

“God Has Numbered the Days of Your Kingdom”

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

Texts: Daniel 5:13-31; Romans 1:18-25

It was a party like no other. Wine was flowing freely and the thousand or so royal guests seem completely oblivious to the fact that within hours the party's host (the Babylonian king Belshazzar) would be dead and the Persian army will have captured the city and the palace in which his guests were partying. King Beshazzar and the great Babylonian empire will be no more. Yet, the events of this fateful evening should not come as a surprise to Belshazzar. YHWH warned Belshazzar's more famous predecessor (Nebuchadnezzar) of this very thing, in a dream recorded in Daniel 2. Nebuchadnezzar saw a gigantic metallic statue with a head of gold (presenting Nebuchadnezzar and his empire). But that empire would at some point give way to the Persian empire (represented by the silver arms and chest of the statue). It was the Hebrew prophet Daniel, who, when interpreting the dream, told Nebuchadnezzar of these events yet to transpire. On this very night, YHWH issues a warning of impending judgment—in the form of a mysterious handwritten message which suddenly appeared on the wall of the palace. Daniel is summoned to the king's palace yet again. This time, Daniel is to interpret a mysterious handwritten message which absolutely terrified Belshazzar as well as his guests. The message does not bring good news to Belshazzar. It is YHWH's declaration of judgment, fulfilling the scene in Nebuchadnezzar's dream.

One of the sure signs that God is directing all things to his appointed ends is that the last night of the Babylonian empire is also the same night in which the intoxicated king ordered that the gold and silver vessels, originally taken as the spoils of war from the temple of YHWH in Jerusalem, be used at his party as vessels with which to toast the Babylonian gods of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood and stone. These are the same elements which composed the statue of Nebuchadnezzaer's dream, which was crushed by a rock cut without human hands (Christ's kingdom), but which are worshiped by the Babylonian pagans. This is an act of out and out sacrilege by Belshazzar and nothing short of the intentional blasphemy of YHWH. We do not know if Belshazzar knew that this would be the night his empire would fall (there is no mention of him leading his troops or making an effort to rally Babylon's defenders), but he does make an intentional effort to mock the God of Israel. But YHWH will not be mocked—especially by the likes of Belshazzar. So YHWH crashes the party by directing that an angel (or perhaps the pre-incarnate Jesus) write a message of warning on the wall of the royal palace for all to see, warning the king and his guests of sure and certain judgment coming later that evening.

While Belshazzar saw the hand of YHWH, his guests saw the writing. No one present could read it—certainly not the useless court magicians and wise men. Belshazzar was terribly shaken by the sight of the hand leaving the message. All color left his face, he looked faint and he was so shaken he could not walk. Overhearing the kerfuffle in the palace, the queen mother entered the banquet hall and remembered a Hebrew prophet Daniel—who was now well up in years, and likely had not served in the royal court for some time. Daniel will be summoned to interpret the dream, only to warn Belshazzar that he will die this very evening. In this we see the overarching theme of the entire chapter—YHWH raises up kings and kingdoms. He removes kings when and how he wills. Belshazzar's kingdom will be taken from him and then given to another. The point of this incident is to give encouragement to the Jewish exiles then living in Babylon. By the next morning, Darius the Mede (Cyrus) will be in charge, and he will issue his decree to allow the Jews to return home to Jerusalem to rebuild. This too, has been ordained by God.

Daniel 5 includes four different scenes, each one centering around different characters who participate sequentially in the story. The first scene (vv. 1-6) focuses upon the king's drunken party, his mocking of YHWH, followed by the dramatic appearance of mysterious handwriting on the palace wall, which terrifies Belshazzar. In the second scene (vv. 7-12) the king seeks out someone who can interpret the mysterious handwriting. The king's wise men (who apparently, are not so wise) cannot read the message, while the queen mother remembers a former prefect in the royal court (Daniel) a Hebrew prophet known for his ability to interpret such things—he might be able to interpret the handwriting. The third scene (vv. 13-29) recounts Daniel's return to the royal palace when he interprets the handwriting and delivers YHWH's warning of impending judgment upon Belshazzar because of the latter's horrible act of sacrilege. The final scene (vv. 30-31) informs us that YHWH makes good on his warning, as Darius conquers the city that same evening and claims the Babylonian empire as his own.¹ Last time we covered the first two scenes, now we will take up the final two scenes (our text) and conclude our time in chapter 5.

