
The Cause of the Nations' Fall

Daniel 5:1-30

Introduction *OMINOUS WARNINGS ABOUND.* We have become so used to predictions of disaster that we are almost inured to them. The Treasury Secretary warned of total financial collapse, getting on his knees to beg for finance to “rescue the banks” from a disaster he helped to create! Yet we now know that people like him in the face of the troubles were taking outrageous bonuses and spending money like water.

Our President now warns us of imminent financial collapse into depression if this spending bill is not passed. I do not believe him. Managing financial, economic and global conflict are old, tried and true means of bringing about social change.

Why do nations rise and fall? Is it just that they make mistakes? Over time does a nation sink under the growing weight of its national folly and failing leadership? Where is God in the procession of pagan kingdoms?

We have here *A TRILOGY OF KINGS*. The writer is not placing these as histories with the events following one after the other. Chapters four, five and six place three kings side-by-side with their responses to God highlighted.

Nebuchadnezzar - Submits to the Lord God and is converted.

Belshazzar - Dishonors the Lord God and is condemned

Darius - Respects the Lord God and is commended.

Who is Belshazzar? In a period of 6 to 10 years, he is actually the fifth king to rule Babylon after Nebuchadnezzar's death. He was the co-regent with his father, Nabonidus who sat on the throne, but pursued his religious and rebuilding interests and allowed Belshazzar to rule. The father/son reference to Nebuchadnezzar was a very common way in both Hebrew and Aramiac to refer to ancestors whose lives overlapped. In other words, Belshazzar was alive when his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar ruled.³

But in the chaos of the years leading up to his ascent to the throne, his pride and folly grew. He is the lens through which God shows us how the Gentile nations fall. He is going to hear an ominous warning. Will he hear and heed?

The Riotous Banquet

(v.1-12)

From the glorious confession of Nebuchadnezzar's humbled heart, the scene now shifts to hubris and hubbub of Belshazzar's riotous banquet.

Its Drunken Revelry

(v.1-4)

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.

The enemy is at the gate. Secure in his deep fastness within the keep of Babylon, Belshazzar gives a great feast for his nobles. He fears not the growing Persian might nor the great power in heaven.

What could add to the delicacy of the sweet wines at his table? Ah, bring up from the royal treasury the gold and silver goblets purloined from the Jewish temple. After all, he is the god of the state, Bel. His ancestors conquered Israel and thus their god – mighty nobles tremble not. We are safe.

Matthew Henry, in the eloquence of his day, writes, "To show how little fear he had of being forced to surrender, for want of provisions, he spent thus extravagantly. Security and sensuality are sad presages of approaching ruin. Those that will not be warned by judgments of God may expect to be wounded by them. He put an affront upon the temple of God, and bade defiance to his sanctuary, v. 2. *While he tasted the wine, he commanded to bring the vessels of the temple, that they might drink in them. When he tasted how rich and fine the wine was, "O,"* said he, "it is a pity but we should have holy vessels to drink such delicious wine as this in," which was looked upon as a piece of wit, and, to carry on the humour, the vessels of the temple were immediately sent for. Nay, there seems to have been something more in it than a frolic, and that it was done in a malicious despite to the God of Israel."⁴

The vessels are brought. The seven branched lampstand is placed along one wall. The stewards hasten around the table filling each vessel with wines – cheese, meats, breads and grapes are heaped on the chalices that once held the cup and bread in the holy place. Raise the cup – praise the gods of gold and silver, the gods of bronze, iron and wood.

Its Divine Interruption

(v.5-9)

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.

Hear the gasp of breath. The music stops in mid-beat. Opposite the lampstand, fingers appear. To the astonished and affrighted gaze of the king, they etch three words into the plaster. They are not holding some piece of chalk or some stump of charcoal. The fingers are pressing into and inscribing deeply into the plaster of the wall the fiery words much like a fingernail etches clay.

The words sank like a knife of fear deep in his soul. He did not know what they meant, but the appearance of the hand and the abruptness of the words boded ill tidings. With all his promises of rewards, all the king's wise men and all the king's magicians were impotent to read, understand or interpret the words. His chest tightened, his breathing shortened as fear swelled in a red alarm.

Its Desperate Recommendation

(v.10-12)

¹⁰ 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 Beltshazzar. Now let Daniel be called, and he will show the interpretation."

