



Sunday School Lesson
Daniel 5:1-31
 by Lorin L. Cranford
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**Faith and
 Confrontation of Power**



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In this continuation of the studies in the book of Daniel, we look now at the episode narrated in chapter five of the book. The six episodes in chapters one through six stand as cameo spotlights on Daniel and his three Jewish friends who found themselves in exile from their homeland and having to adapt to the new situation of living in ancient Babylon. In no sense do these six episodes give a detailed accounting of their new life on a daily basis. Instead, they provide glimpses here and there into events that had significance and could serve as sources of inspiration and teaching initially to Jewish people who found themselves facing persecution some two to three centuries later under the harsh hand of Antiochus Epiphanes, the Seleucid ruler who treated the Jews in Palestine with extreme cruelty in his determination to Hellenize them and also destroy their religious heritage. Followers of God in subsequent centuries have drawn strength and inspiration from these stories as they faced difficulty and oftentimes hostility to their religious commitments to the God of Abraham.

I. Context

The exploration of the external history of this document was explored in detail in the first lesson, and thus will not be repeated here. The reader is encouraged to read this material in [the online version](#) of the lesson at Cranfordville.com, under Bible Studies: Old Testament.

a. Historical

The internal history of chapter five begins a new era in the life of Daniel. The episodes in chapters one through four are set during the reign of Nebuchadnessar over the [Babylonian Empire](#) from

B.C.E.	EGYPT	PALESTINE	MESOPOTAMIA
		THE BABYLONIAN EMPIRE	BABYLONIA
	Apries (Hophra), 589-570	Jehoiachin (Jeconiah), 3 mos., 598-597 First Deportation to Babylonia, 597 Zedekiah (Mattaniah), 597-587 FALL OF JERUSALEM SECOND DEPORTATION, 587 BABYLONIAN EXILE Ezekiel, c. 593-573	Nebuchadrezzar, 605-562 Nabonidus, 556-539 (his son: Belshazzar) RISE OF PERSIA Cyrus II, 550-530 Defeat of Media, c. 550 Invasion of Lydia, c. 546 FALL OF BABYLON, 539
600 to 500		(Second Isaiah, c. 540) Edict of Cyrus, 538	
		THE EMPIRE OF PERSIA	
	Conquest by Persia 525	THE RESTORATION JUDAH Return of exiles Rebuilding of Temple, 520-515 (Haggai) (Zechariah)	Cambyses, 530-522 Darius I, 522-486
500 to 400	Egypt under Persian rule, 525-401	(Malachi, c. 500-450) Ezra's mission, 458 (?) Nehemiah arrives, 445 Ezra's mission, c. 428 (?)	Persia Xerxes I (Ahasuerus), 486-465 Artaxerxes I (Longimanus), 465-424 Xerxes II, 423 Darius II, 423-404
		Ezra's mission, c. 398(?)	Artaxerxes II (Mnemon), 404-358 Artaxerxes III, 358-338 Arses, 338-336 Darius III, 336-331

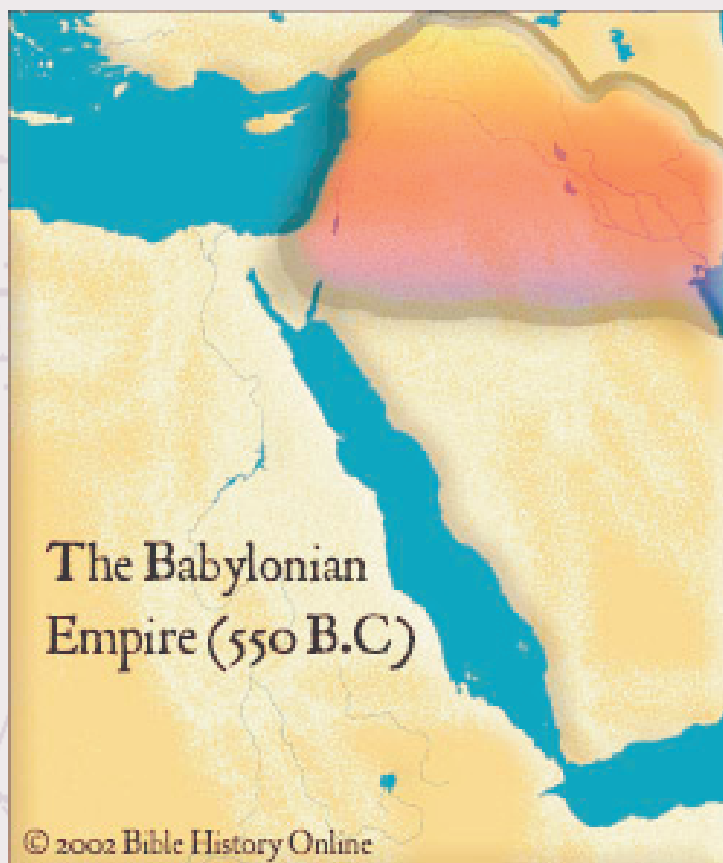
605 to 562 B.C.E. After Nebuchadnezzar, came [Nabonidus](#) and his son [Belshazzar](#), who would rule over the empire until 539 B.C.E. when the Persians overthrew the Babylonians under [Cyrus](#). Nabonidus -- according to ancient records -- ruled until the Persians but allowed his oldest son, Belshazzar, to assume the title of king as well, especially in his absence from the capital city of Babylon. The exact nature of this relationship is unknown. Different spellings of his name will show up, as described in the online [Catholic Encyclopedia](#) article on "Baltasar": "Baltasar is the Greek and Latin name for Belshazzar, which is the Hebrew equivalent for *Bel-sarra-usur*, i.e., "May Bel protect the king". Bel was the chief and titular god of Babylon."

