

The Book Of Daniel

*And in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his kingdom.
(Daniel 1:20 ESV)*

*but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and he has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days.
(Daniel 2:28 ESV)*

*And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.
(Daniel 12:2–3 ESV)*

The Writing On The Wall

February 9th, 2020

Daniel 5

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Introduction:

Good morning church! I'd like to invite you to open your Bibles this morning to Daniel 5; that's on page 742 in your pew Bibles. The story that we are reading today takes place on the night that the Babylonian Empire collapsed and receded into history. It is a significant story and it became in the ancient world something of a proverb and a symbol. You can see that in the Book of Revelation. In the Book of Revelation John talks about the Whore of Babylon who rides upon the Beast and who is drunk with the blood of the saints. The symbol is hard to miss: Babylon is seductive culture propped up by demonic government and fully committed to the seduction and corruption of God's people. And John prophesies her sudden and complete destruction:

“Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!” (Revelation 18:2 ESV)

“her plagues will come **in a single day**, death and mourning and famine, and she will be burned up with fire; for mighty is the Lord God who has judged her.”
(Revelation 18:8 ESV)

That story became a lens for interpreting future stories.

So obviously, we want to pay attention today. People have been reflecting upon this event for thousands of years. The Greek historian Herodotus was fascinated with this story. He remarks upon the fact that while the Persians were diverting the river that protected the city of Babylon – the palace was awash in drunken dancing and debauchery. The Persians marched into the city unopposed because the leaders of this once great empire were too drunk and too distracted to even notice¹.

That's the story that we are reading – but of course – we're seeing the story behind the story; the part of the story that Herodotus did not see. This is the story of what was going on inside those palace walls on October 12th 539 BC – one of the most significant dates in ancient history. We'll read the story and then we'll pull up to the 10,000-foot level in order to reflect upon the lessons that it preserves. As we read through the narrative we'll hear about a carousing king, a retired prophet and a sudden doom.

Hear now the Word the Lord, beginning at verse 1.

A Carousing King

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.

As I mentioned, the story we are reading took place on one of the most significant nights in ancient history. The Persians were at the gates of the city. The army of the Babylonians had just been defeated some 50 miles to the north. We aren't sure whether or not Belshazzar knew at this point that his father Nabonidus had died in that battle but it seems that he did not. Later in the

¹ Herodotus, *The Histories* translated by Robin Waterfield, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 84.

story he will offer Daniel the third highest office in the land – which would have been the highest office he could offer if his father was still alive. Belshazzar was a co-regent with his father. Near the end of his life Nabonidus retired to an oasis in the desert in order to devote himself to the worship of the Moon god and he left his son Belshazzar nominally in charge. But he was a weak ruler, so when the Persians rose up against them, Nabonidus came out of retirement – though by this time it was a classic case of too little too late.

Belshazzar, as this story indicates, was a drunken fool surrounded by idiots and sycophants. Perhaps as a show of bravado, he calls for the vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple in Jerusalem so that he might drink wine from them. Belshazzar was likely trying to drink up his courage for the battle that he assumed lay ahead. This is a picture of an empire in grave decline. This is a young king who is barely recognizable when compared to the greatness and the wisdom of those who went before.

We pick up the story in verse 5:

⁵ 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." ⁸ Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or make known to the king the interpretation. ⁹ Then King Belshazzar was greatly alarmed, and his color changed, and his lords were perplexed. (Daniel 5:1–9 ESV)

The expression used in verse 6 means either that the king swooned or that he wet his pants – that's what the commentators say. He is a weak king, a drunk king and now a terrified king. And he begins to scream for his enchanters and advisors. They all come rushing in but once again – there is no WISDOM IN BABYLON. So the writing on the wall goes untranslated and the king remains alarmed.

That brings us to the second part of the story as the king is reminded that there is still a prophet in Babylon. We pick up the narrative at verse 10.

A Retired Prophet

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.