With that bit of brief recap in mind, we pick up where we left off last time with verse 13, when Daniel interprets the handwriting announcing imminent judgment upon Babylon. This follows the frightening scene of a hand appearing during the party, writing on the white plaster wall of the palace, leaving behind a mysterious message which none of Belshazzar's experts could read. The third scene opens in verse 13 with the arrival of Daniel. *“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. 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.’”* As a now elderly man, Daniel had not served in the royal court for some time—perhaps since the death of Nebuchadnezzar 23 years earlier. Belshazzar did not even think of Daniel until the queen mother mentioned his name and recalled his exploits.

Daniel's reputation preceded him. Belshazzar recalls the stories surrounding this Hebrew prophet who had been so useful to Nebuchadnezzar years before. An exile from Judah, Daniel was brought as a captive to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar in 605 BC (it is now 539 BC). It was soon apparent to all in the royal court that “the spirit of the gods” was in him (once again tying Daniel to the Joseph Story of Genesis 37-50). Daniel possessed light, understanding, and wisdom—an indication that Daniel was a prophet of YHWH, and that remarkable gifts had been given to Daniel by YHWH to protect Daniel and his three friends from being put to death while in exile. From the events recounted earlier in the evening—Belshazzar mocking YHWH by using the vessels to toast pagan gods taken from the Jerusalem temple which been used in worship of the God of the Jews—Belshazzar obviously held YHWH in utter contempt. It was only as a result of his fear and desperation that Daniel now stands before Belshazzar. Nothing is said, but we can almost imagine the disgust Belshazzar felt at having to summon a Hebrew prophet of YHWH to explain the handwriting, especially after the partying and sacrilege just described.

His wise men and magicians having failed him yet again, in verse 15 Belshazzar admits to Daniel, *“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. But I have heard that you can give interpretations and solve problems.”* Daniel had interpreted two dreams which YHWH had given to Nebuchadnezzar when his own Chaldeans and magicians failed to provide an interpretation. Daniel will do as he had done twice before—as a prophet of YHWH he will speak very difficult words to a great and powerful man who is about to come under YHWH's hand of judgment.

¹ Greidanus, Preaching Christ from Daniel, 148-149.

The king offers Daniel the symbols of royal power if he can do for Belshazzar what he had done for Nebuchadnezzar a generation earlier. *“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.”* But Daniel has no interest in such power. He is not there to impress Belshazzar. He has come at Belshazzar’s urgent request. Belshazzar will get far more than he bargained for, because Daniel will reveal to him YHWH’s word of imminent judgment. According to verse 18, *“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.’”* There is no material or monetary reward for any prophet called to speak forth YHWH’s word of judgment. We think of the story of Balaam and Barak in Numbers 22, or even the words of the prophet Micah (3:5) who warns the people of Israel against listening to prophets who will supposedly bring words from God for their own personal gain. YHWH does not allow himself or his prophets to become indebted to the likes of a man like Belshazzar.²

With that, Daniel begins to interpret the handwritten message. The first thing Daniel does (vv.18-21) is to remind Belshazzar of the events of chapter 4 surrounding Nebuchadnezzar’s second dream. *“O king, the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father kingship and greatness and glory and majesty. 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. 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. 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.”*

Daniel uses four terms to describe Nebuchadnezzar’s rule: kingship, greatness, glory, and majesty. No doubt, Nebuchadnezzar was a great and powerful figure as men count such things. But everything which could be said of Belshazzar’s predecessor—even Nebuchadnezzar’s bout with insanity—were given him by YHWH. Elaborating a bit more on Nebuchadnezzar’s dream in chapter 4, we learn the additional details that it was YHWH who also gave Nebuchadnezzar the authority to take life, or to grant pardon to others. This the equivalent of Paul’s assertion in Romans 13:4, that God gives the sword of justice to the state. We also learn from Daniel that when Nebuchadnezzar had his mental collapse, he dwelt with wild donkeys. All of this was ordained by YHWH who is sovereign over all things, including kings and their empires. The lesson for Belshazzar is that even the great Nebuchadnezzar eventually acknowledged that *the Most High God rules the kingdom of mankind and sets over it whom he will*. This is the same YHWH against whom Belshazzar has just spent the evening committing acts of sacrilege and blasphemy, and who would have continued to do so had YHWH not intervened and ruined his party.³

Daniel brings the word of judgment to Belshazzar, who by now must know that the mysterious handwritten message is the declaration of bad news. According to verses 22-23, Daniel tells the king *“and you his son [Nebuchadnezzar is his predecessor, not his biological father], Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this, but you have lifted up yourself against the Lord of heaven.”* Belshazzar is so jaded by power and the gushy life in the royal court that he saw himself as

² Baldwin, Daniel, 136.