Exactly when this banquet was given by Belshazzar during this period from 556 to 539 B.C.E. is not certain, although with the quick demise of the king described in the text it was most likely toward to end of that period. The events that brought down the Babylonians are somewhat cloudy. The [Catholic Encyclopedia](#) has a helpful summation of many of these sources:

In the account given by Herodotus of the capture of Babylon by the Persians under Cyrus, Labynitus II, son of Labynitus I and Nicotris, is named as the last King of Babylon. Labynitus is commonly held to be a corruption of Nabonidus. Herodotus further mentions that Cyrus, after laying siege to the town, entered it by the bed of the Euphrates, having drained off its waters, and that the capture took place whilst the Babylonians were feasting (Herod., I, 188-191). Xenophon also mentions the siege, the draining of the Euphrates, and the feast. He does not state the name of the king, but fastens on him the epithet "impious", *ἀνόδιος*. According to him, the king made a brave stand, defending himself with his sword, but was overpowered and slain by Gobryas and Gadatas, the two generals of Cyrus (Cyrop., vii, 5). The Chaldean priest Berosus names Nabonidus as the last King of Babylon and says that the city was taken in the seventeenth year of his reign. We are further informed by him that Nabonidus went forth at the head of an army to oppose Cyrus, that he gave battle, lost, and fled to Borsippa. In this town he was besieged and forced to surrender. His life was spared, and an abode assigned to him in Karmania. (Prof. C. P. Tiele, *Babylonisch-Assyrische Gesch.*, 479; Euseb., *Præp Ev.*, ix, 41; Idem, *Chron.*, i, 10, 3.) Josephus follows the Biblical account. He remarks that Baltasar was called by the Babylonians Naboandelus, evidently a corruption of Nabonidus, and calls the queen, grandmother (*à mǎmme*) of the king. He adheres to the Septuagint rendering in making the reward held out to Daniel to have been a third portion of the kingdom instead of the title, third ruler in the kingdom. Rabbinical tradition has preserved nothing of historical value.

Although not all the details can be established with certainty, the essential structure of the story remains intact and the spiritual lessons to be gleaned from it are clear. Paul M. Lederach ["Daniel," *Believer's Church Bible Commentary*] has a helpful summation of these issues:

The question about whether the account in this chapter is historically factual perhaps cannot be answered satisfactorily. That the story has a relationship to history is certain. But what is the relationship? One might want to entertain the possibility, as suggested by Millard Lind in private correspondence, that these stories relate to history in ways that a political cartoon relates to an event. The political cartoon speaks to specific situations, oftentimes in a way that cannot be understood by those who do not know the history. Not infrequently the cartoonist exaggerates features of the history. The cartoonist does not intend to set forth history as would a historian. But the cartoonist, to be credible, cannot be unfaithful to history. Establishing the "historicity" of the account is certainly not unimportant. But the biblical text nurtures, instructs, and corrects hearers and listeners in the faith. In one's eagerness to document details, one can easily miss the overriding message of this incident: to unmask sacrilege and political arrogance and show divine punishment on those responsible.



b. Literary

The material in Daniel five is introduced without clear transition from the previous episode in chapter four. In actual time, several years intervene between the death of Nebuchadnezzar and that of Belshazzar. One has then to focus on the literary or spiritual aim of the writer and move away from a close sense of chronological progression of time between episodes.

