

“There Is a Man in Your Kingdom”

The Tenth in a Series of Sermons on the Book of Daniel

Texts: Daniel 5:1–12; 1 Corinthians 1:18–31

Nebuchadnezzar foresaw this terrible night in a dream—a great empire, crumbling by the day, now entering its final hours. In his visionary dream of a gigantic metallic statue with a head of gold, Nebuchadnezzar saw the greatness of his own empire, even as Daniel warned him that both the king and his empire would come to an end—crushed by a rock cut from a mountain without human hands. Now, Nebuchadnezzar is long since dead and gone with the last of the Babylonian kings (Belshazzar, co-regent with his father—Nabonidus) on the throne. The year is 539 BC. Although Daniel does not reveal the circumstances behind the debauchery seen in the opening verses of chapter 5 until the closing verses of the chapter, this is the Kingdom of Babylon’s last night. Persian armies are about to take Babylon through a daring commando raid using the city’s dried-up water supply. Instead of leading the city’s defenders in an effort to save the city, Belshazzar hosts a huge drunken party as though all were right with the world. On this night, the last hours of the great Babylonian empire, Belshazzar spends it drinking and mocking YHWH, even as YHWH takes his kingdom from him and gives it to another—the Persian conqueror of the city, Darius the Mede. All of this was foretold in king Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of Daniel 2.

We resume our series on the Book of Daniel picking up in Daniel 5, where the circumstances are greatly different from those at the end of Daniel 4 (v. 37), when Nebuchadnezzar confessed—even if reluctantly—“*Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to humble.*” Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 BC—23 years before the events of recounted here. A list of short-term successors had taken Nebuchadnezzar’s place. The first was the king’s own son, Amel-Marduk, who was assassinated by his brother-in-law in 560 (reigning just two years). One of those who plotted his death (Neriglessar) ruled unto 556, and was succeeded by his own son, Labashi-Marduk, who was brought down just a few months into his reign by a coup lead by Nabonidus, an unpopular eccentric known for his devotion to the god “Sin” instead of the traditional and most favored Babylonian god, Marduk (Bel).

Nabonidus was hated by the people, so for some ten years he ruled from the Arabian wilderness over the rapidly declining, increasingly decadent, and about to be defeated Babylonian empire—appointing his son Belshazzar as a co-regent representing the “pro-Marduk” wing of the Babylonian court. It fell to Belshazzar to remain in Babylon when the Persians finally breached the city’s walls (after damming-up the Euphrates river so that an elite unit could enter the walled city using the dried up riverbed which ran through the heart of the city). After the fall of Babylon (his capital), the cowardly Nabonidus later surrendered to the Persian king Cyrus and lived out his life in exile. Darius the Mede and Cyrus are likely one and the same man—Darius the Mede is the conquering king’s birth name, while Cyrus is thought to be his Persian royal throne name.¹

The scene in Daniel 5 is one in which the city’s fate has already been determined—it is just a matter of time before the Persians open the gates from the inside so that the Persian army can enter the undamaged

¹ See the discussion in; Steinmann, Daniel, 290-296.

city in triumph.² We can even precisely date the events of this night to October 11, 539, because Persian military records tell us that Darius' victorious armies marched into Babylon on 16 Tishri, 539 (October 12). According to verse 30, the king's banquet occurred the very night the city fell to Darius.

Some of the worst examples of human behavior play out in the final moments of a dying tyrannical empire. The reality of the impending disaster facing the king of Babylon and his court as described by Daniel does not become clear to the reader until the closing verses of the chapter. One commentator points out that quite unexpectedly "the narrative leaps from the reign of Nebuchadnezzar [chapter 4] to the very end of the Babylonian empire, the night on which its last ruler was killed and the city fell to the Medes and Persians."³ Some have noted that the text of Daniel 5 is rather choppy, lacking any of the reluctant but repeated confessions of YHWH's power and sovereignty as found on the lips of Nebuchadnezzar seen in chapters 2, 3, and 4. "We read only that Belshazzar the Chaldean is eliminated and Darius the Mede was enthroned."⁴ In fulfillment of the dream in Daniel 2, YHWH crushes Belshazzar and his empire (the golden head of Nebuchadnezzar's dream) without forcing a reluctant confession of YHWH's sovereign rule. It is God's appointed time for the silver chest and arms of the statue (the Persians) to take Babylon's place.