Let’s just pause here. This queen is generally identified as Nitocris – the Queen Mother actually. She was married to Nabonidus and she was known in the ancient world as a wise and formidable woman.

She goes on to say in verse 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 – perhaps I should pause and just remind you that the word “father” here can also mean grandfather and ancestor. Belshazzar was the son of Nebuchadnezzar in the same way that Jesus was the Son of David. Belshazzar was trying to position himself as the true heir of the greatest hero in Babylonian history - that’s why he sent for the cups and chalices from the temple. He wanted to identify with that great era – well thankfully, there is a relic of that era still alive and well among us, Nitocris says. Daniel! The chief advisor to the Great King Nebuchadnezzar, now more than 80 years old - you should call him! As he assisted your father, so may he assist you. That’s what she says at the end of verse 12:

Now let Daniel be called, and he will show the interpretation.”

¹³ 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. 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. 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.

²⁴ “Then from his presence the hand was sent, and this writing was inscribed. ²⁵ 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.” (Daniel 5:10–28 ESV)

Daniel does more than interpret the writing on the wall – he interprets the entire life of king Belshazzar. You are the fool who did not learn from history. You know what happened to Nebuchadnezzar. You know the family secret of his mysterious mental illness. You know that God humbled him because he dared to exalt himself as a god. You saw that whole story play out and yet here you are, having obviously learned nothing. You are a stubborn fool. You have been weighed, measured and found wanting and this very night your kingdom will be taken from you and given to someone better.

That's what Daniel says – and there was no delay in the fulfilment of that proclamation. We hear the conclusion of the story in verses 29-31.

A Sudden Doom

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 5:29–31 ESV)

So that was the end of the Kingdom of Babylon. That was what was going on inside the palace on the night when the greatest Empire in human history collapsed into ruin. This was the fulfilment of the dream that Daniel interpreted for King Nebuchadnezzar almost 70 years before. His Kingdom was in fact succeeded by a Kingdom of lesser quality – known to the world as the Empire of the Medes and Persians.

Tremper Longman III refers to this story as “history with a theological and didactic purpose”². Meaning that it is history that we are supposed to learn from. So – what are we supposed to learn? What are the lessons that we are supposed to take from this story?

Insight And Instruction:

Well, I think the first one is obvious. I think this story is reminding us that:

1. God is large and in charge

The Bible says that sort of thing again and again and again. In Deuteronomy 32:39 God says:

“See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.”
(Deuteronomy 32:39 ESV)

² Tremper Longman III, *Daniel* in the NIV Application Commentary, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 143.

Hear that friends:

I kill.

I make alive.

I wound.

I heal.

And there is NONE that can deliver from my hand – that’s how God speaks about himself in the Bible – but that’s not how we talk about God. Most modern-day evangelicals are actually guilty of believing in a sort unbiblical dualism. We talk as if God is the author of the good stuff – the victories, the promotions, the new babies, the big blessings – but the devil is the author of the bad stuff – the job losses, the sickness, the setbacks and the diseases, the deaths and the disasters. God gives us presents but the devil gives us pestilence.

But that’s heresy actually.

That is unbiblical.

There is only one GOD – one CAUSER – ONE MOVER in the universe and his name is the LORD.

The devil is a dog on a chain. He does what he does. He eats whatever he can sink his teeth into – but it is God who turns him this way and that.

Psalm 75:6-7 says:

“For not from the east or from the west and not from the wilderness comes lifting up, but it is God who executes judgment, putting down one and lifting up another.”
(Psalm 75:6–7 ESV)

“Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.” (Psalm 115:3 ESV)

That’s the God of the Bible.