Here James M. Efird in *The Old Testament Writings: History, Literature, and Interpretation* (iPreach) has some helpful insights:

The purpose of chapter 5 was to demonstrate what ultimately happens to rulers and nations who deal cavalierly with God's people and take lightly the power of Yahweh when his honor is ridiculed. Here God's honor was being mocked by these people who were desecrating the vessels taken from the Temple. The judgment inevitably came upon these enemies of God. Again the people of that time would remember that Antiochus had plundered the Temple, even stripping gold off its facade.

As this story was recounted in later Jewish history, the main reassurance taken from it was that God would have the final say—no matter how powerful conquering rulers might be and in spite of their arrogant display of power and influence. God would vindicate his covenant people as well as his own honor. The painting, "Belshazzar's Feast," below by Rembrandt captures a major aspect of the aim of this story.



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II. Message

The internal structure of this episode breaks down into four segments, as pointed out by George A. F. Knight, "The Book of Daniel," *Interpreter's One Volume Commentary on the Bible* (iPreach): (1) Belshazzar's Sacrilege (vv. 1-4); (2) The Writing on the Wall (vv. 5-12); Interpretation of the Writing (vv. 13-29); and (4) The Fall of Babylon (vv. 30-31).

a. Belshazzar's Sacrilege (vv. 1-4)

NASB

1 Belshazzar the king held a great feast for a thousand of his nobles, and he was drinking wine in the presence of the thousand. **2** When Belshazzar tasted the wine, he gave orders to bring the gold and silver vessels which Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken out of the temple which was in Jerusalem, so that the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines might drink from them. **3** Then they brought the gold vessels that had been taken out of the temple, the house of God which was in Jerusalem; and the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines drank from them. **4** They drank the wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone.

NRSV

1 King Belshazzar made a great festival for a thousand of his lords, and he was drinking wine in the presence of the thousand. **2** Under the influence of the wine, Belshazzar commanded that they bring in the vessels of gold and silver that his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple in Jerusalem, so that the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them. **3** So they brought in the vessels of gold and silver^{F19} 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 the wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone.

FOOTNOTES:

F19: Theodotion Vg: Aram lacks [and silver]

NLT

1 A number of years later, King Belshazzar gave a great feast for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine with them. **2** While Belshazzar was drinking, he gave orders to bring in the gold and silver cups that his predecessor,^{F19} Nebuchadnezzar, had taken from the Temple in Jerusalem, so that he and his nobles, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them. **3** So they brought these gold cups taken from the Temple of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his nobles, his wives, and his concubines drank from them. **4** They drank toasts from them to honor their idols made of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone.

FOOTNOTES:

F19: Aramaic father; also in 5:11, 13, 18.

Comments:

George A. F. Knight, in "The Book of Daniel," *Interpreter's One Volume Commentary on the Bible* (iPreach) has a helpful summation of these verses:

At a state banquet Belshazzar unashamedly drinks in front of the thousand guests, the officials and leading citizens of his empire. In his drunken state he deliberately commits a sacrilegious act by calling for the holy vessels pillaged from the house of God, the Jerusalem temple (cf. 1:1-2; 2 Kings 24:13; 25:14-15; Ezra 1: 7-11), so that his guests may drink and pour libations from them to their pagan gods. The account would of course remind the original readers immediately of Antiochus Epiphanes' desecrations of the temple and its altar (see Intro.).

One knotty issue that surfaces in this passage is the reference to Nebuchadnezzar (v. 2) as Belshazzar's father. Ancient records clearly indicate that Nebuchadnezzar wasn't Belshazzar's father. So what does the reference mean? Paul M. Lederach, "Daniel," *Believer's Church Bible Commentary*, (iPreach) has some helpful observations here:

Belshazzar is the son of Nabonidus and serving as regent or viceroy during his father's absences for much of his reign. [Nabonidus, p. 291.] The text refers to Nebuchadnezzar as Belshazzar's father (5:2), and one may wonder if the writer is thinking of biological parentage (5:11, 13, 18, 22). Yet father here must mean dynastic predecessor since Nabonidus was not part of Nebuchadnezzar's family but had seized the throne through a coup. Between Nebuchadnezzar and Nabonidus were three other kings. The word father is used in senses other than biological (2 Kings 2:12, Elisha calls Elijah "father"). Some have suggested that through a marriage by Nabonidus

with Nebuchadnezzar's daughter, Nebuchadnezzar is indeed Belshazzar's father (grandfather) in a literal sense. Anyhow, Belshazzar is in command when Babylon surrenders to Cyrus (539 B.C.) and apparently there meets his death. [Cyrus the Persian/Darius the Mede, p. 284.]

