said to Belshazzar, “Long live the king! Don't be so pale and frightened. ¹¹ There is a man in your kingdom who has within him the spirit of the holy gods. During Nebuchadnezzar's reign, this man was found to have insight,

⁴ James E. Smith, [*The Major Prophets*](#), Old Testament Survey Series (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1992), Da 5:1–4.

understanding, and wisdom like that of the gods. Your predecessor, the king—your predecessor King Nebuchadnezzar—made him chief over all the magicians, enchanters, astrologers, and fortune-tellers of Babylon.

She also spoke to the king more as a mother than as a wife. Moreover she spoke as one who had personal acquaintance with Daniel's earlier interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's second dream (cf. 4:8, 9, 18). Probably this woman was Belshazzar's mother and the daughter of Nebuchadnezzar. The queen mother was often a significant figure who exerted considerable influence in ancient courts (cf. 1 Kings 15:13; 2 Kings 11:1–3; 24:12; Jer. 13:18) The queen referred to Daniel by his Jewish name, thus showing respect for his faith and background. Arthur Jeffery, "The Book of Daniel, Introduction and Exegesis," in *The Interpreter's Bible*, 6:426., Gleason Archer

***12 Daniel 5** ¹² This man Daniel, whom the king named Belshazzar, has exceptional ability and is filled with divine knowledge and understanding. He can interpret dreams, explain riddles, and solve difficult problems. Call for Daniel, and he will tell you what the writing means." ¹³ So Daniel was brought in before the king. The king asked him, "Are you Daniel, one of the exiles brought from Judah by my predecessor, King Nebuchadnezzar? ¹⁴ I have heard that you have the spirit of the gods within you and that you are filled with insight, understanding, and wisdom. ¹⁵ My wise men and enchanters have tried to read the words on the wall and tell me their meaning, but they cannot do it.

Clearly Belshazzar did not know Daniel personally. Perhaps Daniel had left public service. Tom Constable

***13 Daniel 5** ¹⁶ I am told that you can give interpretations and solve difficult problems. If you can read these words and tell me their meaning, you will be clothed in purple robes of royal honor, and you will have a gold chain placed around your neck. You will become the third highest ruler in the kingdom." ¹⁷ Daniel answered the king, **"Keep your gifts or give them to someone else, but I will tell you what the writing means."**

Daniel wasn't for sale when He was young and he certainly isn't for sale after walking with the Lord for all those years. We will see his commitment in chapter 6. Besides that he knew that the Babylonian stock market was going to crash the next day! ☺

***Interesting thing happen when I was a young believer, my heart was set on ministry in our church and I made a statement one day to Juanita: "I'm going to serve the Lord here, this is where He wants me, even if someone calls me and offers me \$500 a week! (back then that was like \$2000 a week now!) The next day I got a call from a less that reputable friend from the past who offered me \$500 a week to move to Idaho! Satan has a way of seeking to buy us with the pleasures, security and power this world has to offer – but I happen to know that the world and what it has to offer is passing away!

But really, how can we have such boldness and ability to speak the truth in the face of the world? The truth is that Daniel had served the Lord for 60-70 years – he was faithful in his prayer life. When you’ve been with Jesus and you know He is with you – you are bold like Peter and John in Acts 4 **Acts 4:13 (ESV)** ¹³ Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. **And they recognized that they had been with Jesus.**

These men were also full of God’s Holy Spirit guiding them into all the truth – telling them what was to come, giving them power to speak, courage and boldness. Do you want to be like Daniel? Then ask the Lord to fill you with His Holy Spirit!

Daniel 5 ¹⁸ Your Majesty, the Most High God gave sovereignty, majesty, glory, and honor to your predecessor, Nebuchadnezzar. ¹⁹ He made him so great that people of all races and nations and languages trembled before him in fear. He killed those he wanted to kill and spared those he wanted to spare. He honored those he wanted to honor and disgraced those he wanted to disgrace.