We see that in this story of course, just as we saw it in the Book of Job. D.A. Carson comments at the end of Job chapter 2 saying:

“We belong to God. He may do with us as he wishes. There is something deep within us that rebels at being reminded of that elemental truth. But truth it is. Indeed, our rebellion in the face of it is a reminder of how much we still want to be at the centre of universe, with God serving us. That is the heart of all idolatry.”³

Belshazzar believed himself the centre of the universe and as a result he was in for a rude awakening – and a rude awakening is exactly what he got when Daniel came to see him. We are a little shocked by Daniel’s lack of regard for King Belshazzar. The king offers him high honours and great reward and Daniel says:

“Let your gifts be for yourself, and give your rewards to another.” (Daniel 5:17 ESV)

Daniel was not impressed with the young king – in part, surely because Daniel already seen the future. Daniel had interpreted Nebuchadnezzar’s dream back in chapter 2, almost 70 years ago. Daniel knew where history was headed and Daniel knew exactly who was driving the bus – and it was not this insignificant pretender holding down his daddy’s throne here in the city of Babylon.

Belshazzar was nothing.

Belshazzar was a footnote.

Belshazzar was a footnote that history LOST for more than 2000 years – have you heard that story?

³ D.A. Carson, *For The Love Of God*, February 3rd.

Belshazzar reign was so short and so insignificant that he was immediately lost to history. Herodotus knew nothing of him. He does not name the Lord of the palace who was drunk and debauched on the night the city fell. He did not know who it was. And no one knew who it was until 1854 when archaeologist John George Taylor discovered an inscription that described the coregency of Nabonidus with his son Belshazzar. Until that time there was no mention of this person outside of the biblical record.⁴

Belshazzar was nothing – but God was large and in charge.

There is a lesson in there for us friends. I wonder, should the human race endure for another 2500 years, if historians will one day argue amongst themselves as to whether there were two separate Trudeaus reigning over the land once known as “CANADA”. Surely there could not have been TWO TRUDEAUS? Surely what happened was that the one Trudeau changed his name and grew a hip beard in order to attract the younger voters.

The debate will likely rage on for years and never be satisfactorily decided.

The point my friends is this: Nations rise and fall. Politicians come and go – therefore God’s people do not obsess over historical footnotes. God’s people keep their eye on the Lord who does not change. Thanks be to God!

The second thing we see in this story is that:

2. The job of a prophet is to speak truth to power

Daniel was not impressed with Belshazzar, but, nevertheless, he did his job. He said:

“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 5:17 ESV)

⁴ As told by David Helm in *Daniel For You*, (U.S.A.: The Good Book Company, 2015), 89.

Daniel's was in no man's hip pocket. He did not cower or cow to civil authority. Like his three friends, he gave due deference – and nothing more. His allegiance was to another world – another Kingdom – another King – and he never forgot that.

In the Bible prophets speak FOR GOD – and generally speaking, their job was to speak FOR GOD to the king. Whether or not the king wanted to hear it.

We think for example of the story of Ahab and Jehoshaphat. Before they went to war Jehoshaphat asked whether or not there was a prophet of Yahweh who could speak into this matter. Ahab said that there was one, a prophet named Micaiah and thus he was summoned to stand before the two kings. The story is told in 2 Chronicles 18:

And the messenger who went to summon Micaiah said to him, “Behold, the words of the prophets with one accord are favorable to the king. Let your word be like the word of one of them, and speak favorably.”¹³ But Micaiah said, “As the LORD lives, what my God says, that I will speak.”¹⁴ And when he had come to the king, the king said to him, “Micaiah, shall we go to Ramoth-gilead to battle, or shall I refrain?” And he answered, “Go up and triumph; they will be given into your hand.”¹⁵ But the king said to him, “How many times shall I make you swear that you speak to me nothing but the truth in the name of the LORD?”¹⁶ And he said, “I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, as sheep that have no shepherd. And the LORD said, ‘These have no master; let each return to his home in peace.’”¹⁷ And the king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, “Did I not tell you that he would not prophesy good concerning me, but evil?” (2 Chronicles 18:12–17 ESV)

The job of the prophet is to speak truth to power – even when power does not want to hear it.