³ Steinmann, Daniel, 283.

greater than all “gods.” He refused to acknowledge that there is one far greater than he who has appointed this king to rule over this empire. If the king had reflected upon this—even for a moment—he would have realized that he should have humbled himself before the Lord of heaven. Refusing to humble himself, Belshazzar is about to be humbled by a Persian battle sword at YHWH’s behest.

But it was Belshazzar himself, who chose to spend his last night on earth blaspheming YHWH. Daniel explains precisely how the king had lifted himself up against YHWH. Daniel tells him what should be obvious, but which apparently is not. *“And the vessels of [YHWH’s] 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 first way in which the king has lifted himself up against YHWH is that he ordered the vessels from the Jerusalem temple be brought to the royal palace to be used to praise the false gods of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone. Drinking toasts to such things, using vessels set apart for the worship of YHWH, is blasphemy of the worst kind. Belshazzar is guilty as charged.

The second way in which Belshazzar has lifted himself up against YHWH is when he and his guests praised “lifeless” gods. What power do mere elements like gold and silver possess? Gold is beautiful, but can it answer your prayers? Can the elegant statue of the “god” made from fine gold hear your prayers and answer them? These mere elements cannot possess knowledge, they cannot hear, and although it is not mentioned by Daniel, they cannot speak. This is self-evident in the fact that it is YHWH who speaks by his own hand (through a divinely chosen agent) writing a warning of judgment on the wall of the king’s palace during these acts of blasphemy. The third way in which Belshazzar has lifted himself up is by failing to acknowledge that it is YHWH—not the mysterious forces of the universe—who gives the king his very life and breath. The king’s life is in YHWH’s hand—not Marduk’s. What does the king do with the life and breath YHWH has given him? He mocks and blasphemes the one who holds his life in his hand. His fate for doing so? YHWH will take that life from Belshazzar before the dawn of the next day.

After declaring to Belshazzar that his blasphemy of YHWH has not gone unnoticed in the heavenly court, Daniel interprets the handwriting which the king’s wise men could not read. According to verse 24, Daniel tells the king, *“then from his presence the hand was sent, and this writing was inscribed.”* Whose hand was it? Daniel doesn’t say exactly, but the king saw it and it scared him tremendously. The hand was that of an angel (sent by God as his agent) or it was the pre-incarnate Christ?—regardless of which divine agent this was, the hand which had written the message came from “the presence of God.” In other words, the hand gave direct revelation to Belshazzar of judgment from YHWH.

Although none of the king’s wise men and magicians could read the writing, Daniel can. *“And this is the writing that was inscribed: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, and PARSIN.”* These three Aramaic words are the subject of seemingly endless speculation. The writing was Aramaic but all the characters (letters) ran together. Daniel immediately sees the pattern, three words (one repeated), each having three consonants. The three words are weights (also the names of coins); the mina, the shekel, and the half-mina. But the measure of the weights (coins) are not in descending order from the highest to lowest, which may explain why the court magicians could not read the message much less figure out its meaning. Daniel will interpret the meaning of these words using a semi-obvious bit of word play for each of the weights. He takes each word (a noun) and converts it into a verb, which he then uses to evaluate Belshazzar’s kingship

and its shortcomings.⁴

The first of these (v. 26) is explained by Daniel. *“This is the interpretation of the matter: MENE, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end.”* The noun Mene (for Mina) has been turned into a verb, “counted” which is interpreted by Daniel as “king Belshazzar, your days are numbered.” The second word is explained in verse 27. *“TEKEL, you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting.”* Similarly, Daniel turns a noun into a verb which usually means to “pay out,” but in Daniel’s word play, he interprets it to mean that when the king is measured by YHWH, he comes far short of what is expected. Similarly, the third word (Parsin–half) is also a noun now understood as a verb. *“PERES, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.”* Daniel is telling Belshazzar that the event foretold in Nebuchadnezzar’s first dream is about to come to pass. The Babylonian empire will give way to the Persian empire before sun-up.⁵

Just as in Daniel 2 and 4, in which YHWH demonstrated his absolute superiority over the so-called “gods” of Babylon, he now does the same Belshazzar. This harkens us back to YHWH’s similar victories over the “gods” of Pharaoh, and the “gods” of the Canaanites. By doing what the Babylonian wise men could not do, Daniel very clearly demonstrates a point the Apostle Paul will make in 1 Corinthians 1:25. *“For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”* Although by now, we might expect that a man like Belshazzar would react in a drunken rage and have Daniel executed for his impudence before the king, instead, Belshazzar makes good on his promise made before all of his guests. We read in verse 29 of Daniel 5, *“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.”*

