

Cyrus was about 62 when he conquered Babylon (ca. 539 B.C.) –
and Belshazar was the king that he overthrew –
so it is likely that “Darius the Mede” refers to Cyrus.
Kings in those days used lots of different throne names,
so it would not at all be surprising if this was so.

In fact, if you look ahead to chapter 6, verse 28,
you could translate it,
“Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius, *even* the reign of Cyrus the Persian.”

For that matter, the name of Belshazzar had been forgotten to history.
By the fifth century B.C., no one seemed to know anything about him!
But then in the mid-19th century,
researchers in Babylon came across a reference to Belshazzar,
the son of Nabonidus,
who ruled Babylon in place of his father,
after his father had run afoul of the priests of Marduk.

But all these kings become object lessons in our text about the importance of submitting to God.

The theme of chapter 4 was expressed clearly in the refrain that we heard repeatedly:
“the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will.” (4:17, 25, 32)
That same refrain is found again here in 5:21 –
but only once in our passage.

Because our passage serves as a warning.
Yes, God had mercy on Nebuchadnezzar, because he humbled himself (at least a little!).
But Belshazzar did not.
And so Belshazzar serves as a cautionary tale that God’s patience has limits.
Humble yourself before the LORD and he will exalt you.
Exalt yourself before the LORD and he will humble you!

1. The Handwriting Is on the Wall: Belshazzar Dishonors the Temple Vessels (v1-9)
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^[a] 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.

Think about this!
Nebuchadnezzar had plundered the temple –

and he had placed the holy vessels in the temple of his god –
as if to say, “my god is better than your God.”

But Belshazzar goes a step further.

Nebuchadnezzar had at least respected the sacred vessels *as sacred*.

But Belshazzar uses the temple vessels as common drinking cups
for a drinking party!

(Now, I want you to think about the context here.

By the end of the chapter we will discover that this “drinking party” occurred
while the Persians were besieging Babylon.

So the “great feast” may not have been a mere “drinking party.”

This may have been Belshazzar’s feast to the gods –

imploping their aid against the Persians –

and so he may have thought that bringing out the holy vessels from Jerusalem
would “remind” the gods of how they had helped Nebuchadnezzar,
and so now he implores them to help him!

At least that’s how Belshazzar may have interpreted what he was doing!)

But the Book of Daniel does not “honor” the gods of Babylon

with a dispassionate scholarly analysis of what Belshazzar was thinking!

After all, the gods of Babylon are gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone!

We do *not* compare a feast to Marduk with a feast to Yahweh!

A feast to Marduk is a mere *drinking party*!

After all, *Marduk* does *not* answer!

To use Elijah’s words, from Mt. Carmel in 1 Kings 18:

“Cry aloud, for he is a god.

Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey,
or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.”

²⁸ And they cried aloud and cut themselves after their custom
with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them.

²⁹ And as midday passed, they raved on
until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice.
No one answered; no one paid attention.”

But as in the days of Elijah, so also in the days of Daniel –

neither Baal nor Marduk will answer.

But the *LORD* answers!

And

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.*

Opposite the lampstand.

He is using temple vessels from the Holy Place of God's temple.

Vessels that belonged in the service of the table of shewbread – opposite the lampstand!

Belshazzar probably was not intimately familiar with the layout of Solomon's temple –
but the author and the readers of the Book of Daniel *were*.

There is a sort of “poetic justice” here.

You have exalted yourself by doing that

which only the Aaronic priests were allowed to do!

And now the fingers of a human hand appear “opposite the lampstand.”

When man exalts himself against God,

God will humble him – and generally in ways that are appropriate to his crime!

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^[b] 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.

Here we are told that the king saw the hand as it wrote.

As you might suppose, this is the origin of our phrase,

“the handwriting is on the wall” – as if to say,

the signs all point to the end of something.

And Belshazzar rightly sees that this is an omen that bears ill news.

Twice we are told that the king's color changed and he was greatly alarmed.

He does not know what it means – but he can tell that it is bad news!

So why does he offer such extravagant rewards?

If he knows that the news is bad, why reward the one who can explain it?