This is why brothers and sisters we can never be co-opted by a single political party. The over identification of the church of Jesus Christ with the Republican Party in the United States of America represents the most significant evangelistic capitulation in recent history. When Christianity becomes the court prophet for any human empire we have become the salt that has lost its saltiness. Do you remember what Jesus said about that? He said:

“It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.” (Matthew 5:13 ESV)

Our job is to be salt and light. If we compromise with the culture or capitulate to the people in charge we surrender our role and function.

Daniel was brought out of retirement because he was known as a man who speaks the truth. Listen to me brothers and sisters. We will always have a role in this culture if speak the truth. But the moment we stop; the moment we cave; the moment we tell the king whatever he wants to hear is the moment we become irrelevant. Neither God nor king requires a parrot who merely repeats the wisdom and folly of the age.

The job of a prophet is to speak truth to power.

The third lesson that I believe we're to take away from this text is a common one in the Bible. It is the reminder that:

3. To whom much is given much is required

One of the questions we ask when we read this story is why was Nebuchadnezzar given a chance to repent of his pride whereas Belshazzar, clearly, was not? And the answer of course is that Belshazzar had been given MORE INFORMATION. Belshazzar KNEW what happened to Nebuchadnezzar. He knew the story. He had a front row seat. He ought to have thought about that and he ought to have remembered that – but he didn't and therefore he was treated more severely.

Jesus says the same thing. In Luke 12:47-48 he says:

“And that servant who knew his master's will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating. ⁴⁸ But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating. Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more.” (Luke 12:47–48 ESV)

The more you know the more severe the judgment that you will face. And that leads us to the final and perhaps most important take away from this story. This story is a powerful reminder that:

4. Prince or pauper, we will all one day stand before the King

Belshazzar met God in his underwear covered in who knows what. It was not how he would have planned it I am sure. But that's the point – we don't get to plan it. Death often comes without warning and woe to the man or the woman – woe to the prince or the pauper - who is unprepared.

Judgment waits for us all.

The Apostle Paul said:

“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.” (2 Corinthians 5:10 ESV)

Sometimes Christians will protest here. They will say: “But I thought Christians didn't face judgment? I thought the Apostle Paul promised that?”

Well first of all, it is never a good idea to believe that one verse in the Bible cancels out another. If you think that, then you have surely misunderstood at least one and probably both of the verses in question. This verse clearly says:

“For **we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ.**” (2 Corinthians 5:10 ESV)

So it would odd – horrifyingly odd – if there was another verse in the New Testament that disproved what we are reading here.

But thankfully, there is not.

The verse these people are no doubt thinking of is Romans 8:1, which says:

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 8:1 ESV)

Well, as I'm sure you can see for yourself, that's quite a different thing. That verse does not promise that you will avoid judgment. It just says that if you are truly in Christ Jesus then you will not be condemned.

But you will still be judged.

“For **we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ**, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.” (2 Corinthians 5:10 ESV)

According to the Bible, wisdom begins with thinking about that day. Moses in Psalm 90 says:

“Who considers the power of your anger, and your wrath according to the fear of you? So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.” (Psalm 90:11–12 ESV)

Teach us to number our days - because our days are numbered. Belshazzar's days were numbered – though he did not know it. Daniel told him, but by that time it was too late. That very night his life was required of him and unlike his ancestor Nebuchadnezzar he was given no time to humble himself and to repent.

His death was not unjust – because he knew. He knew the story. And now – so do you. You know that God alone is God. He kills. He makes alive. He casts down and he lifts us. And one day you will stand in front of him to give an account for your life. If you are in Christ then there will be no condemnation. There will be glory, honour and immortality. But if you are not in Christ, then there will be only wrath and fury. That's not a scare tactic – that's a Bible verse. Romans 2:6-8 says:

He will render to each one according to his works:⁷ to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life;⁸ but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. (Romans 2:6–8 ESV)

That's the truth. That's the future for all of us – and I know that because this is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let's pray together.