

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, WA
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Daniel 5

A Last Lesson from Babylon on VBS Sunday

- 1. *The great feast of Belshazzar***
- 2. *Lessons the Lord would have us learn from it***

Hymns: 226 – 732 – 379 – Closing: 331

All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984

This week we went back in time. Our Vacation Bible School went back in time about 2,500 years to the time of the OT believer Daniel, who lived in Babylon.

Daniel lived during the time that God's people were in exile far from home in Babylon. The book of Daniel records many memorable stories that we can learn from. Each day of our Vacation Bible School week we learned from one of those stories: The Deportation of Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar's Dream, the Three Men in the Fiery Furnace, and Daniel in the Lions' Den.

Today we would like to go back one more time and learn from one last story in Babylon during the life of Daniel. This story is recorded in Daniel 5. We could call it, "**The Handwriting on the Wall.**" It's interesting that this phrase is still used in our times. "The handwriting is on the wall" means that the end is near. The downfall is inevitable. Things are going to end badly. Let's see where this phrase originally came from as we learn one last lesson from Babylon!

(Read Daniel 5)

1. The great feast of Belshazzar

We hear the first reference to King Belshazzar in this chapter of Daniel. Up until this point in the book, King Nebuchadnezzar has been the king. He was the one who invaded Palestine, pillaged the city of Jerusalem, and carried off the nation in exile. After the events of Daniel 4, a lapse of about 30 years until the time of Belshazzar had gone by. He was the grandson of Nebuchadnezzar, and since his father had an archaeology interest and not a big interest in ruling, he had formed a co-regency with his son Belshazzar.

The action of this chapter begins as Belshazzar throws a huge feast. We hear that he invited 1,000 of his nobles to this party, along with his wives and the women of his harem. Why would he be throwing a feast like this? Especially knowing the end of the chapter, where the city is overrun that very night by the armies of the Medes and Persians, we might wonder why this would be a night for feasting. Some speculate that this was a "morale boosting" feast. Perhaps with the imminent danger of the invading army that had been advancing, Belshazzar wanted to keep morale high and allay people's fears. If so, this certainly was not a wise move that night! Secular sources confirm that when Belshazzar died at this time in history, there was great feasting going on at the time.

The scene at the party is vividly described. It says that the king was drinking wine with his guests. Literally, it says "in front of" his guests. Many times in ancient days the king would be situated at a table on a stage in front of the partiers. From there he could not only observe the goings-on, but he could also set the tone and tempo for the toasting and partying. The drinking of wine is mentioned no less than five times in the first four verses. This is a polite way to hint at what kind of party this was: A drunken orgy with the king's harem and with the guests.

Our reading reports more about this feast. We hear that in his high spirits Belshazzar ordered that the gold and silver goblets that his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar had seized from the Temple in Jerusalem be brought out. They used them for their drinking, and Daniel 5 says, *“As they drank the wine, they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone.”* Just think about that for a moment. This was a calculated insult against the God of the Israelites. The sinful orgy turned into a direct insult against Daniel’s God in a mocking, blaspheming way. We might compare this to a group or a gang robbing our church and using our communion ware for their drinking and mocking at their next party and putting on the pastors’ robes as to make it a “toga party.” This was direct desecration! Belshazzar had forgotten the dreams that God had given to his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar, which had humbled him.

God chose to act immediately. In a dramatic, supernatural, frightening way he caused a light to appear in a visible place that the king could easily see by one of the lampstands and write four words on the wall. Even in his high spirits the king was very shaken up. He grew pale and his legs were about to collapse. He immediately called for his magicians and enchanters. He had a gut feeling that this message was about him and that it was not good news. He offered great gifts to the man who could tell him what the message said:

- A purple robe (only for royalty)
- A gold chain (for men of rank)
- A position third in the kingdom, only behind him and his father the co-regent.

The result? No one could tell him what the message said.

We might wonder where Daniel was at this time. Years before he had been made the head of Babylon’s “wise men.” He had been a man of high position and had been known for interpreting dreams. However, remember how much time had elapsed. Thirty years had

passed since Nebuchadnezzar’s reign and at this time we guess that Daniel was in his 80s. He may have been long retired!

However, the queen remembered him. The queen – most likely the queen mother of Belshazzar – entered the scene, remembering well the interpretations of dreams that Daniel had been given years ago. She encouraged Belshazzar to have him brought immediately, and the king did exactly that. When he offered the gifts to Daniel for his interpretation, Daniel brushed them aside. He would take no credit for the interpretation and he wouldn’t be influenced by them either. In fact, before he turns to the handwriting on the wall, Daniel took the opportunity to lecture Belshazzar on his lack of humility. He recounted how his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar had been humbled by God and had accepted God’s sovereignty, but told Belshazzar that he himself had not showed such humility, but only insolence against the true God.

Then the Lord gave Daniel the interpretation of the handwriting:

- The first two words were the same: MENE, MENE – “Numbered, numbered.” The Lord had numbered Belshazzar’s days. He would not be on the throne much longer.
- TEKEL – “weighed.” God had put Belshazzar on the scale, figuratively speaking, and he had been found lacking.
- PERES – This word seems to be a pun, meaning both “divided” and is also a form of the word for “Persians.” Belshazzar’s kingdom will be divided and given to the Persians.