Also important to note here is the portrayal of the feast, as Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, "The Book of Daniel," *New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 8, (iPreach) observes:

Describing King Belshazzar as being under the influence of alcohol, (the Aramaic reads "in the taste of the wine"), chapter 5 continues the theme of excess and abuse. We are reminded of the exile by the gold and silver vessels taken from the Jerusalem Temple by Nebuchadnezzar. This is an important point. The Babylonian policy was to commandeer the religious icons or statues of the gods of the conquered people. In the case of the Jews, since no image of their God could be found in the Temple, the ritual vessels were taken instead. Nebuchadnezzar is often noted as the one who took the temple vessels (Ezra 5:14; 6:5). Therefore, the vessels serve as a symbol of the subordinate status of the Jews throughout their exile. They are captives in the same sense that the people are captive. The gold and silver vessels once again highlight the hunger for valuables that symbolizes the appetite for power of conquering empires.¹⁴⁹

Feasting was typically used in biblical narratives, especially post-exilic writings, to portray the abuse of power and privilege by the wealthy, and especially foreign monarchs. Taxes were paid in kind, and such great feasts would be resented just as much as the waste of tax money to fund government programs! As has been noted, in Esther and Judith feasts or banquets serve as the setting for Jewish victory over foreign power, much in the same way that a royal banquet serves as the backdrop for God's punishment of Babylon in this chapter.

In moving from the 'then' to 'now' meaning, we ask, "What connection do these verses have to us today?" One thing that comes across clearly to me is the danger of getting caught up in pompous displays of power and wealth. Although normal for the ancient world and still often viewed so in our world, such parading of wealth and power risk the wrath of God. Clearly scripture wants God's people to have nothing to do with such practices.

Such becomes particularly offensive when the display includes the humiliation of other people. The use of the vessels from the Jewish temple in Jerusalem was deliberate and calculated, although done in drunkenness. Christians aren't immune to that temptation to follow the pattern of Belshazzar. We saw events at the last Southern Baptist Convention meeting this past summer get very close to this kind of thing in the celebration of fundamentalism's triumph inside the SBC.

Another insight that comes is the reminder that God's people sometimes are subjected to embarrassing suffering and humiliation. The religion of the Jews was portrayed by the Babylonians drinking from the sacred vessels as weak and worthless, since the gods of the Babylonians had brought about the capture of the Israelites. We live in a world that can castigate Christianity -- especially in its message of love and caring -- as weak and useless to a society built on power and control of others.

b. The Writing on the Wall (vv. 5-12)

NASB

5 Suddenly the fingers of a man's hand emerged and began writing opposite the lampstand on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace, and the king saw the back of the hand that did the writing. **6** Then the king's face grew pale and his thoughts alarmed him, and his hip joints went slack and his knees began knocking together. **7** The king called aloud to bring in the conjurers, the Chaldeans and the diviners. The king spoke and said to the wise men of Babylon, "Any man who can read this inscription and explain its interpretation to me shall be clothed with purple and

NRSV

5 Immediately the fingers of a human hand appeared and began writing on the plaster of the wall of the royal palace, next to the lampstand. The king was watching the hand as it wrote. **6** Then the king's face turned pale, and his thoughts terrified him. His limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together. **7** The king cried aloud to bring in the enchanters, the Chaldeans, and the diviners; and the king said to the wise men of Babylon, "Whoever can read this writing and tell me its interpretation shall be clothed in purple,

NLT

5 At that very moment they saw the fingers of a human hand writing on the plaster wall of the king's palace, near the lampstand. The king himself saw the hand as it wrote, **6** and his face turned pale with fear. Such terror gripped him that his knees knocked together and his legs gave way beneath him. **7** The king shouted for the enchanters, astrologers,^{F20} and fortune-tellers to be brought before him. He said to these wise men of Babylon, "Whoever can read this writing and tell me what it means

have a necklace of gold around his neck, and have authority as third ruler in the kingdom.” **8** Then all the king’s wise men came in, but they could not read the inscription or make known its interpretation to the king. **9** Then King Belshazzar was greatly alarmed, his face grew *even* paler, and his nobles were perplexed.