***14 Daniel 5** ²⁰ **But when his heart and mind were puffed up with arrogance, he was brought down from his royal throne and stripped of his glory.** ²¹ He was driven from human society. He was given the mind of a wild animal, and he lived among the wild donkeys. He ate grass like a cow, and he was drenched with the dew of heaven, **until he learned that the Most High God rules over the kingdoms of the world and appoints anyone he desires to rule over them.** ²² **“You are his successor, O Belshazzar, and you knew all this, yet you have not humbled yourself.** ²³ **For you have proudly defied YaHWeH of heaven and have had these cups from His Temple brought before you.**

In other words “sir”, you didn’t learn from the mistakes of your grandfather (which has been very public, written down, it’s your family identity – the Halls just don’t do that!) and from the heavenly warnings in your life. You knew better, but you refused to humble yourself before God!

God is so gracious to warn us when we are getting off track, but you understand that there comes a time when you’ve gone too far and then you realize that there is “handwriting on the wall”. Suddenly, without warning; judgment comes for your lies, hiding your sin, you’ll be found out, God is going to expose you to public shame or in Belshazzar’s case earthly doom.

Think of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. **Acts 5:1–6 (ESV)** ¹ But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, ² and with his wife’s knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles’ feet. ³ But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? ⁴ While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this

deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God.”⁵ When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it.⁶ The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him.

***15** “One of the most amazing spectacles in this world is how little men really profit from the judgments of God.” Daniel Feinberg

Daniel 5 You and your nobles and your wives and concubines have been drinking wine from them while praising gods of silver, gold, bronze, iron, wood, and stone—gods that neither see nor hear nor know anything at all.

***15a** **But you have not honored the God who gives you the breath of life and controls your destiny!**²⁴ So God has sent this hand to write this message.

***15b** **Romans 1:18–22 (NASB95)**¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,¹⁹ **because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them.**²⁰ For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.²¹ **For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.**²² Professing to be wise, they became fools...

***16 Daniel 5**²⁵ “This is the message that was written: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, and PARSIN. [*numbered, numbered, weighed and divided - Chaldean*]²⁶ This is what these words mean: *Mene* means ‘numbered’—God has numbered the days of your reign and has brought it to an end.²⁷ *Tekel* means ‘weighed’—you have been weighed on the balances and have not measured up.²⁸ *Parsin* means ‘divided’—your kingdom has been divided and given to the Medes and Persians.”

This much seems clear. The words all referred to measures of weight. (Goldingay, pp. 110–11; Baldwin, pp.) Daniel interpreted the consonants by adding vowels, which are absent in Aramaic as in Hebrew, that made each word a passive participle. The Aramaic word “*mene*” means “mena,” or with different vowels, “numbered.” Daniel understood this word to signify that the number of years that God had prescribed for the Neo-Babylonian Empire had expired. Its repetition probably stressed the certainty of this point. “*Tekel*” (cognate with the Hebrew “shekel”) also means “weighed.” God had weighed Belshazzar and had found him deficient; he was not the ruler that he should have been because of his flagrant refusal to acknowledge the Most High God’s sovereignty (v. 22). “*Upharsin*” means “half” or “and *peres*.” “*Peres*” means “divided” and relates to the division of Belshazzar’s kingdom into two parts, one part for the Medes and the other for the Persians. However, “*paras*,” the same consonants with different vowels, means “Persia.” Persia was the dominant kingdom in the Medo-Persian alliance. Thus *prs* had a double meaning. Tom Constable

***17** God had Belshazzar's *number*, and it fell short. God *weighed* Belshazzar, and he came up light. God would therefore *divide* Belshazzar's kingdom to the Medes and the Persians. David Guzik

Belshazzar had been weighed and found wanting. God does that, and He uses His scale and His standards. He says to you and me, "... all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23).⁵

***17a** Psalm 14:2–3 (NIV84)² YaHWeH looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God.³ All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one. [Romans 3:23 (NIV84) for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.]