Daniel was given the gifts that the king had promised, perhaps as an act of penance to forestall the inevitable. But we hear that God’s judgment came immediately. That very night Belshazzar was killed by the invading force.

2. Lessons the Lord would have us learn

What lessons can we take home with us from this last story from Babylon? What does the Lord want us to learn? I'd submit that we can learn three important lessons for our faith and life today.

First, this story clearly teaches us about the nature of the human heart. What is the natural condition and inclination of the human heart? Philosophies today offer different opinions about this. One philosophy I've heard says that people are born with two inclinations in them – Some good and some bad. At times you'll see the bad side come out as temper tantrums and sins are seen. Other times they'll come through with flying colors and show their naturally good side. I read about another philosophy in a parenting book I was perusing once. The book claimed that babies are born into this world completely perfect and faultless, and that whatever faults or bad behavior they end up with are a result of the parents' faulty parenting!

What does the Bible say?

- *"Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me" (Psalm 51:5).*
- *"The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so" (Romans 8:7).*
- *"The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time." (Genesis 6:5)*

The Bible is clear that we are born with a corrupt heart, through and through. We cannot choose the good; we are at odds with a holy God. Belshazzar, raised in a pagan family and a pagan nation, is a perfect example of

human nature. We see clearly where this nature had led him. **This is the nature that we were all born with.** Martin Luther once said, "The human heart is an idol factory." That is its natural inclination.

The natural human heart has such a lack of humility that it can be led to mock and blaspheme the Lord as Belshazzar did. Flaunting sin and mocking the Lord's will is common in our day. We could look at obvious examples:

- Atheists of America, who have a national organization
- Marches for a mother's right to murder her unborn baby, despite what God has said in Scripture about when life begins.
- Parades flaunting the sin of homosexuality in God's face

But we can't only look "out there" at such flaunting and mockery. We must also look in our own hearts. When might a Christian flaunt their sin in God's sight?

- A high schooler might brag to his/her classmates about how they smoke out back during lunch hour but never get caught.
- A student might boast about their clever cheating method that worked all last year.
- A grownup might show off his new fuzzbuster, which will allow him to avoid the cops.
- A citizen might proudly tell of their neat (illegal) tax break they give themselves every year.
- And maybe there are even Christians who consult the magicians and mediums for advice and fun, instead of detesting and avoiding them, as God commands us.

To us, the Lord says, “MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PERES” – Your days are numbered. That is the second lesson we learn here. God will not be mocked. God will not forget to judge. God will not leave the guilty unpunished. Galatians 6 says, *“Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.”* In his time God will follow through with justice. He controls even nations and kings, and they rise and fall according to his will.

We even see a serious side of God’s judgment here in the “snowballing” effect of God’s judgment. You might remember how the Lord told Moses, *“I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me...” (Exodus 20:5,6)* For those who continue their sinful ways despite their better knowledge, God snowballs the punishment. We see that clearly in this account, for God had sent Nebuchadnezzar dreams and trials to teach him humility. For Belshazzar, who knew that history, God had a final judgment that came quite quickly. Take a lesson!

In his judgment, God even withholds his wisdom from the arrogant who have rejected him. We have an example of that in the way God speaks to Belshazzar in a mysterious phrase that his own wise men cannot understand. Only God’s own prophet could interpret it. This is reminiscent of Jesus’ use of parables, where his enemies and those hardened against him were mystified and confused, yet where his own followers could understand the instruction he was giving when parables were interpreted. Jesus would later say in Matthew 11, *“I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure.”* Paul would write about the “foolishness of God” by which we are saved, which is “foolishness to those who are perishing.” What judgment that God would operate this way toward those who hate him!

One lesson remains. It is a lesson of grace. Where is the grace in this story? We see it in the hand of God, as he directed the affairs of those nations. King Cyrus the Persian was the king who was going to allow the Israelites to return to their land soon after this conquest. It had to be that way, and God would work things out in that way. God’s people had to return so the promised Savior of the world could be born there. God had promised to send his Son to his people to serve as their Savior – to live a perfect life in their place and to die for their sins. He had to be born in Bethlehem and minister to his people. The rest of salvation’s story had to be played out. God in his grace used the Persian king Cyrus to send his people back to the land he had promised. That Savior would be your Savior of grace as well.

We see even more grace in the time that God allowed Belshazzar during his life. During the years of his life he was acquainted with the God of the OT exiles. He had heard about their temple and their goblets. He had a “time of grace” that God allowed him before his fateful party. And he even had the chance to hear Daniel’s God-given interpretation of the handwriting on the wall. What grace God showed in revealing himself to Belshazzar!

What grace that God has given us a “time of grace” and that he continues to give this world time to repent as well. As 1 Timothy tells us, *“God our Savior wants all people to be saved, and to come to a knowledge of the truth.”*

So ends our VBS week. It was a week filled with stories from Babylon and from the life of Daniel. As we consider this last story toward the end of Daniel’s life, may we learn lessons about our natural heart, our sin, and God’s judgement. But let us also leave assured of God’s tremendous grace that he has shown to us in saving us. That is the best lesson of all! Amen.