It will come as no surprise that critical scholars consider this chapter to be legendary because Belshazzar is spoken of throughout as Nebuchadnezzar's "son" (when he was not, at least biologically speaking). For a time there was no external evidence for the existence of Belshazzar apart from this account—making critical scholars suspicious of its authenticity. But Babylonian sources uncovered in the 1860's and again more recently do indeed refer to Belshazzar as the son of Nabonidus, proving the accuracy of Daniel's account. Going about their merry way with scant regard for facts which don't fit their theories, critical scholars cannot explain how someone writing three hundred years after these events would make these names, only to have the original story confirmed by previously unknown sources coming from the 5th century BC. Once critical views get entrenched, scholars won't give these views up.

Furthermore, the queen mother's reference to Belshazzar as Nebuchadnezzar's son (5:11), can easily be taken to mean that Nebuchadnezzar is the historic predecessor of Belshazzar—as David is said to be "son of Abraham" in the opening verse of Matthew's gospel. But the main point Daniel is making when speaking this way is that as someone loyal to the Babylonian "god" Marduk, Belshazzar actually follows Nebuchadnezzar in defying YHWH (as we will see in our text). Nabonidus is in a Babylonian cult, living out in the desert doing his own thing, letting his son face the Persians alone. But Belshazzar actually better reflects the attitude of a true follower of Marduk, believing in Marduk's superiority over all other gods including YHWH. In this sense then, Belshazzar is the true son of Nebuchadnezzar, repeating the boasts and sins of his well-known predecessor. One idolater (Nebuchadnezzar) has bred another, Belshazzar, even though there is likely no direct biological connection between them.⁵

The fifth chapter of Daniel is arranged into four different scenes, each centering upon different characters

0. The historical background is capably set forth in: Baldwin, Daniel, 24-26; and Steinmann, Daniel, 258-259.

³ Baldwin, Daniel, 132.

⁴ Davis, Daniel, 71-72.

⁵ Steinmann, Daniel, 262.

who participate in the fateful events during the last banquet in the royal palace. The first scene (vv. 1-6) focuses upon the king's drunken party, his mocking of YHWH, followed by the appearance of mysterious handwriting upon the wall, which terrifies Belshazzar. The second scene (vv. 7-12) opens when the king seeks someone to interpret the mysterious handwriting. As is now the pattern throughout the Book of Daniel, the king's wise men cannot read the message, while the queen mother remembers a Hebrew prophet known for his ability to interpret such things (Daniel). The third scene (vv. 13-29) is Daniel's appearance before the king when he interprets the handwriting and delivers its warning of impending judgment because of Belshazzar's blasphemy. The final scene (vv. 30-31) occurs when YHWH fulfills what is promised in the mysterious handwriting when Darius conquers the city that same evening (and takes the Babylonian throne for his own).⁶ We will cover the first two scenes this Lord's day, and then complete the chapter next time, Lord willing.

As we turn to our text, verse 1 of chapter 5, the scene in the palace is set before us. "*King Belshazzar made a great feast for a thousand of his lords and drank wine in front of the thousand.*" Daniel's description is one of a very big party with lots of wine flowing freely. Those present were from the leading families, civic officials, and regulars at court. There is no hint that the Persian army was just outside the city and nothing is said about any of the participants (including Belshazzar) feeling any sense of urgency to join the city's defenders and perhaps rally them to drive back the Persians. We are left to wonder whether these royal big-wigs were unaware of what was about to happen (which seems unlikely given what Daniel says to Belshazzar in verse 22, "you know that YHWH humbled Nebuchadnezzar"), or if they thought defeat inevitable and held one last party in the face of death—"eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die."

