

The Writing on the Wall

Daniel 5

The phrase *the handwriting is on the wall* is a common saying today uttered by Christians and non-Christians. It is used to express that it's clear something bad will probably happen soon. For example, an employee might say, "I haven't lost my job yet, but the writing is on the wall; my company just laid off 10 more people today."

Now many may not realize it, but the expression, "the writing is on the wall" is actually derived from the Biblical text of Daniel 5:5. In the biblical and historical narrative of Daniel 5, the capital of Babylon was surrounded by the Persian army.

But although they were under siege and invasion was imminent, the Babylonian king Belshazzar decided he was going to have himself a party. His pride, lust for power and idolatry made him think he was invincible. It was at this time that a hand appeared and wrote on the wall of the king's palace a message that he would later learn was a pronouncement of his impending doom. And Daniel, who was a light in Babylon, was summoned to interpret the writing on the wall.

Main idea: Even when evil men rule, truth is suppressed and circumstances test our faith, God is in charge, judgment is coming and the gospel still saves.

This morning we'll examine Belshazzar's and Daniel's responses to the writing on the wall and the sovereignty of God behind it all and learn some lessons about shining brightly in our Babylon.

1. Belshazzar's Greed

Notice first of all **Belshazzar's greed** which was on full display while his kingdom was under siege. Beginning in verse 1 we read:

"King Belshazzar made a great feast for a thousand of his lords and drank wine in front of the thousand. ² Belshazzar, 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.³ Then 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. ⁴ They drank wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone” (Daniel 5:1-4).

We know from the end of the chapter that the night of Belsazzar’s drunken party he was killed and his kingdom was given to the Medo-Persian empire. Other ancient historical sources tell us that the Babylonia army lost a major battle near Sippar, which was approximately fifty miles from Babylon, just a couple of days before the final invasion.

It’s important to note that secular historians of the past pointed to Daniel’s account of the fall Belshazzar as evidence that the scriptures were unreliable. According to the archeological evidence they had at the time, historians believed that the final King of Babylon was a another man name Nabonidus. In fact, until a mid-ninetieth century discovery, no one knew that Belshazzar even existed let alone that he ruled in Babylon.

But in 1854 a team of archeologists found ancient Babylonian inscriptions in the desert of Iraq which revealed that Belshazzar in fact did reign as co-regent with his father Nabonidus. There’s also evidence that Belshazzar’s father was married to Neb’s daughter. (<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Belshazzar>).

The fact that archeological evidence reveals that Belshazzar reigned as co-regent with his father helps us to understand why Belshazzar gave Daniel the position of third ruler in the kingdom for interpreting the handwriting on the wall. He did so because his father Nebonidus was first in command, and his son Belshazzar, was second in command. How many of you know, we can trust the bible above secular historians and their evidence?

Historical records also indicate that Belshazzar's father, whose royal residence was outside the capital of Babylon, commanded the Babylonian army that was defeated just a couple days before the final raid of Babylon.

With all this in mind, Belshazzar should have known that the Persian army was knocking on the door. So, if that's the case, what's he doing throwing a *Taste of Babylon* feast with a thousand Babylonian officials? I want to submit to you that his enormous pride, his incredible prosperity and insatiable lust for pleasure gave him a false sense of invincibility and blinded him to his inevitable demise.

Remember, one of the wonders of Belshazzar's kingdom was the walls of Babylon. They were 56 miles long, 80 feet thick and 320 feet high. Behind those great walls of human ingenuity, Belshazzar's pride led him to believe that his kingdom was impregnable.

So, the great feast that he had was his way of displaying before his officials what he thought was his invincibility. But it also was a demonstration of what ruled his heart, namely his lust for power and his desire to please himself.

Notice also that after he drank the wine, which no doubt also fueled his insatiable lust, he commanded that the vessels, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple in Jerusalem, be brought to him so that he, his lords, and his many wives, and concubines might drink from them.

Concerning this debased feast, one bible teacher writes: "To call this event a party is kind. The word "orgy" is probably more appropriate. And it was quite the event, which adds to the irony and foolishness of the moment! This feast was "for a thousand of his nobles." Furthermore, he did something kings normally did not do: he "drank wine in their presence" (v.1). He set the example of drunkenness, sensuality, and revelry on this fateful night. He would be the life of the party, even as his own life would soon come to an abrupt end. What a fool Belshazzar was!" Daniel Akin

Now this feast that Belshazzar made not only demonstrated the foolishness of his pride and the lust in his heart, but it's also possible that it was a way of escaping reality. I know of respectable Christians that may have a glass of wine or two with their dinner without impairing their judgment. But I've also known many more people that won't stop at a glass of wine or two and drink until they're impaired.

