

TOPIC: "Belshazzar's Doom - Daniel 5

Some twenty years pass between chapters 4 and 5, and King Nebuchadnezzar moves off the scene. He was succeeded by a son who reigned just a few years and then was assassinated by his own brother-in-law. He in turn ruled four years but was killed while in battle. The next two rulers occupied the throne a very brief time; the second of these was Nabonidus. He was actually a son-in-law to Nebuchadnezzar and was married to the widow of one of the previous kings. Nabonidus was king of the Babylonian empire at this time, and his son Belshazzar was king of the city of Babylon. This explains why Daniel was named third ruler (7, 29). While the events in ch. 5 are taking place, King Nabonidus has been a captive of the Medes and Persians for four months. Note the experiences of the king.

I. ENJOYING HIS FEAST - 1-4

This feast was in honor of one of the great Babylonian gods, and it took place in the autumn of 539 BC. Archaeologists have unearthed palaces at Babylon containing great halls large enough to entertain a thousand guests. They have also discovered that the walls were covered with a white chalk-like substance, which explains the matter of the handwriting on the wall. The main idea in these verses is drinking wine. Wine has always been associated with Babylon and the Babylonian "system" of this world (Jer. 51:7, Rev. 14:8, 17:1-5, 18:3, 13). The king was not content to drink wine to his gods (vs. 4, and see Rev. 9:20); he wanted to blaspheme the God of the Jews as well. So he had the sacred temple vessels brought in to be used at this idolatrous, blasphemous feast (see Dan. 1:2). The word "father" 5:2 indicates "grandfather"; also in vs. 11 and 13. Please keep in mind that the Medes and Persians were already outside the gates of the city when this feast was in progress! So confident was the king that his fortress city was impregnable that he laughed at the invading armies outside the gates. What a picture of our world today: judgment is about to fall, yet men are making merry and worshipping their false gods. "When they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them ..." says I Thess. 5:3. Babylon was a strong city with walls 350 feet high and 87 feet thick! The Euphrates River ran diagonally through the city, and great brass gates controlled the entrances to the city. How could any invading army capture such a city? Well, they did!

II. REVEALING HIS FEAR - 5-9

The guests apparently could not immediately see the mysterious hand appear, but the king looked over their heads and saw it on the opposite wall. Imagine how shocked the guests were when they saw their king trembling, his knees knocking together! Wine could not give him courage now; he was face to face with a message from God. You can read vs. 7, "And the king shrieked..." He had to know the meaning of the hand and the handwriting. In fact, he offered the man who would explain it the position as third ruler of the land. (How foolish! In just a few hours Belshazzar would not even be alive and ruling himself!) As usual, none of the king's "experts" could explain the writing on the wall, and this made the king even more concerned. How strange that he did not know Daniel, the man who had counselled his grandfather, Nebuchadnezzar. But Belshazzar was a careless youth (he was about 35 years old at this time) who was more interested in power and pleasure than in spiritual matters. No wonder his city fell!

III. DISCOVERING HIS FUTURE - 10-29

The Queen Mother solved the problem. It is likely that this wise woman was the widow of Nebuchadnezzar whom Belshazzar's father, Nabonidus, married in order to solidify his power in the kingdom. At any rate, she heard of the consternation in the banquet hall and came to advise the king. "O king, live forever!" she said (vs. 10) - and he was going to be dead before the night was over! Then she told him about

Daniel and how he had advised his grandfather. Daniel was an old man now, and had been "retired" from public service. As an honored member of the official family, Daniel was probably invited to the feast as a guest; but he would not defile himself or compromise his testimony. Because of his separated position, Daniel was honored of God (II Cor. 6:14-18).

The king tried to impress Daniel (13-16), but Daniel would not be impressed! He knew that the king's gifts meant nothing in comparison to the blessing of God; for that matter, Belshazzar was not going to be king much longer. Before explaining the handwriting, Daniel preached a sermon to the king, using the king's grandfather as his illustration. He warned the king about his pride and sin and reminded him that God judged Nebuchadnezzar severely. "And you knew all this!" Daniel exclaimed; "yet you persist in living such a wicked life! Now God has sent you a message of judgment it is too late!" God gave Nebuchadnezzar a year to repent (4:28-33), but there was no year for Belshazzar to repent. He was doomed.

Now for the explanation. The words were in Chaldean: MENE (menay), MENE, TEKEL (tekal), PERES (parace). (The word UPHARSIN in vs. 25 is the plural of PERES, and the letter U is our word "and" in the Chaldean language.) Now, in Babylon a mina and a tekel were different weights; and the word peres simply means "to divide." So, when the Babylonian magicians saw these words on the wall, they could not understand what they meant. But God gave Daniel the interpretation: "Numbered - weighed - divided!" Belshazzar's days had been numbered and time was up; he had been weighed in God's scales and found wanting; now his kingdom would be taken from him and divided by the Medes and Persians. And keep in mind that Darius was at the gates at that very hour!