The scene is one of the leaders and officials an empire so cut-off from reality and so thoroughly convinced of the empire's invincibility that even though total collapse of the empire was but hours away, no one knew what to do, or even had the categories how to respond. A number of ancient Greek sources—from Herodotus to Xenophon report that Babylon fell to the Persians while the Babylonians were engaging a late night drunken feast—confirming Daniel's report. Other ancient writers tell us that the Persians captured the city virtually intact, killed Belshazzar that very night, occupying the city the next day, allowing Darius (Cyrus) to enter several days later with his new subjects waving palm branches signifying "peace."⁷ The Babylonians were quick to see what had happened and embraced the Persians.

The drunken debauchery of the king's party leads to something much worse according to verses 2-3, the out and out mockery of YHWH. "*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. 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.*" We have discussed these temple vessels a number of times in our previous series on Ezra-Nehemiah and even mentioned this night (recounted in Daniel 5) in passing. These vessels were made of fine gold and silver and were known by Belshazzar and his guests to have been used in YHWH's temple. They are the spoils of war.

The reference to Belshazzar "tasting the wine," is probably a euphemism for being drunk. The king is

⁶ Greidanus, Preaching Christ from Daniel, 148-149.

⁷ Goldingay, Daniel, 106-108.

about to bring down the wrath of God upon his head and that of his kingdom. Recall that Nebuchadnezzar first laid siege to Jerusalem in 605 BC (this is when Daniel and his three friends were first captured and brought to Babylon). Recall too that YHWH allowed Nebuchadnezzar to seize some of the temple vessels (from YHWH's temple in Jerusalem) and place them in the treasury in Babylon. In Daniel 1:1-2, we read, "*in the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God. And he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his god.*" Nebuchadnezzar saw this as a triumph of his "gods" over YHWH, only to find himself in the years following repeatedly humbled by YHWH for boasting about such a thing. YHWH is Lord, not Nebuchadnezzar or his "gods." That YHWH humbled the Babylonian king would bring much comfort to the Jews then in exile hearing Daniel's prophecy.

As we have also seen, YHWH allowed this pillage of the temple vessels and the city as a form of judgment upon the disobedient Israelites, who worshiped and served other gods and then intermarried with Gentile pagans. We also know that Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem a second time before finally breaching the walls of the city in 587 BC, at that time completely destroying the city and the temple and perhaps bringing what was left of the gold and silver implements in the temple back to Babylon as the spoils of his victory over the defeated Jews and their God. No doubt, these expensive vessels held place of honor in the Babylonian treasury.

As is clear from the ground we have covered so far in Daniel 2, 3, and 4, YHWH repeatedly demonstrated his sovereignty over Nebuchadnezzar, forcing the pagan king to confess that YHWH is the eternal God who rules from heaven and who is greater than all the gods of Babylon. But in the twenty-plus years since Nebuchadnezzar's death, much political intrigue has gone on in Babylon, some of it centering upon which Babylonian "god" should be favored—Marduk (Belshazzar) or "Sin," championed by Nabonidus. Fully aware of Nebuchadnezzar's history with YHWH (as we know from what follows), in a moment of drunken bravado and blasphemy, Belshazzar demands that the gold and silver vessels be removed from the treasury and brought to the palace so that all the partygoers can drink from the gold and silver vessels taken from YHWH's temple. It is a supreme and intentional act of sacrilege. This would be like taking home the communion ware for use at a bachelor party. The New Testament warns us of people getting sick and dying for profaning the Supper (1 Corinthians 10:16-22 with 11:27-31).

The partying in the royal palace is nothing short of open mockery of YHWH, blaspheming his name, and an obvious attempt on the part of Belshazzar to "outshine his predecessor and to demonstrate that he is greater than Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon's greatest king."⁸ We are told in verse 4, the partygoers "*drank wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone.*" Daniel's point is that the Babylonians have hit a new low and are now effectively demanding divine retribution and judgment in a supreme act of human sinfulness and rebellion. Renouncing YHWH, and mocking him, they also praise their gods of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone. A more foolish and dangerous act is hard to conceive. Surely, Belshazzar knew enough of Nebuchadnezzar's history to know that the statue of Nebuchadnezzar's dream which was crushed by a rock (Christ's kingdom) was composed of the very same elements he and his people are now praising.⁹

⁸ Steinmann, Daniel, 272.