Do you know, since the pandemic, the sale of alcoholic beverages has increased exponentially? Why? I'm sure there's more than one reason for the increase, but how many of you know that many today consume alcohol and use drugs to escape reality. But then they wake up from their drunken stupor only to find that they made their reality worse and they go right back to the alcohol again.

Do you know, sometimes God uses a reality check to wake us up to eternal realities and the things that matter most. When the realities of this life shake us up we can find that His grace is enough, if we look to Him to be our refuge, and not a worldly way of escape.

But Belshazzar's foolish pride didn't end with losing himself in a drunken feast. In his pride, he took the vessels used in the service of the temple of God and used them to not only pleasure himself, but to worship his false gods together with his officials, trophy wives and sex slaves.

As Paul explained in Romans 1:18-28, when we fail to give glory to God, we will take the things that God has given for our good and to serve him and used them to serve our idolatrous hearts. But when we try to find in something or somebody what we can only find in God, which is idolatry, we will be ruled by our feelings and desires. We will do that which is contrary to nature. And when our feelings and desires rule us rather than God in whom true contentment is found, there's no limit to how perverse we can become in order to feed our insatiable appetites.

Now at the very moment when in their sin they are out of touch with reality and in their pride use the vessels of God to praise their own

gods, the Most High delivers a prophetic warning to Belshazzar. Beginning in verse 5 we read:

“Immediately 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. ⁶ Then the king's color changed, and his thoughts alarmed him; his limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together. ⁷ The king called loudly to bring in the enchanters, the Chaldeans, and the astrologers. The king declared to the wise men of Babylon, “Whoever reads this writing, and shows me its interpretation, shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around his neck and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom” (Daniel 5:5-7).

As we begin to unpack what the handwriting on the wall was all about, keep in mind that Daniel wrote this account not for Belshazzar. Belshazzar was long dead when the book of Daniel was written. He wrote the book to both encourage and warn the people of God in their captivity. The writing on the wall was not only meant to wake up Belshazzar, but Daniel's written account of that moment in history was meant to wake up the people of God in Daniel's day and in every age.

God is patient. But we must never mistake His patience for his permission. Judgment is coming upon all who spurn God's grace, suppress the truth and remain in unrepentant sin.

The hand that immediately appeared and wrote on the wall in Belshazzar's day, surely woke him up and got his attention. But to what extent. One commentator wrote: “I'm sure Belshazzar set the record for the shortest time it has ever taken for a drunk to sober up! Ligon Duncan says, From verse 5-7 this man goes from a break with reality to a check with reality. Suddenly, Belshazzar is yanked into the reality of the seriousness of the moment.” Daniel Akin

But now, although the writing on the wall sobered up Belshazzar to a certain extent, what was his reaction? He was terrified and he should have been. And as his knees were knocking, he also yells out *to bring in the enchanters, the Chaldeans, and the astrologers.* And in

desperation, he offers the position of third ruler in the kingdom, which is surrounded by the Persian army, to whoever could read the writing on the wall.

But these so-called “wise men” in the Babylonian kingdom, proved once again that they had nothing to offer when it came to the kind of answers that Belshazzar needed. Sadly, many today, including professing Christians, are turning to so called Christian therapists, who deny the sufficiency of the scriptures and use worldly and mystical systems, like the Enneagram, to help them find themselves and or God.

Belshazzar’s wise men could do nothing for him (v.9). But there was a man in his kingdom who could give him the answers that he needed.

This bring us to the second point in the message, namely Daniel’s Grit.

2. Daniel’s Grit

After it was clear that the king’s wise men could not read the writing on the wall and bring calm to the king (v.8-9), we read: “*The queen, because of the words of the king and his lords, came into the banqueting hall, and the queen declared, “O king, live forever! Let not your thoughts alarm you or your color change.¹¹ There 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,¹² because 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” (Daniel 5:10-12).*

As we read, Belshazzar, who was shaking in his boots, needed answers. And all the wise men of his kingdom that were brought to

him could not provide the answer that he needed. They could not read the writing on the wall.

But because of Daniel's reputation and how he had supernaturally interpreted king Nebuchadnezzar's dreams in the past, the queen appeals to Belshazzar to call for him. She knew that Daniel had the "light" that Belshazzar needed.