It is a good thing that Daniel did not care about such matters, because his new position was rather short-lived. Belshazzar did not have to wait long to receive the judgment of which YHWH had warned. According to verse 30, *“that very night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was killed.”* The golden head of the metallic statue gives way to the silver chest and arms exactly as foretold in the dream YHWH gave to Nebuchadnezzar. Not only was Belshazzar dead by the next morning, the chapter ends with the solemn declaration, *“and Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old.”* We ought notice that Darius (Cyrus) is the only person in Daniel’s prophecy whose age is mentioned. This is not mere information for curiosity sake. It reminds Daniel’s audience that Darius was born at the height of Babylonian power (601 BC), and now the Babylonian kingdom was his (i.e., now part of the Persian empire). This matters much to the Jews in exile because this information reminds them that their time in exile (seventy years) is almost over.

Because they are one and the same in an empire like this one, the king and his kingdom fall together. Belshazzar’s open contempt of YHWH reflects the general attitude of the entire empire, which had grown used to military and economic dominance. Starting with Belshazzar, the Babylonians saw themselves as completely self-sufficient, unwilling to do as Moses exhorts us in Psalm 90:9-12. *“For all our days pass away under your wrath; we bring our years to an end like a sigh. The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away. Who considers the power of your anger, and your wrath according to the fear of you?”*

⁴ Steinmann, Daniel, 285-86.

⁵ Steinmann, Daniel, 285-87.

So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.” Belshazzar has not numbered his days, so YHWH has numbered them for him. As one writer puts it, “Belshazzar in this chapter presents a vivid picture of the fool, the atheist, who at the end can only brazen it out with the help of alcohol which blots out the stark reality.”⁶ The alcohol probably didn’t help to lessen the pain very much when the Persians put him to the sword.

As for application, it is important to let the events recounted here push us beyond mere consideration of the personal circumstances of the last king of a dying empire—as tragic and compelling as the story of Belshazzar’s last night is. Daniel’s point throughout his prophecy so far has been that YHWH is sovereign over all the kingdoms of this world. There are divine limits set for earthly kings—limits which YHWH will not allow his creatures to go beyond. YHWH allows the Babylon empire to conquer Judah and destroy his temple because Israel has fallen into idolatry and is unfaithful to him as covenant Lord. Yet the Babylonians will be punished for proclaiming their gods as superior to YHWH. YHWH will not allow this to stand. He will bring his people back to the land of promise after their seventy years of exile.

Worldly power carries with it great responsibilities in YHWH’s sight, and an incident like this one reminds us that this is the case—then as now. YHWH holds all the kings of the earth responsible for their actions, and will judge them for how they treat their subjects as well as their enemies. In this case Belshazzar received his word of condemnation before he died—although most dying tyrants must wait until the judgment to hear theirs. YHWH gives kings, presidents, and prime ministers their power. He holds them accountable for how they use it. The knowledge that world leaders (even despotic ones) must answer to their creator should bring us much comfort.

It is also important to consider YHWH’s word to Belshazzar (through Daniel) is echoed later on the by the Apostle Paul in Romans 1:18-25. Paul writes,

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

Daniel’s account singles out Belshazzar because of his gross blasphemy and his important place in redemptive history (the last ruler of the Babylonian empire). But let us not make the mistake of thinking that Daniel’s warning (echoed by Paul) is not every bit as true today as it was on the night of October 11, 539 BC. God has revealed himself to all. None can offer any excuse for worshiping and serving created things (the elements themselves) or more creative idols (fame, celebrity, power, wealth) which moderns are more apt to seek after. We are as prone to the twin sins we see in Belshazzar (worshiping and serving created things and failing to carefully number his days) as he was.

⁶ Baldwin, Daniel, 139.

On final bit of application we must take from Daniel 5, is that apart from God's grace in our lives we will remain servants of the idols we create for ourselves, and we will spend our days living as though God does not exist or matter much, and was only there to help in times of trouble. If we believe in Jesus, it is only because God has called us out of darkness (idolatry and indifference to God) and applied to us the saving work of Jesus—his life of obedience, his death for our sins, and his resurrection from the dead. Let us therefore strive to be thankful that instead of a hand appearing on the wall, warning us that this is our last day, we see the hand of God in a much different way—extended to us through the signs and seals of bread and wine (“this is my body and my blood”), reminding us of his favor by promising us the forgiveness of all our sins (including idolatry and our frequent indifference to God).