⁹ Steinmann, Daniel, 272-273.

YHWH crashes Belshazzar's party. He sends Belshazzar a personal warning of imminent judgment in the form of a mysterious handwritten message—the basis for the phrase predicting imminent disaster, “the handwriting is on the wall.” Daniel recounts in verse 5, that “*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.*” This was not a drunken apparition seen only by the highly intoxicated king, but the now visible hand of a divine agent (an angel) if not the hand of the Angel of the Lord himself (the preincarnate Jesus Christ). The king saw the hand, the wise men saw the writing left behind.

It is interesting (and helpful) to note, that the royal palace in Babylon has since been excavated. It has a huge throne room (50m x 17m) found behind three large outer courtyards. A massive doorway faces a large niche in the wall opposite where the king's throne was probably located. Nebuchadnezzar sat here. Daniel appeared here. Belshazzar saw the handwriting here. The wall behind the throne is covered with blue enamel tile (as with the Ishtar Gate), the rest of the walls are white plaster. Enough remains of the room that we can get a good sense of the lampstand probably placed before one of the walls near the throne, illumining the room during the evening so the king could see visitors and entertainers. The light from the lamp enabled the king to see the hand and what it had written.¹⁰

The entire scene is creepy and intended to be. This was not some sort of graffiti left behind by teenage vandals or by the king's enemies, suddenly discovered by those assembled. No, this is the hand of God (literally) and visible to the king, writing his word of judgment on the wall of the royal palace so the king could see it while at the same time the king and his guests were openly mocking YHWH. With the sight of a divine hand writing a mysterious warning on the wall, the king's reaction is one of sheer terror. We read in verse 6, “*then the king's color changed, and his thoughts alarmed him; his limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together.*” Belshazzar was absolutely terrified and looked faint. He is instantly sober, and since the Hebrew literally reads “the knots of his loins were loosed,” Daniel may be telling us euphemistically that the last Babylonian king soiled himself in the presence of YHWH's hand of judgment.¹¹ Regardless, Daniel is certainly affirming that Belshazzar was too shaken to stand.¹² This mysterious hand and the message left behind warns all those present that the end is near. YHWH has just ruined Belshazzar's party.

Gathering himself enough to call for the wise men and court magicians to explain the meaning of this frightening turn of events, we learn in verse 7 that “*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.'*” The situation is desperate and the matter is urgent. The king will give anyone who can read the mysterious handwritten message the symbols of royal office—purple robes and a gold chain.¹³ As further evidence of the historical accuracy of the account, Belshazzar does not offer the interpreter a chance to be his second in command, but the third highest ruler in the kingdom, behind Nabonidus and Belshazzar.

¹⁰ Baldwin, Daniel, 134.

¹¹ Davis, Daniel, 74.

¹² Goldingay, Daniel, 101.

¹³ Goldingay, Daniel, 109.

The king's court magicians prove themselves completely useless again. *"Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or make known to the king the interpretation."* We are not told why the writing was unreadable although the characters were obviously visible to the naked eye. They seem to have been Aramaic (which the wise men could read), but were probably written without spaces, dots, or lines so that the wise men could not figure out individual words from an inscription in which everything ran together. Daniel will interpret the writing as three words, and then interpret the words through divine revelation (vv. 25-28).

Since YHWH wrote the words, so too only a prophet of YHWH can read/interpret them. The inability of his wise men and astrologers to translate the handwriting brought back the king's initial panic. Daniel tells us in verse 9, *"then King Belshazzar was greatly alarmed, and his color changed, and his lords were perplexed."* The brash drunken king, once mocking YHWH, and praising the gods of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone, is no longer so brash. He's terrified, his party is over, and the Persians are about to enter the palace and put the king to the sword.

