



The story of Belshazzar and the writing on the wall in Daniel 5 is a great example of the perspective Jesus criticizes when he says “woe to you who laugh now” (Luke 6:25). Belshazzar is throwing a great banquet for a thousand nobles, drinking heavily, and effectively declaring his own greatness. Highlighting his own gods and their power over the feeble gods of the conquered lands, he sends for the gold and silver goblets taken from the Temple in Jerusalem to drink from them.

As Belshazzar and the nobles gloat over the Lord and his people, a hand appears and writes something on the wall. The bodiless hand is disturbing enough, but they are unable to understand the meaning of the writing. They become notably agitated and Belshazzar offers great reward for the person who can decipher it, position as the third most powerful ruler in the kingdom.

Nobody is able to read the message on the wall until the queen recalls stories of Daniel and his divinely given wisdom for interpreting dreams and solving difficult problems. Daniel is summoned, and Belshazzar renews his promise of high position. Daniel cares little for the king's promised reward though, especially in light of the message's meaning. Instead of thanking the king for the offer, he lectures him, reminding him of his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar's experience with God. Nebuchadnezzar learned humility before the Lord, acknowledging “that the Most High God is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and sets over them anyone he wishes” (Dan. 5:21). Belshazzar on the other hand, does not “honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways” (5:23). Where Nebuchadnezzar had learned from his humbling experience with God, Belshazzar has taken his arrogance to a new level. A party to highlight his own greatness becomes an opportunity to laugh at and scorn the Lord.

The writing on the wall and Daniel's explanation are clear, Belshazzar and his nobles will be judged. God has found Belshazzar deficient as a ruler, his reign will quickly come to an end, and the kingdom will be given to the Medes and the Persians. Belshazzar's response is astounding under the circumstances. He recognizes the truthfulness of Daniel's interpretation, but he is unwilling to take it seriously. Daniel is clothed in purple and given authority as the third highest ruler in the kingdom, but Belshazzar no longer seems agitated by the significance of the message. He certainly doesn't repent. In fact, it appears that the party continues until the fulfillment of Daniel's warning as if he had only blessed Belshazzar's narcissism.

The result is clear: “That very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain, and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom” (5:31). Where Nebuchadnezzar had learned humility, Belshazzar has only scorn for God and avoids sin with drunkenness and entertainment to his own destruction. His laughter has become mourning.

### Discussion Questions

What has recently brought you sadness and grief? Which of these sorrows do you think grieved God's heart and which were merely the passing of temporary things?

How do we keep God at a distance by distracting ourselves with other things? How have you heard others scorn God, and what does it indicate about their spiritual condition?

How can our “happiness” in times of difficulty demonstrate our trust in God and encourage others who might otherwise be tempted to scorn God?