Well, when you are *desperate*, you will take extraordinary measures to know all that you can.

Maybe if you have enough information, you can make the decision that will enable you
to thwart the onslaught of danger!

Belshazzar continues to exalt himself.

Persistently he refuses to humble himself.

Even in his extravagant reward he exalts himself.

He offers to make the wise man who can interpret this the “third ruler in the kingdom.”
He says this because his father, Nabonidus, was the *first* ruler.

But because Nabonidus had alienated the priests of Marduk,
Belshazzar was the second ruler – who had the practical rule of Babylon.
But with all his power, and with all the patronage of the throne of Babylon,
Belshazzar is still left with his knees knocking and his lords perplexed.

Humble yourself before the Lord and he will exalt you!

2. Call for Daniel! The Speech of the Queen Mother (v10-12)

¹⁰ The queen,^[c] 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.^[d] 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.”

Then the queen – probably the Queen Mother – came into the banqueting hall.

I will have you notice that without the Queen, the narrative comes to a screeching halt.
Everything else in the passage depends on *her*.

(Think about the feasts in the book of Esther –
and how central Esther is to the feasts in that book!)

Who is the Queen?

She might be the mother of Belshazzar –
but it is more likely that she was a daughter of Nebuchadnezzar,
and is referred to as queen only as a title of respect.

(This would also explain why she was not present for the feast.

She is not *really* part of the royal family.

She is a last vestige of the *former* dynasty – who comes now to “save the day”)

She refers to Nebuchadnezzar as “your father the king” –

but that is merely a way of saying “you are the rightful king –
therefore Nebuchadnezzar is your ancestor in the kinship!”

(and if she is a daughter of Nebuchadnezzar, then she *needs* to affirm
that she supports the rule of Belshazzar!)

After all, Belshazzar was the son of Nabonidus.

Nabonidus was an Assyrian general who had seized the throne during a coup in 556 B.C.

Nebuchadnezzar had died in 562 B.C. –

and his death led to general instability in the realm.

The Nabonidus Chronicle claims that Belshazzar was a grandson of Nebuchadnezzar

but since Belshazzar was already an adult when Nabonidus took the throne,
it is highly unlikely that this is literally true.
It is more likely that “father” means “predecessor on the throne”
(which was a very common way of speaking in the ancient world).

But this also helps us understand this interaction.
Belshazzar (and his father, Nabonidus) were outsiders.
Even after 15 years, they did not know the whole history of Nebuchadnezzar’s rule.

It also points out that even after 60 years,
Daniel is still not accepted by the guild of the Chaldeans.

Oh, but he was appointed “chief of the magicians” by Nebuchadnezzar!
Doesn’t that mean that Daniel was in charge of all the others?
No.
It means that Nebuchadnezzar had highly honored Daniel (twice).
The book of Daniel *never* says
that Daniel actually was in charge of all the native-born magicians.
And *everything* that we see in the book of Daniel
tells us that the native-born magicians did *not* submit to Daniel.
(Only in chapter 6 will they finally be able to do anything to try to *harm* Daniel –
but we should probably understand “chief of the magicians”
as an honorary title more than a function of daily life!)

But while Belshazzar may not know about Daniel,
the Queen Mother does.
And so this representative of the older dynasty comes with a recommendation.

Call for Daniel!
And her words suggest that she has great respect for Daniel:
“in the days of your father, light and understanding and wisdom
like the wisdom of the gods were found in him.” (v11)

Sinclair Ferguson says well about her comment,
that “This energy is the secret of all spiritual work
and the hallmark of all those whom God has used in special ways.
It is not a physical energy, although it often manifests itself
in the sheer tireless patience and determination
God’s people have to finish their tasks.” (110)

What is this “energy”?
Nothing else but the Spirit of God.
“Daniel had a share in the Spirit of the Messiah...
No wonder there were so many ways that Daniel resembled Christ.” (111)

God had promised Abraham that those who bless you, I will bless.
The Queen Mother blesses the Seed of Abraham with her words.
We do not know whether she herself trusted in the God of Daniel –
but from her words, it would not surprise me!