10 The queen entered the banquet hall because of the words of the king and his nobles; the queen spoke and said, “O king, live forever! Do not let your thoughts alarm you or your face be pale. **11** “There is a man in your kingdom in whom is a spirit of the holy gods; and in the days of your father, illumination, insight and wisdom like the wisdom of the gods were found in him. And King Nebuchadnezzar, your father, your father the king, appointed him chief of the magicians, conjurers, Chaldeans and diviners. **12** “This was because an extraordinary spirit, knowledge and insight, interpretation of dreams, explanation of enigmas and solving of difficult problems were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Belteshazzar. Let Daniel now be summoned and he will declare the interpretation.”

have a chain of gold around his neck, and rank third in the kingdom.” **8** Then all the king’s wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or tell the king the interpretation. **9** Then King Belshazzar became greatly terrified and his face turned pale, and his lords were perplexed.

10 The queen, when she heard the discussion of the king and his lords, came into the banquet hall. The queen said, “O king, live forever! Do not let your thoughts terrify you or your face grow pale. **11** There is a man in your kingdom who is endowed with a spirit of the holy gods.^{F20} In the days of your father he was found to have enlightenment, understanding, and wisdom like the wisdom of the gods. Your father, King Nebuchadnezzar, made him chief of the magicians, enchanters, Chaldeans, and diviners,^{F21} **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 give the interpretation.”

Footnotes:

F20: Or [a holy, divine spirit]

F21: Aram adds [the king your father]

will be dressed in purple robes of royal honor and will wear a gold chain around his neck. He will become the third highest ruler in the kingdom!” **8** But when all the king’s wise men came in, none of them could read the writing or tell him what it meant. **9** So the king grew even more alarmed, and his face turned ashen white. His nobles, too, were shaken.

10 But when the queen mother heard what was happening, she hurried to the banquet hall. She said to Belshazzar, “Long live the king! Don’t be so pale and afraid about this. **11** There is a man in your kingdom who has within him the spirit of the holy gods. During Nebuchadnezzar’s reign, this man was found to have insight, understanding, and wisdom as though he himself were a god. Your predecessor, King Nebuchadnezzar, made him chief over all the magicians, enchanters, astrologers, and fortune-tellers of Babylon. **12** This man Daniel, whom the king named Belteshazzar, has a sharp mind and is filled with divine knowledge and understanding. He can interpret dreams, explain riddles, and solve difficult problems. Call for Daniel, and he will tell you what the writing means.”

Footnotes:

F20: Or Chaldeans; also in 5:11.

Comments:

Once more we turn to George A. F. Knight, in “The Book of Daniel,” *Interpreter’s One Volume Commentary on the Bible* (iPreach) for a short summation of these verses:

The walls of ancient palaces were often finished with white plaster, on which writing would show clearly in the light from a lampstand, which might hold a number of oil lamps. Belshazzar’s terror at the sight of the hand is to be understood as due to guilt, a belated realization of the enormity of his sacrilege. The godless man is always horror-stricken at any invasion of his secure little world from the mysterious beyond whose existence he has denied. The consultation of the Babylonian wise men and their failure follows the same pattern as in chs. 2, 4 except that here the eventual calling of Dan. is based on his earlier success.

In classic fashion the reveling king in his power turned pale and helpless in the face of a superior power, which he couldn’t control. Arrogant pride turned into desperation to figure out what was going on. The collective wisdom of all his sages was useless in interpreting the handwriting on the wall. Worse still, he was being embarrassed before the nobles who were his invited guests. Rembrandt captured this sense of

desperation well in his painting.

The moment was saved by the queen mother, who remembered what the Jew Daniel had done years earlier for Nebuchadnezzar. Interestingly, she gives Daniel credit for abilities much greater than had been described in chapter two when he interpreted the meaning of Nebuchadnezzar's dream. The highest confidence is expressed in her words in verse twelve (NRSV): "Now let Daniel be called, and he will give the interpretation."

George A. F. Knight, "The Book of Daniel," *Interpreter's One Volume Commentary on the Bible* (iP-reach) has a helpful observation about an issue that arises from verses 8 and 9:

Why the Babylonians are unable even to read the writing, which consists of common words in Aramaic (vs. 25), a language known to educated persons throughout the ancient Near East, is a question on which there has been much speculation. Some interpreters suppose the reason is a strange script. E.g. the old Hebrew script in which most of the OT was written would be well known to Dan. but presumably unfamiliar to Babylonians. In the author's day the use of this old script for writing Hebrew was giving way to use of the Aramaic script, from which the Hebrew letters we know today developed (see "Writing in Biblical Times," pp. 1201-08). On the other hand the wise men's failure may be due to the fact that Aramaic, like Hebrew and other Semitic languages, was written in a consonantal alphabet. Being unable to make sense of the writing as a whole, they would be uncertain which vowel sounds to insert and thus, even though recognizing the letters, be unable to pronounce them as words.