It's important to note that between the events of Daniel 4, which records Daniel's dealing with Nebuchadnezzar and the events of chapter five, more than twenty years have passed. And yet in the darkness of Babylon there was still a light that people, who were searching for divine answers, could turn to.

In the New Testament, after John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus, was arrested, Jesus said of him: *"the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned"* (Matthew 4:16).

Are we shining brightly for Christ? In this Babylonian society that we live in, if your light is shining, some in your circle of influence will despise you for it as they did Daniel. But when you stay faithful to God, others will be drawn to the light. And sometimes those who rejected the light before, when they get to a place where they realize this world doesn't have the answers to their deepest needs, they will call on you to give them a reason for the hope that is in you.

The king, who thought he was invincible, suddenly woke up to the reality that he was not in control—that he needed answers that were not found in horoscopes or human wisdom. So finally he does a wise thing; he listens to the queen and calls for Daniel who had the grit and the grace to read the writing on the wall and tell the king what he needed to hear. Beginning in verse 13 we read:

"Then Daniel was brought in before the king. The king answered and said to Daniel, "You are that Daniel, one of the exiles of Judah, whom the king my father brought from Judah. ¹⁴ I 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. ¹⁵ Now the wise men, the enchanters, have been brought in before me to read this writing and make known to me its interpretation, but they could not show the interpretation of the matter. ¹⁶ But I have heard that you can give interpretations and solve problems. Now if you can read the writing and make known to me its interpretation, you shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around your neck and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom.” ¹⁷ Then Daniel answered and said before the king, “Let your gifts be for yourself, and give your rewards to another. Nevertheless, I will read the writing to the king and make known to him the interpretation” (Daniel 5:13-17).

Notice that Daniel didn't need any reassurances or rewards from the king in order to read the writing to the king. Daniel was prepared to give king Belshazzar the interpretation because God was his reward.

As we will see in a later message, Daniel knew that He was greatly loved by God (Daniel 10:11). He was a man that talked to God and God talked to Him. He didn't look to the world to escape the hard realities of life. Rather he looked to God and found refuge in knowing that the most high rules in the kingdoms of men. He knew God was in charge, even when circumstances appeared to say otherwise, and he trusted in God's plan for Him and His people in exile.

Daniel knew that although His people forsook the Lord, God loved them enough to break them in order to save them—to humble them so that they might receive His grace. And because Daniel knew the greatness of God, he had the grace and the grit to tell people what they needed to hear not just what they wanted to hear.

How many of you know, in our nation as a whole and in the lives of many that we know, the writing is on the wall. Judgement is not only coming, judgement is all ready falling. The increased lawlessness and violence that we see in our country in and outside the womb, the mass shootings, the prideful parading of sin is not only what will incur God's judgment but it's also the consequence of rejecting the God of the Bible and suppressing the truth.

And although God ordained family, civil government and other authorities to restrain evil, only the regeneration of the Holy Spirit that comes when we trust the saving work of Christ can change the human heart that is bent to do evil.

Do you know, the worse thing that can happen to man is for God to leave us to ourselves and cease to shine His light in our hearts and in our world. We will self destruct.

The only hope for any nation and people that have rejected God—who have become lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God, is to see the writing on the wall, humble themselves in repentance and receive the salvation that's only found in Jesus.

There are people in our lives who may get shaken up by the realities of life and call for us to give them an answer. But we are also called to go to people and help them to see the writing on the wall and tell them that unless they turn to Christ, soon their souls will be required of them.

As important as it is to build relationships with people that don't know Christ, we can't stop there. The saying, *preach the gospel and if necessary use words*, is unbiblical. Yes, we need to **show** people the love of Jesus, but we must also with grace and grit **tell** them about the love of Jesus and the judgment that He bore on the cross so that they can escape the judgement that will surely come. The gospel is good news, but it's not good news until people understand that it's the bad news that makes the good news good.

Let me ask you, what is the greatest hindrance to sharing the gospel with the lost which necessitates reading the writing on the wall? Is it that we don't have relationships with the unsaved? How many of us have relationships with people we've never shared the gospel with? The absence of relationship may be an issue but it's not the issue. What hinders most Christians from sharing the gospel is that we fear man more than God.

In his book, *Evangelism as Exiles*, Elliot Clark, who was a missionary in a Muslim country, wrote, “We withhold the truth for the sake of acceptance. We polish our social media persona to remove the rough edges of religiosity. And we nurture relationships with unbelievers for years without broaching the subject of Christ. Why? To please people. In our twisted understanding, we reason such people-pleasing efforts are for the sake of future gospel opportunities. But in reality, we’re often just fearing others instead of God.”