Did Belshazzar believe the message from God, even after all his fear and shaking? NO! We find no evidence of repentance or concern. He kept his promise and made Daniel third ruler just as though his kingdom were to continue forever. The king's pride, lust, indifference, and self-satisfaction led to his downfall.

IV. MEETING HIS FATE - 30-31

Had Belshazzar studied the Prophet Isaiah, he would have known just how the city of Babylon would be taken, and by whom it would be taken. Cyrus the Persian conqueror would defeat the Medes and then come down upon Babylon (Isa. 41:25; 45:1-4). He would dig a canal that would reroute the Euphrates River, and then smuggle his army into the city under the gates! The Babylonians had seen the enemy digging, but they thought they were going to build a mound against the city. Actually, they were diverting the river. Why was the city taken unawares? Because most of the people were drunk! It was a great religious feast day and the people were too involved in pleasure to think about defense. The enemy came right into the banquet hall and the king was slain. What a warning to our nation! We have such a pleasure-mad country today that it will be easy for some enemy to take us unawares, and history will repeat itself.

Who was Darius the Mede? Isaiah had said that Cyrus would capture Babylon and set the Jews free (Isa. 44:28-45:13); see also Dan. 1:21 and 10:1. Darius is mentioned as "king" in Dan. 6:1, 6, 9, 25, 28; 9:1; 11:1. The solution is found in the word "took" in 5:31; it should be translated "received." Darius (Cyrus' military leader) received the kingdom from Cyrus, king of Persia, and ruled Babylon for him. In 6:28 we see that it was a dual kingship; Cyrus was the king of the empire, while Darius ruled Babylon and the area connected with it. Cyrus entered Babylon a mighty conqueror and proceeded to deal wisely with the people, including the exiled Jews. It was Cyrus who issued the decrees that permitted the Jews to return to their land and rebuild their temple (Ezra 1:1-4; see Isa. 44:28). So, even the rise and fall of empires is all a part of God's plan for His people - Rom. 8:28!

The fall of Babylon in 539 is a picture of the future fall of Babylon (the devil's world system) as given in Rev. 17-18. And Bible-believing Christians can already see "the handwriting on the wall." But blind world rulers continue in their pride and pleasure, little realizing that the Lord is coming, yes, He is even at the doors (James 5:9)!!

TOPIC: "The Lion's Den" - Daniel 6

In recent years we have had a series of books on "A Day in the Life of..." in which the writer takes us through a typical day with a famous person. In this chapter we spend a day in the life of the Prime Minister of the Medo-Persian Empire - Daniel the beloved! Remember, now, that Daniel is not a teenager in this chapter; he is a man in his 80's. This just proves that age is no barrier to serving Christ, nor is it any protection against temptation and testing. Because Daniel started young as a man of faith and prayer, he was faithful to the Lord even in his old age. Let's spend a day in the life of Daniel.

I. A DAWN OF DEVOTION

How did the Prime Minister begin each day? He prayed to the Lord! In 6:10 we are told that Daniel prayed three times a day in a special "prayer chamber" atop his house. "Evening, and morning, and at noon will I pray," says Ps. 55:17. So, Daniel started his day with the Lord - and it's a good thing that he did! The enemy was afoot and Daniel was going to face one of the greatest tests of his life. "Watch and pray!" was our Lord's warning, and a good one it is. Prayer was not an incidental thing in Daniel's life; it was the most essential thing. He had a special place for prayer and special times for prayer; and you can be sure that he talked to the Lord all day long. No wonder God called him "greatly beloved" (9:23; 10:11, 19), language that, in the NT, the Lord reserves for His Own Son! It was Daniel's faithful walk and consistent prayer life that made him one of God's "beloved sons" (read Jn. 14:21-23 carefully). How important it is to start the day with the Lord! Abraham had this habit (Gen. 19:27); so did David (Ps. 5:3) and our Lord Jesus Christ (Mk. 1:35).

II. A MORNING OF DECEPTION - 6:1-9

God had honored Daniel for his faithfulness, so that he was practically the second ruler in the land. There were actually 124 persons involved in the leadership of the land: Darius the king, the three presidents (with Daniel as #1), and 120 princes. In fact, so impressed was Darius with Daniel that he was planning to make him the official second ruler! The promotions of Daniel in Babylon are proof that a believer does not have to compromise to succeed (Mt. 6:33).