Now, the connecting link question: How does this apply to us? One insight that surfaces here reflects a pattern that I've observed many times during my lifetime: Bullies are really cowards. All the pompous arrogance of the king melted in the face of a superior power.

Additionally, what happens when we lose control of a situation? Belshazzar, when he was in control -- in his thinking -- displayed one attitude. When he lost control, he changed a 180 degrees. The power of the supernatural can be overwhelming, as well as frightening. The Babylonian religious traditions viewed the various gods as extremely powerful, but without serious interest in humans. Because their gods were immoral and war-like in their behavior, the worship of them was based on fear and a desire to keep the gods at a safe distance, out of the worshipper's life. The supernatural tones of the writing of the words on the wall thus became extremely frightening to Belshazzar, and to his guests. Normally, when the gods came down to where humans were, it meant trouble for the humans. With zero understanding of the Jewish religious tradition, Belshazzar had not an inkling that this was an action of Yahweh, the God of the Jews. Even the queen mother did not recall the distinctive religious orientation of Daniel, only that he was gifted with power to interpret mysterious things originating in the supernatural world.

Our human inclination is to fall into desperation like Belshazzar when we lose control. But, as Christians, we must resist fear, and stand on a secure faith and confidence in our God.

c. Interpretation of the Writing (vv. 13-29)

NASB

13 Then Daniel was brought in before the king. The king spoke and said to Daniel, "Are you that Daniel who is one of the exiles from Judah, whom my father the king brought from Judah?" **14** "Now I have heard about you that a spirit of the gods is in you, and that illumination, insight and extraordinary wisdom have been found in you. **15** "Just now the wise men and the conjurers were brought in before me that they might read this inscription and make its interpretation known to me, but they could not declare the interpretation of the message. **16** "But I personally

NRSV

13 Then Daniel was brought in before the king. The king said to Daniel, "So you are Daniel, one of the exiles of Judah, whom my father the king brought from Judah?" **14** I have heard of you that a spirit of the gods^{F22} is in you, and that enlightenment, 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 tell me its interpretation, but they were not able to give the interpretation of the matter. **16** But I have heard that you can give interpretations and solve prob-

NLT

13 So Daniel was brought in before the king. The king asked him, "Are you Daniel, who was exiled from Judah by my predecessor, King Nebuchadnezzar?" **14** I have heard that you have the spirit of the gods within you and that you are filled with insight, understanding, and wisdom. **15** My wise men and enchanters have tried to read this writing on the wall, but they cannot. **16** I am told that you can give interpretations and solve difficult problems. If you can read these words and tell me their meaning, you will be clothed in purple robes of royal honor, and

have heard about you, that you are able to give interpretations and solve difficult problems. Now if you are able to read the inscription and make its interpretation known to me, you will be clothed with purple and wear a necklace of gold around your neck, and you will have authority as the third ruler in the kingdom.” **17** Then Daniel answered and said before the king, “Keep your gifts for yourself or give your rewards to someone else; however, I will read the inscription to the king and make the interpretation known to him. **18** “O king, the Most High God granted sovereignty, grandeur, glory and majesty to Nebuchadnezzar your father. **19** “Because of the grandeur which He bestowed on him, all the peoples, nations and *men of every* language feared and trembled before him; whomever he wished he killed and whomever he wished he spared alive; and whomever he wished he elevated and whomever he wished he humbled. **20** “But when his heart was lifted up and his spirit became so proud that he behaved arrogantly, he was deposed from his royal throne and {his} glory was taken away from him. **21** “He was also driven away from mankind, and his heart was made like *that of* beasts, and his dwelling place was with the wild donkeys. He was given grass to eat like cattle, and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven until he recognized that the Most High God is ruler over the realm of mankind and *that* He sets over it whomever He wishes. **22** “Yet you, his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, even though you knew all this, **23** but you have exalted yourself against the Lord of heaven; and they have brought the vessels of His house before you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines have been drinking wine from them; and you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which do not see, hear or under-