But there is one who remembers Daniel. The queen mother here is likely the wife of Nebuchadnezzar and therefore his grandmother. She is a grand old dame at this point. She has absented herself from the debauchery, but hears about what has taken place. She sweeps in with wise words and a desperate recommendation. She counsels that Belshazzar call on Daniel to come. He has a demonstrated ability to read, understand and interpret such weighty portents. He had served Nebuchadnezzar well. Seek him out and he will give the interpretation.

The Prophetic Warning

(v.13-23)

Daniel is summoned and brought in. There he stands, now an aged man of eighty. White are his locks and beard. Stooped are his shoulders. Clear is his gaze. Strong is his soul. This is the foremost of his day now called to serve the king once again. But in his prophetic warning, he will serve his greater sovereign.

Its Desperate Request

(v.13-16)

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 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."

Belshazzar makes sure Daniel knows his place – he is an exile brought to Babylon from Judah. But he also knows Daniel by reputation. Daniel is known for having the spirit of the gods and extraordinary wisdom and insight. Remember, Belshazzar is thinking as a polytheist, idol-worshipping ruler. He is looking at someone who in his mind is a Gandalf, a great white wizard full of power and wisdom. He is needed and therefore has been summoned. But such a great personage will need a reward, hear, bribe. He is being offered the third rulership of the kingdom along with its personal symbols and public status.⁵

Its Dramatic Accusation

(v.17-23)

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.

The dramatic accusation flows from the stern and calm servant of God. Daniel serves His king, not for human reward, but with prophetic integrity. Belshazzar's gifts are not necessary for Daniel to serve. They are not desirable lest his integrity be compromised. This is so great a temptation to those who represent Christ and speak or write in the public forum. Book publishers are notorious for demanding change in content that eventually compromises the author's message.

The lure of popular appeal and financial gain can erode the preacher's willingness to say with appropriate force the hard things to hear.

Daniel in grand prophetic tone, reminds Belshazzar of his failure to learn the lessons his (grand)father learned. God humbled the mighty Nebuchadnezzar. Belshazzar has ignored the lessons of history and family. He has read the conversion letter. He knows what the sovereign of heaven can and will do. But he has not bowed his heart, tempered his pride nor restrained his sin.

Daniel pointedly accuses him of lifting up himself against the God of heaven. His sin is not just horizontal, that is, against the Jewish people or in the face of family history. His praise of pagan gods and the defilement of Jewish relics is an affront to the one and true sovereign God.

This is a lesson we need to learn again today. What ever happened to sin against God? Our "sins" today are violations of relational mores. They are breaking faith with others or not respecting others space, boundaries or meta-narratives. No matter how evil or wicked a religion may be, it is simply impolite and unkind to expose it for what it is. And we almost never hear people talking about sin against God. My friends, your sins are sins against the high King of heaven or they are not sins. Yes, you may sin against another, but every sin against another person is a sin because God says so.

We live our lives before the face of God *whether we recognize it or not*. Daniel simply says to the most powerful man on the face of the earth, "In your pursuit of your religion you have sinned against the one true God." This is simply a fact that is to be declared, particularly when we are giving the gospel. May we simply have the clarity in our own mind about what is at stake and courage in our own hearts to be able to say the most loving thing we can to someone whose course of sin is on a trajectory towards eternal hell and damnation. The alarm must be raised. The wrath of God hanging over their heads must be declared. The love of God that made the way must be proclaimed without hesitation or hypocrisy.

Brothers and sisters, do you really believe that every single person who does not believe and bow is presently already under the sentence of the wrath of God? Listen to the words of John 3:16-21 which interlock these two concepts into a strong testimony of both present doom, future wrath and gracious love.

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. ²¹ But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been carried out in God." [ESV]

Its Damning Judgment**(v.24-28)**

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 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."

The three words announce the damning judgment on Belshazzar.

Mene God is sovereign over the duration of your kingdom.

Tekel God has weighed you and your actions and found you wanting.

Parsin God will judge you by ripping your kingdom in two and giving it to the Medes and the Persians.

These three words announce judgment on all unbelievers.

Mene God is sovereign your own life. He has numbered your years. He has ordained and established the moment of your death. As creator, sustainer and judge He holds absolute and ultimate sway over your life. Your denial of this does not change the fact of it. It only increases the dire danger of it.