***18 Daniel 5**²⁹ Then at Belshazzar's command, Daniel was dressed in purple robes, a gold chain was hung around his neck, and he was proclaimed the third highest ruler in the kingdom.³⁰ **That very night Belshazzar, the Babylonian king, was killed.**

[³¹ **And Darius the Mede took over the kingdom at the age of sixty-two.** (Masoretic Manuscripts & Septuagint place this verse as the first verse of Chapter 6)]

***18a** The city had been under assault by Cyrus. In anticipation of a long siege the city had stored supplies to last for 20 years. The Euphrates River ran through the city from north to south, so the residents had an ample water supply. Belshazzar had a false sense of security, because the Persian army, led by Ugbaru, was outside Babylon's city walls.

***19** Their army was divided; part was stationed where the river entered the city at the north and the other part was positioned where the river exited from the city at the south. The army diverted the water north of the city by digging a canal from the river to a nearby lake.

With the water diverted, its level receded and the soldiers were able to enter the city by going under the sluice gate. Since the walls were unguarded the Persians, once inside the city, were able to conquer it without a fight. Significantly the defeat of Babylon fulfilled not only the prophecy Daniel made earlier that same night (5:28) but also a prophecy by Isaiah (Isa. 47:1–5). The overthrow of Babylon took place the night of the 16th of Tishri (October 12, 539 B.C.). (Herodotus recorded) John Walvoord

Isaiah had predicted the exact nature of the fall of Babylon and who would do it by name. Cyrus the Persian was the leader of the army – Ugbaru his subordinate.

***20 Isaiah 44:26 (NLT)**²⁶ But I carry out the predictions of my prophets! By them I say to Jerusalem, 'People will live here again,' and to the towns of Judah, 'You will be rebuilt; I will

⁵ J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible Commentary*, electronic ed., vol. 3 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 562.

restore all your ruins!’²⁷ When I speak to the rivers and say, ‘Dry up!’ they will be dry.²⁸ When I say of Cyrus, ‘He is my shepherd,’ he will certainly do as I say. He will command, ‘Rebuild Jerusalem’; he will say, ‘Restore the Temple.’ ”

***21 Isaiah 45**¹ This is what YaHWeH says to Cyrus, His anointed one, whose right hand He will empower. Before him, mighty kings will be paralyzed with fear. Their fortress gates will be opened, never to shut again.² This is what YaHWeH says: “I will go before you, Cyrus, and level the mountains. I will smash down gates of bronze and cut through bars of iron.³ And I will give you treasures hidden in the darkness— secret riches. I will do this so you may know that I am YaHWeH, the God of Israel, the one who calls you by name. ***22**⁴ “And why have I called you for this work? Why did I call you by name when you did not know Me? It is for the sake of Jacob my servant, Israel my chosen one.⁵ I am YaHWeH; there is no other God. I have equipped you for battle, though you don’t even know me,

***22a Jeremiah 51:36–37 (NLT)**³⁶ This is what YaHWeH says to Jerusalem: “I will be your lawyer to plead your case, and I will avenge you. **I will dry up her river, as well as her springs,**³⁷ and Babylon will become a heap of ruins, haunted by jackals. She will be an object of horror and contempt, a place where no one lives.

***23** The head of gold is gone from Nebuchadnezzar’s statue in his dream and now comes the age of the silver arms – the Medes and the Persians!

Several truths may be observed in this chapter.

First, as in all of the book, God’s sovereignty is emphasized. Belshazzar foolishly challenged Yahweh’s power, and he was no match for the living God. (God will not suffer any earthly created thing to take the glory due only to Him!)

Second, human beings may go so far in sin (in this case blasphemy) that they bring God’s temporal judgment upon themselves. God is a God of grace but He is not to be tempted. He has spoken and humans cannot cross the line He has set without there being handwriting on their walls!

Third, a lesson concerning God’s faithfulness and the trustworthiness of the Word of God may be discovered, for this chapter records the fulfillment of prophecies predicting the downfall of Babylon. God had kept his word. “Babylon has fallen, has fallen!” (Isa 21:9). Stephen Miller⁶

⁶ Stephen R. Miller, *Daniel*, vol. 18, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 169.