lems. Now if you are able to read the writing and tell me its interpretation, you shall be clothed in purple, have a chain of gold around your neck, and rank third in the kingdom.” **17** Then Daniel answered in the presence of the king, “Let your gifts be for yourself, or give your rewards to someone else! Nevertheless I will read the writing to the king and let him know the interpretation. **18** O king, the Most High God gave your father Nebuchadnezzar kingship, greatness, glory, and majesty. **19** And because of the greatness that he gave him, all peoples, nations, and languages trembled and feared before him. He killed those he wanted to kill, kept alive those he wanted to keep alive, honored those he wanted to honor, and degraded those he wanted to degrade. **20** But when his heart was lifted up and his spirit was hardened so that he acted proudly, he was deposed from his kingly throne, and his glory was stripped from him. **21** He was driven from human society, and his mind was made like that of an animal. His dwelling was with the wild asses, he was fed grass like oxen, and his body was bathed with the dew of heaven, until he learned that the Most High God has sovereignty over the kingdom of mortals, and sets over it whomever he will. **22** And you, Belshazzar his son, have not humbled your heart, even though you knew all this! **23** You have exalted yourself against the Lord of heaven! The vessels of his temple have been brought in before you, and you and your lords, your wives and your concubines have been drinking wine from them. 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 power is your very breath, and to whom belong all your ways, you have not honored. **24** “So from his presence the hand was sent and this writing

you will wear a gold chain around your neck. You will become the third highest ruler in the kingdom.” **17** Daniel answered the king, “Keep your gifts or give them to someone else, but I will tell you what the writing means. **18** Your Majesty, the Most High God gave sovereignty, majesty, glory, and honor to your predecessor, Nebuchadnezzar. **19** He made him so great that people of all races and nations and languages trembled before him in fear. He killed those he wanted to kill and spared those he wanted to spare. He honored those he wanted to honor and disgraced those he wanted to disgrace. **20** But when his heart and mind were hardened with pride, he was brought down from his royal throne and stripped of his glory. **21** He was driven from human society. He was given the mind of an animal, and he lived among the wild donkeys. He ate grass like a cow, and he was drenched with the dew of heaven, until he learned that the Most High God rules the kingdoms of the world and appoints anyone he desires to rule over them. **22** “You are his successor, ^{F21} O Belshazzar, and you knew all this, yet you have not humbled yourself. **23** For you have defied the Lord of heaven and have had these cups from his Temple brought before you. You and your nobles and your wives and concubines have been drinking wine from them while praising gods of silver, gold, bronze, iron, wood, and stone – gods that neither see nor hear nor know anything at all. But you have not honored the God who gives you the breath of life and controls your destiny! **24** So God has sent this hand to write a message. **25** “This is the message that was written: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN. **26** This is what these words mean: Mene means ‘numbered’ – God has numbered the days of your reign and has brought it to an end. **27** Tekel means ‘weighed’ – you have been

stand. But the God in whose hand are your life-breath and your ways, you have not glorified. **24** “Then the hand was sent from Him and this inscription was written out. **25** “Now this is the inscription that was written out: ‘MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN.’ **26** “This is the interpretation of the message: ‘MENE’—God has numbered your kingdom and put an end to it. **27** “‘TEKEL’—you have been weighed on the scales and found deficient. **28** “‘PERES’—your kingdom has been divided and given over to the Medes and Persians.” **29** Then Belshazzar gave orders, and they clothed Daniel with purple and *put* a necklace of gold around his neck, and issued a proclamation concerning him that he *now* had authority as the third ruler in the kingdom.

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^{F23} your kingdom and brought it to an end; **27** tekel, you have been weighed on the scales and found wanting; **28** peres,^{F24} your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.” **29** Then Belshazzar gave the command, and Daniel was clothed in purple, a chain of gold was put around his neck, and a proclamation was made concerning him that he should rank third in the kingdom.

weighed on the balances and have failed the test. **28** Parsin^{F22} means ‘divided’ – your kingdom has been divided and given to the Medes and Persians.” **29** Then at Belshazzar’s command, Daniel was dressed in purple robes, a gold chain was hung around his neck, and he was proclaimed the third highest ruler in the kingdom.

Footnotes:

F21: Aramaic son.

F22: Aramaic Peres, the singular of Parsin.