What enables a Christian to overcome the fear of man so that they might be a faithful witness for Christ? We will warn and witness with grace and grit when we are gripped by the greatness of God, the reality of the judgement to come and the sufficiency of the gospel to save.

This brings us to our final point in the message, God’s greatness.

3. God’s Greatness

As he prepares to read the writing on the wall, Daniel says, “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. 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. ²¹ He 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. ²² And you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, **though you knew all this**, ²³ but 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 5:18-23).

Notice that after testifying to Belshazzar about how God the most High dealt with his father’s Neb’s pride, who eventually humbled himself before God and was restored, Daniel says, *“And you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this”* (Daniel 5:22). Belshazzar knew the truth that God rules over the kingdoms of men and gives them to whom He will. But rather than humbling himself and surrendering to God’s gracious rule, Belshazzar suppressed the truth and as a result, was ruled by his passions and desires which led to his demise.

How many of you know, the more we suppress the truth the harder our hearts will become and the less likely it will be that we will ever humble ourselves and receive the restoring grace of God.

Was it too late for Belshazzar? It wasn’t too late for his father. Here’s what we know from God’s word: There’s no sin so great that God’s Grace will not forgive if we humble ourselves in Christ and receive His saving and transforming grace.

But the only sure opportunity that you have to be saved is the very moment when God’s saving light is shining in your heart. Today is the day of salvation. Tomorrow is not guaranteed.

Now after explaining to Belshazzar that he knew the truth, but chose to turn from it, Daniel proceeds to interpret the writing on the wall sent from the presence of God: *“And this is the writing that was inscribed: Mene, Mene, Tekel, and Parsin. ²⁶ This is the interpretation of the matter: Mene, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; ²⁷ Tekel, you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting; ²⁸ Peres, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.” ²⁹ Then Belshazzar gave the command, and Daniel was clothed with purple, a chain of gold was put around his neck, and a proclamation was made about him, that he should be the third ruler in the kingdom. ³⁰ That very night Belshazzar the Chaldean*

king was killed. ³¹ And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old” (Daniel 5:24-31).

What was the meaning of the writing on the wall for Belshazzar and how does it apply to us today? Read as a sequence of Aramaic letters and verbs, the words mean, numbered, numbered, weighed, and divided.

The interpretation of the words, as intended for Belshazzar, meant that the Lord had numbered the days of Belshazzar’s kingdom and brought it to an end because God weighed him in the balance and he was found wanting. In fact, that very night Belshazzar was killed and his kingdom conquered by the Medo-Persian empire.

The application for us is that our days on earth are also numbered. And apart from Christ, when weighed in the balance of God’s justice, we would be found wanting and as a result we would be separated from God’s kingdom forever.

As Bryan Chapel also explained, “Mene, Tekel, Peres is not ultimately the handwriting against Belshazzar; it is the handwriting of God for us. By his hand God warns us of our sin. On the cross of Jesus we see that handwriting in its boldest and brightest strokes, for there the script is written in the blood of God’s own Son. But the glory of that blood is that it does more than warn. In his letter to the Colossians the apostle Paul tells us it is the same blood that blots out the handwriting that was against us (Col. 2:14). God warns us of his judgment so that we will seek the Son who already has assumed it. The blood of Jesus beacons and beckons. It beacons a warning to all who will look, testifying that God judges sin. “Turn back,” the blood warns, “turn back from the sin that leads to your hurt and this destruction.” At the same time the blood beckons. It beckons sinners to be covered and cleansed by the crimson flow that God lovingly provides for all who truly repent. “Come,” cries the blood, “come away from your guilt and enter the forgiving, comforting, strengthening presence of the Savior.”

It’s important to see also that for the people of God in Daniel’s day who would be reading the book of Daniel, the concluding fact that

Darius the Mede received the kingdom that Belshazzar lost, is a sign of future hope. It was under this Medo-Persian empire that the repentant people of God were allowed to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple of God.

Similarly, no matter who the leaders are in our day who come and go, we can trust that God's redemptive plans are being fulfilled. And when it's complete, all who are in Christ will be brought safely into His heavenly Kingdom.

Conclusion

Until then, may we, as the redeemed people of God, anchor our hope not on the kingdoms of men, but on the overruling sovereignty of God. No matter how dark it gets in our world, we can trust that God is in charge, judgement is coming and the light of the gospel is still the only answer.

May the greatness of God's holiness and love displayed on the cross strengthen us to rise above the greed in our world and give us the grit and the grace to be lights in our Babylon for the greater fame of Jesus.