Tekel God knows you from the inside out. He knows your down sitting, your rising up, your thoughts and intents. He knows your secret thoughts and hidden sins. He sees the stain of inborn depravity spreading like dark sludge ever deeper and deeper into the crevices of your life. He places all the dark evil and dripping filth of your self-righteousness on one side of the scale. On the other, He places the bright gold of His own goodness, glory and grace. And He finds you wanting. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23)

Parsin God will judge you. He may begin His judgment in this life. He may hold, storing it up until the day of His fierce and terrible wrath when you will stand before the King, the Lord Jesus.

O, turn, believe, bow. No words are inscribed on the walls of this room. They are written in the pages of this Book, the Bible, the Word of God, the Scriptures. Hear them well and heed their call.

The Contrasted Results

(v.29-30)

In a simple and stunning contrast, two results are set over against one another. The one speaking words of doom is honored and the one who dishonored the Lord God is doomed.

Its Brief Elevation

(v.29)

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.

In a tacit acknowledgement of the truth Daniel spoke, Belshazzar elevates him. He rewards him and honors him. But O, how brief and fleeting the recognition by those whose doom is just outside the walls. I wonder if Daniel allows this simple because he knows he may wear them back to his chambers, but not another day.

Its Destroying Execution

(v.30)

³⁰ That very night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was killed. ³¹ And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old.

What a word, “That very night...” Darius’ army, knowing the futility of breaching the multi-layered defensive system of the city, simply diverted the Euphrates above the city. The quiet clink of sword and shield and armor was not heard as the invading army slipped in under the sluice gates moving along the river bed. The quiet assault began at the palace in the slumbering hours of darkest night. There, Belshazzar was slaughtered as he lay in a drunken stupor upon his bed.

Reflect and Respond

Like Belshazzar, many unbelievers are evading the difficulties and dangers of life with the excesses of pleasures and escapes. The enemy is at the gates - financial troubles, job vulnerabilities, looming consequences of long choices. Some Christians are often little better. We hide out in virtual worlds, medicate our anxieties, blot out reality with the noise of music, blog ourselves into believing all is well. May God grant all the grace of repentance lest we find ourselves swept away.

What we need in such a world are good and great prophet/preachers, full of the Word, wisdom, courage and clear, plain words. We need men who will not be tempted by the siren songs of acclaim, recognition, money, sales and large numbers. We need men who will say, “I will not take your rewards *because* I must give you God’s Words.” And we need Christians who will support such men.

Do you sense the hand writing on the wall? Through the Word of God you have been hearing, has God inscribed condemnation? Have you come to understand that you are already under the wrath of God? Then turn, my friend, turn to Christ. Go not down with Belshazzar into eternal doom. Believe what the Bible says of Him. Bow to Him as your Lord. Receive the forgiveness of your sins, reconciliation and peace with God.

Notes

³ While this seems strange to us and even to some, either deceptive or inaccurate, the use of father/son to refer to living ancestors/predecessors is well attested to the contemporary history. It is used in the Hebrew genealogies in the Pentateuch. The sequence of Nebuchadnezzar → Evil-Merodach → Neriglissar → Labashi-Marduk → Nabonidus → Belshazzar is well documented elsewhere. See *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Vol. 1 p. 1344; *Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary*, p. 316; as well as the following from the NBC, “Strictly speaking, the last king of the neo-Babylonian dynasty was Nabonidus (556–539 bc), but for a decade he set up his royal residence in Teiman leaving his son Bel-sarusur (Belshazzar, ‘Bel protect the king’) as regent. Note that Belshazzar’s offering of the third highest place in the kingdom in vs 7, 16 and 29 assumes this. (Cf. Gn. 41:40 where Joseph was given second place.) Belshazzar was possibly the grandson of Nebuchadnezzar (‘father’ in vs 2, 11, 18 and ‘son’ in v 22 would have been readily understood as elastic terms by the original readers).” *New Bible Commentary : 21st Century Edition, Rev. Ed. of: The New Bible Commentary. 3rd Ed.* / Edited by D. Guthrie, J.A. Motyer. 1970., 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), Da 5:1.

⁴ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible : Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996, c1991), Da 5:1.

⁵ Note that this corresponds with what we know to be true. Nabonidus is the first regent with Belshazzar as the second, co-regent. He is offering Daniel an elevation to the third place in the kingdom which would put him over the realm on behalf of Belshazzar.