Humble yourself before the LORD and he will exalt you!

3. Babylonian Blather: The Speech of Belshazzar (v13-16)

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^e 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.”

And so Daniel is brought in,
and we have to endure four verses of Babylonian blather from Belshazzar!
We already know everything here –
but Belshazzar must say it all over again –
because (as any good Presbyterian knows),
it doesn't make a difference *how many people* have said this before me,
if *I haven't said it*, it hasn't been said!!

But there is also considerable irony in this scene.
Belshazzar has just insulted Daniel's God by drinking from the sacred vessels.
He also highlights Daniel's humble origins –
“you are that Daniel, one of the exiles of Judah,
whom the king my father brought from Judah” –
you are a nobody!

Ironic – given that the Queen Mother has just said that Daniel is his only hope!

Exalt yourself before the LORD and he will humble you!

Because like Belshazzar,
your only hope is a castoff Jew who was despised by the rulers of his day!

4. You Have Not Honored God: The Speech of Daniel (v17-28)

a. Remember Nebuchadnezzar – Who Was Humbled by the Most High God (v17-21)

¹⁷ Then Daniel answered and said before the king, “Let your gifts be for yourself, and give your rewards to another.

In other words, I don't want to be part of your administration!

I'm not going to interpret this for you out of any desire for reward.

I'm over 80 years old, and I don't need anything that you can give me!

This principle will be expressed later by the apostle Peter in reply to Simon Magus –

“Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money!” (Acts 8:20) (112)

(Daniel will have no choice but to accept the honors later –

but he makes it clear from the start that these honors will not influence his words.)

I know the temptation!

Pastors have always had to deal with the challenge of preaching to the people who pay them.

God says that this is the way that we are supposed to do it (1 Cor 9:11, 14).

The key is for both of us – both you and me – to simply follow Jesus.

I am called to teach you to observe all that Jesus said.

And you are called to provide for me and my family.

And while I am not fit to evaluate myself in the first part of that,

I am thankful to say that you have done so well at doing the second part!

But after rejecting the rewards of the king, Daniel says that he will still interpret the words.

Nevertheless, I will read the writing to the king and make known to him the interpretation.

But before he does, he gives Belshazzar a lesson in theological history.

I call it theological history –

because Daniel is not just talking about “political history.”

He is talking about the spiritual realities *behind* the story of Nebuchadnezzar:

¹⁸ O king, the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father kingship and greatness and glory and majesty.

Jesus will echo this when he says to Pilate – “you would have no authority, if it had not been given you from above!”

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.

Now let's be clear!

This is talking about Nebuchadnezzar!

Nebuchadnezzar killed whom he would, and raised up whom he would.

Nebuchadnezzar even humbled whom he would!

But the key is that all of this was because of the greatness that *God* gave him!!

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.

This briefly summarizes what we saw last week from chapter 4.

The Most High God rules the kingdom of mankind and sets over it whom he will.

God set Nebuchadnezzar over ancient Babylon
He set William the Conqueror over medieval England.
He set Lenin over the Soviet Union –
and yes, he has set Donald Trump over the United States.

But the way that Daniel tells the story,
we need to take this in a much broader, more all-encompassing sense.
We are not just talking about politics here.
We are talking about a theological vision of history.
God's rule extends to all things.

This book, after all, was not written to kings and rulers.
This book was written for *all of God's people*.
It's not just Gentile kings who need to humble themselves before the Lord!
You do!

Think about how Daniel says this to Belshazzar:

b. You Have Not Humbled Your Heart (v22-23)

²² And you his son,^[1] 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.

“And you”...

Fourteen times in these two verses (v22-23)
the word “you” or “your” or “yourself” is used.

What is the problem here?
YOU ARE!
You have exalted yourself.
You have not humbled your heart.

And notice the end of verse 22 –
“though you knew all this”!
Maybe Belshazzar didn’t know much about Daniel –
but he *knew* all this.

Nowadays we seem to think that education is the solution to every problem.
We must “enlighten” these poor ignorant blighters –
and then they will *know* better!
But how often are we *genuinely* ignorant?