Of course, the other 122 leaders were not too happy about Daniel's success. For one thing, he was an alien - and a Jew! Satan has always hated the Jews and done his utmost to persecute them and eliminate them. The wicked always hate the just. Certainly godly Daniel was honest and kept careful watch over the affairs of state; the other leaders were stealing from the king and covering up their thefts with false accounts. This is why Darius had reorganized the government, so that he "should have no damage" (loss). The wicked lie about God's people; they told Darius that all the presidents agreed on the plan (vs. 7), when Daniel had not been consulted. How foolish Darius was to sign the decree without first consulting with his best president! But history shows that Darius was easily influenced by flattery. So, it seems like the wicked leaders have Daniel in their power. What will he do?

III. A NOON OF DECISION - 6:10-13

Daniel was one of the first ones to hear of the new decree, and he had to decide what to do. Of course, his godly character and spiritual walk had already decided for him: he would serve the Lord and pray to Jehovah just as he had always done. He could have made excuses and compromised. For one thing, "everybody was doing it!" And he was an old man who had served the Lord faithfully all his life. One little compromise at the end of his life could not do too much damage. (It would have ruined his whole testimony.) Could he not be more useful to the Lord alive than dead? No! Daniel refused to compromise. He would rather be eaten by lions than miss one prayer meeting!

His enemies watched as Daniel went to his prayer chamber where the windows were always open ("Pray without ceasing"); and they could see him kneel and lift up his hands toward Jerusalem. Now they had him! But Daniel had peace in his heart. He was praying, giving thanks, and making supplication, and this is the formula for peace (Phil. 4:6-7). This was not a "crisis prayer meeting"; Daniel was used to praying, and had been since he was a teenager. It is wise to start building spiritual habits when you are young.

IV. A SUNDOWN OF DISAPPOINTMENT - 6:14-17

The king realized what a fool he had been, but even his power and wealth could not alter the law of the Medes and Persians. But God did not want Darius to deliver Daniel; that was a privilege He was reserving for Himself. Daniel was not depending on the king either (Ps. 146:1-6); he had learned long ago to trust the Living God. God did not want to save Daniel from the lions' den; He wanted to deliver him out of it.

V. A NIGHT OF DELIVERANCE - 6:18-23

What a contrast between Darius in his palace and Daniel in the lions' den! Darius had no peace, yet Daniel was perfectly at peace with himself, the Lord, and the lions. Daniel was in a place of perfect safety, for God was there; while Darius could have been slain by some enemy right in his bedroom. Darius had labored all the previous day to save Daniel from judgment, yet had no power; while Daniel simply talked to the God of the universe and received all the power he needed. In every way, Daniel was reigning as King while Darius was a slave!

It was Daniel's faith in God that delivered him (6:23, Heb. 11:33). It is amazing that he had any faith at all, after living in that idolatrous heathen land for so many years. His daily fellowship with the Lord was the secret: he had faith, and he was faithful. (See Ps. 18:17-24.) It is not enough to be faithful to the Lord in our daily lives, although this is the foundation for a successful prayer life; we must also trust Him and believe that He will keep His Word.

Christians today face many temptations to compromise, and it often appears that the "safest" course is to go with the crowd. But this is the most dangerous course! The only really safe place is in the will of God. Daniel knew that it was wrong to worship the king and pray to him, because Daniel knew God's Word. He would rather die obeying God's Word than live outside of God's will. Satan comes as a roaring lion (I Pt. 5:8-9), and men try to devour us as well (II Tim. 4:17); but God can deliver us if it is for His glory. It is not always God's will to deliver his children from danger; many Christians have given their lives in the place of duty. But what a reward they receive! Read Rev. 2:10 carefully.

IV. A MORNING OF DESTRUCTION - 6:24-28

Our Christian souls revolt at the thought of whole families, including children, being thrown to hungry lions! But this was the law of the land, the same law that these wicked men had tried to use against Daniel. How tragic, however, that their innocent children had to suffer; but such are the awful penalties of sin. Any children under the age of accountability went to be with the Lord anyway, so they were better off dead than growing up in a heathen land and going to hell in unbelief. God always vindicates His own. "The righteous is delivered out of trouble, and the wicked cometh in his stead." (Prov. 11:8). If you are going through persecution and you wonder if God cares, read Ps. 37:1-15 - and trust Him the way Daniel did.

Now we see why God permitted Daniel to go through this experience (vss. 25-27). It brought great glory to His Name! Peter may have had Daniel in mind when the Spirit led him to write I Pt. 3:10-17 (read these verses). When a Christian overcomes temptation, he always glorifies the Lord. May we be like Paul who desired that Christ might "be magnified in his body, whether it be by life or by death" (Phil. 1:20).