Footnotes:

F22: Or [a divine spirit]

F23: Aram lacks [the days of]

F24: The singular of [Parsin]



Comments:

Again the comments of George A. F. Knight, in “The Book of Daniel,” *Interpreter’s One Volume Commentary on the Bible* (iPreach) are helpful:

5:13-29. Interpretation of the Writing. As a true man of God Dan. rejects flattery and promised rewards and fearlessly tells the ruler the truth about himself. He cites as a warning the experience attributed to Nebuchadnezzar in ch. 4 but perhaps originally told of Nabonidus, historically Belshazzar’s father (see above on 4:1-37). Each generation has to learn from experience for itself (vs. 22). Dan.’s reference to the God in whose hand is your breath (vs. 23) is striking; even the most powerful man on earth lives only by the grace of God.

5:24-28. The words written on the wall as read by Dan. mean respectively numbered ... weighed ... divided. Read with different vowels as other derivatives of the same roots (see above on vss. 8-9), the words are a series of weights: mina, shekel, and half shekels (see table, p. 1285). Parsin, lit. “halves,” sometimes was used of half minas but here more likely indicates half shekels, to form a series in order of descending value. Probably the series was a proverbial expression comparing the abilities of successive rulers—possibly Babylonian kings during the Exile, with the coregents Nabonidus and Belshazzar as the half shekels. There is a further word play in peres, which may mean not only “divided” and “half,” i.e. the singular of parsin, but also Persians.

Still at the beginning there is no recognition of the God of Daniel by the Babylonians, only the desperation of the king to get an explanation of the mysterious words on the wall. Elaborate promises are made to Daniel if he will explain them, but Daniel has no interest in these things. Rather, he seized the opportunity to speak in behalf of God and to boldly pronounce doom on the king. Scholars will debate the meaning of the Aramaic words written on the wall until Jesus comes without coming to unanimous agreement! So we won’t contribute to that. Daniel gave the interpretation that counted in verses 26-28.

What jumps out from these verses at me is Daniel’s picture of God. Daniel’s God had given power to the pagan king Nebuchadnezzar, and then took it away when the king abused it. Belshazzar is accused of having insulted God by his use of the sacred vessels from the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. Therefore, God was going to bring him down from power as punishment. Because of this vision of God’s greatness, Daniel dared say things to the Babylonian king than none of his own sages would have been willing to, had they have understood the meaning of these strange words on the wall.

Our vision of God needs to match that of Daniel’s. From it we gain both humility and courage to face unbelievable obstacles.

d. The Fall of Babylon (vv. 30-31)

NASB

30 That same night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was slain. **31** Darius the Mede received the kingdom at about the age of sixty-two.

NRSV

30 That very night Belshazzar, the Chaldean king, was killed. **31**^{F25} And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old.

NLT

30 That very night Belshazzar, the Babylonian^{F23} king, was killed.^{F24} **31** And Darius the Mede took over the kingdom at the age of sixty-two.

FOOTNOTES:

F25: Ch 6.1 in Aram

FOOTNOTES:

F23: Or Chaldean.

F24: The Persians and Medes conquered Babylon in October 539 B.C.

Comments:

Finally, again we turn to the comments of George A. F. Knight, in “The Book of Daniel,” *Interpreter’s One Volume Commentary on the Bible* (iPreach) for some helpful insights:

The Babylonian records tell nothing of Belshazzar’s death, but mention by the Greek historian Xenophon that the “king” was killed when the Persians took Babylon may refer to him, for the records indicate Nabonidus was captured at a later time. The author’s idea that Babylon fell to Darius the Mede, who in turn was succeeded by Cyrus the Persian (6:28), accords with his idea of 4 successive kingdoms (see above on 2:31-45), of which the 2nd was the Median Empire, supposedly coming between the Neo-Babylonian and Persian empires. No doubt this idea stemmed from prophetic oracles against Babylon predicting its destruction by the Medes (Isa. 13:17-18; 21:2; Jer. 51:11, 28). Actually the Median and Neo-Babylonian empires, which arose together after the downfall of the Assyrian Empire, coexisted until both were conquered by Cyrus, first the Median Empire ca. 550 and afterwards the Neo-Babylonian in 539. The name Darius is not found in the list of Median kings, which is known from historical records; evidently it comes from confused traditions of the later Persian king Darius the Great (522-486), who aided the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem (Ezra 5:1-6), and is mistakenly applied to Astyages, the last ruler of the Median Empire (see below on 9:1-2).

The point intended by the writer is that God’s decree, issued by Daniel, came to pass immediately. Sometimes God takes action quickly, but sometimes slowly. He makes His own choice as to how quickly to carry out his punishments. One thing is certain: His punishments will be carried out. That’s just as true today as it was almost three thousand years ago with Belshazzar.