The queen (the mother of Belshazzar and wife of Nabonidus) who recalls what happened back in the days of Nebuchadnezzar enters the banquet hall with a very wise suggestion for Belshazzar. *"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.'" She seeks to calm her son, and after the perfunctory royal greeting, "may the king live forever," she proceeds to comfort her son, "dear, dear, you don't look so good . . . it will be OK."*

The queen recalls that a young Hebrew servant had the ability to interpret the troubling dreams given to Nebuchadnezzar. *"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."* As noted earlier, Nebuchadnezzar is Belshazzar's father in a figurative sense (predecessor), not a biological sense. This Hebrew prophet of YHWH—in whom YHWH's Spirit dwells—could interpret dreams and showed himself to be wise beyond all the others serving in the Babylonian court—so wise, in fact, that Nebuchadnezzar named him prefect over the other wise man, court magicians, and astrologers.

The queen recalled that Daniel excelled, *"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."* If Daniel could interpret mysterious dreams, he should be able to interpret the mysterious handwriting. Nothing is said of what Daniel has been doing in the meantime. He's now an old man, he's outlived Nebuchadnezzar by 20+ years, he's survived two palace coups, and was not familiar to the current king and his group of Chaldeans, which is an indication that he had not served the Babylonian royals for some time. Daniel probably did what all retired prophets do, he played golf. The queen, however, remembers him and knows that he can help her son. Daniel will be summoned immediately.

The king's last hope is that *"there is a man in his kingdom"* who can read the writing. Belshazzar will not like what Daniel tells him (in vv. 13-31, our text next time). YHWH will not be mocked. The king has been warned that this is his last night to live and that the great kingdom of Babylon soon will be no more. The time has come for YHWH to remove the kingdom of Babylon from Belshazzar, and to allow the Persians to rule in their stead. It will not be long before Darius the Mede (Cyrus) will issue his decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem and allow the Jewish exiles to return home. YHWH keeps his

promises. YHWH is Lord, not any Babylonian or Persian king.

What then can we say by way of application? As for the scene depicted by Daniel in this chapter of his prophecy, YHWH gave a unmistakable sign of impending judgment upon the Babylonian king in the form of the mysterious handwriting on the wall of the royal palace. Only a prophet of YHWH can interpret the sign and what explain it means. Belshazzar has forgotten (or never learned) that it is YHWH who rules over all the kingdoms of men. It is YHWH who takes the kingdoms of men and gives them to whom he wills. Even kings have a king. YHWH will not be mocked by the likes of a Belshazzar. God keeps his promises to his covenant people, their 70 years in exile are about to come to end. Soon, they will be returning home to rebuild.¹⁴ As we read in Erza 1:1, not too long ago, “*the Lord stirred up Cyrus king of Persia,*” to let the Jews return home.

Yet the kings of the earth think nothing of mocking YHWH, or of blaspheming him, or as Nebuchadnezzar had done, act as though YHWH does not exist. Non-Christians cannot understand the ways of the Lord, because they have no spiritual discernment to see the hand of God (pun intended) as sovereign over all things. Paul addresses this sad fact for us in our New Testament lesson, 1 Corinthians 1:18–25, where he writes,

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

Neither the greatest kings nor the weakest of their subjects can understand the purposes of God, even when God gives them visible signs of his power and majesty. This is how deeply human sin effects us and this is why, apart from God’s prior grace and the work of his Holy Spirit, we will never understand the things of God or trust the cross of Jesus Christ to save us from our sins. In the providence of God, the queen’s mother can say to Belshazzar “there is a man your kingdom in whom God’s Spirit dwells,” and who possesses the wisdom of God. Thankfully, we have the very same Spirit who indwelt Daniel, and who lets us see the signs and wonders for what they are, also granting us the faith to trust in the cross of the crucified Savior to save us from our sins. For these things are wisdom from God for the salvation of our souls.

¹⁴ Greidanus, Preaching Christ from Daniel, 156.