If the problem is ignorance, then the solution is education.
But what if education doesn’t work?
Well, that would suggest that the *problem* lies elsewhere!

What’s my problem?
“Me, me, me, me, me, me”
What is it that I love?
What is it that I desire?
Where is your heart?

As long as I am fixated on my own little kingdom –
on furthering *my* power and *my* glory and *my* kingdom, forever, amen! –
I will always run up against the uncomfortable – but inexorable – fact
that I am not God – and my kingdom cannot last!

That’s why we pray in the Lord’s Prayer:
“for *thine* is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.”

Thy kingdom come.

Not *my* kingdom.

I need to learn to humble myself – to deny myself, take up my cross, and follow Jesus.

But let’s look at this a little closer:
What was the fundamental sin of Belshazzar?

Pride, yes.
Exalting himself against the Lord of heaven.

But *how*?

Daniel highlights the particular sin that we heard
just before Belshazzar saw the handwriting on the wall:
you have drunk wine from the vessels of God’s house –
and you have praised the gods of silver and gold...
which do not see or hear or know.

You have used God’s holy things to exalt yourselves.
And you have refused to honor the God in whose hand is your breath.

Daniel focuses on the particular liturgical expression that Belshazzar's pride had taken.
Where are the places in your life where *you* are exalting yourself
at the expense of Christ?

And particularly what are the practices – the habits – the patterns in your life –
that are interfering with what God has called you to do and be?

What are the things that are more important to you than the worship of God?

What are the things that you will do *rather* than read the scriptures and pray?

What will you prefer, rather than sing Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs –
something that Paul says we should be doing in our daily life in our homes!

Yes, I know.

It gets uncomfortable when I think about this for myself!

I would rather play a computer game, than praise my God?

Humble yourself before the almighty hand of God – before it's too late!

c. So the Sign Signifies Your End (v24-28)

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^[s] the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; ²⁷ TEKEL, you have been weighed^[h] in the balances and found wanting; ²⁸ PERES, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.”

And so Daniel says, here is what the inscription means.

Mene, mene, tekel, parsin.

In one sense, the words themselves were not all that difficult.

They form a sequence of weights.

‘mene’ – or *mina* – refers to a very large amount;

‘tekel’ – or *shekel* – refers to a much smaller weight (1/60th of a mina);

‘parsin’ – is a half-shekel.

But the words also are related to other words,

so if you interpret them more loosely,

you could say, “numbered, numbered, weighed and divided.”

And the repetition of the word “numbered” has the effect of saying

“it is surely numbered.”

And Parsin sounds an awful lot like the word *Persia*.

The particular judgment upon Belshazzar – and upon Babylon –

is a reminder to us that there is a day of judgment coming –

on which God will judge all mankind – the living and the dead.

And, like Belshazzar, your only hope is a castoff Jew who was despised and rejected by men.
Because, as Paul says, God has given notice of that coming day,
by raising his Son from the dead!
In the death and resurrection of Jesus,
the last-days judgment of God came upon *him* –
and *he* was vindicated!
If you would share in his vindication – if you would be justified –
then you must come to him in faith! –
for there is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved!

5. The Most High God Rules the Kingdom of Mankind and Gives It to Whom He Wills (v29-31)

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.*

But the ironies continue!

Because Belshazzar gives Daniel the promised honors!
Perhaps he felt obligated to fulfill his word.
Perhaps he was drunk.

Daniel must have wondered if he would be executed for giving the king bad news!
(And especially for doing it in such an abrupt and peremptory way!)

But our text shares Daniel's peremptory tone.

Because the conclusion of the matter comes in two short sentences:

³⁰ *That very night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was killed.* ³¹ [\[U\]](#) *And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old.*

How did all this happen?

Daniel will spend lots of time telling small stories.
But of the siege of Babylon and the fall of the city,
he offers no details.

Why should he?

The Most High God rules the kingdom of mankind and gives it to whom he wills!
It is sufficient to say that Belshazzar was killed that night –
and Darius the Mede received the kingdom.

That's how quick it can happen.

All of a sudden – in a moment – your kingdom is gone.
Humble yourself before the Lord, and he will exalt you!