

# Daniel 5

## Introduction

We have an expression in our language that we have all heard: *It was the handwriting on the wall*

**What does that expression mean?** All indications are pointing to something that is going to happen

**Note:** Several years ago the writer of these notes was in the local Post Office, and the Postmaster and a lower level person were having a fierce argument with each other

-It was in public, and I would only think to myself: "This is not going to turn out well for the lower level person (regardless of what was the cause of the argument)"

-Several weeks later I went into the Post Office, and I saw that person with a mop and a bucket of water washing the floor to the lobby

-In other words, he had been totally demoted for his part in that argument

-In a few more months, I never saw that man again at the Post Office

We could have said when the first argument took place in public that...*The handwriting was on the wall*

-Knowing human nature, we would have a pretty good guess that the Postmaster was going to win the argument and that it was not a healthy thing to do to criticize the Postmaster in public with a loud angry voice – The handwriting was on the wall...

That expression comes from *Daniel 5*

The nation of Babylon was one of the most powerful nations that ever existed on the face of the earth

-They conquered anyone in their path

-We remember that they took over the Southern Kingdom of Israel in three stages: 606, 597, 586 BC

-The Jews who managed somehow to survive these attacks were taken as slaves to Babylon

-The prophet Jeremiah had prophesied that the captivity would last 70 years (this was to teach the Jews never to worship idols again, and they never did)

-That 70 years was dated from the first attack in 606 BC and was over in 536 BC when Zerubbabel brought the first group of Jews back from Babylon to resettle Jerusalem

Nebuchadnezzar was the king of Babylon who had conquered Israel and most other countries of the ancient world

But when he died, there were several miscellaneous rulers for a time, but finally his good-for-nothing son-in-law was made king: Nabonidus

-He ruled for several years and was replaced by his son Belshazzar, another wicked and worthless man, a man who was also extremely jealous

According to the writings of the Greek historian Xenophon, Belshazzar took a hunting trip with his princes, but one of the princes outshot the king and brought down the game

-At this point, Belshazzar had the nobleman killed on the spot

-He was insanely jealous about his wife and took terrible measures against anyone who even complimented his wife

*Daniel 5* takes place on Oct. 29, 539 BC

-According to a clay cylinder that has been excavated from the ruins of Babylon, the king of the Medes and Persians was Cyrus, and Cyrus was a good man whom God was using to bring down the wicked kingdom of Babylon

Herodotus and Xenophon have recorded the events of 539 BC

- Cyrus and the Medes and Persians started digging a canal on the Euphrates River upstream from Babylon
- They diverted much of the water from the river into a nearby lake, and on the evening of Oct. 29, 539 BC, they diverted so much water from the river that they were able to walk into the city on dry ground
- The city of Babylon was built on both sides of the river, with a high wall around it, but there were no preparations for an attack from the river itself
- The Babylonian army was caught totally off-guard, and the city fell without a battle

But on the night of the fall of Babylon, Belshazzar was having a wild drunken party (similar to Mardi Gras today)

The historian Herodotus records these words about that night:

*"By reason of the great size of the city...those in the outer parts of it were overcome, yet the dwellers in the middle part knew nothing of it; all this time they were dancing and making merry at a festival...till they learned the truth...too well"*

- So Belshazzar had a wild party going on and had no idea that the Medes and the Persians had already entered the capital city and were in the process of totally conquering the city

So as they were partying, a hand appeared on the wall and began writing a message in the plaster

Note to the teacher: On the Internet you can find many paintings that illustrate the events from the book of Daniel. It would be good to download some of them to show to the students.

## **Daniel 5.1-4**

**V1** – Belshazzar was having a drunken feast, and he was drinking more than he should have (in front of his thousand guests)

**V2** – **What were they drinking the wine out of?** We tremble when we read this: The golden vessels that they had taken from Solomon's temple in Jerusalem in 586 BC

- What would have been God's attitude toward this?** Furious (and that hardly does justice to describing the anger of God about this)

**V3** – Notice the writer of the book goes over this again

- There is nothing worse that Belshazzar and his guests could possibly have done to make God angry than using the sacred golden vessels from Solomon's temple in Jerusalem for a drunken party in Babylon
- We sometimes talk about people who are so mad that steam is coming out of their ears!
- But God has a similar kind of anger toward raw evil – See Heb. 10.26-31
- Other examples of the anger of God?** *Gen. 19* – Sodom and Gomorrah, the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC, the existence of hell for evil doers, etc.

**V4** – **In whose honor were they drinking the wine from the sacred vessels?** The *"gods of gold and silver"*

**-Note:** This is the personal opinion of the writer of these notes: I do not personally own any silver or gold (maybe some silver fillings in my teeth and my wedding ring)

- But we hear ads constantly on the radio about buying gold – the only metal we can trust to have value if everything else fails in our economy

But I have always been impressed with what the apostle Peter said in *Acts 3* when the crippled man asked for some coins so that he would have something to live on

*Acts 3.6 – But Peter said, "I do not possess silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you: In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene—walk!"*

*KJV: Then Peter said, Silver and gold have I none; but such as I have I give to thee: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk.*

There are a lot of people who are trusting in the silver and gold markets, instead of God, who made all the silver and gold that exists on the planet earth

-V 4 should cause us to think about where our values are

-We have many people around us today who are still trusting in *"the gods of gold and silver"*

*"...they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone"*

## **Daniel 5.5-9**

**V 5** – Belshazzar was at "the top of his game," as we might say today – the greatest military in the world at the time, and all the money and pleasures of this life that he could ever want

**-But what happened as he was enjoying the evening?** A hand appeared and started writing in the plaster on the wall! (Imagine that happening on the wall of this auditorium)

-Truly God has a sense of the dramatic, doesn't he?

-We get chills just reading this passage – There are all kinds of ways that God could have sent a message to Belshazzar that his time was up

-But a hand writing in the plaster on the wall was His decision for this occasion

**Where else in the Old Testament had the finger of God written in stone?**

*-Exodus 31.18 - ...He gave Moses the...tablets of stone, written by the finger of God*

-God had the power to write with his finger on stone, plaster, on anything else he might choose

**-Where do we see Jesus writing?** *John 8* (in the dust) and letters to the Seven Churches of Asia (*Rev. 2-3*)

**V 6** – **What was the reaction of Belshazzar to the hand that was writing on the wall?** Absolute terror

**-What four things tell us of the terror that Belshazzar felt?**

1. His face grew pale
2. His thoughts alarmed him
3. His hip joints went slack
4. His knees began knocking together

**V 7** – **Whom did Belshazzar call for to get help with this scene?** His magicians and astrologers

**-What did he offer to anyone who could interpret the message on the wall?** To be clothed in purple, necklace of gold around his neck, would be one of 3 rulers over the kingdom of Babylon

Optional note:

In 1882, the Nabonidus Chronicle was discovered which referred to Nabonidus giving full control of Babylon to the "crown prince."

In 1916, two Babylonian legal documents were found which actually named Belshazzar as the "crown prince."

Then, in 1924, the British Museum published the Persian Account of Nabonidus which clearly stated that Nabonidus "entrusted the kingship" to Belshazzar in the third year of his reign (553 BC).

Instead of being incorrect, the Bible proved to be remarkably correct.

Though Nabonidus is not named in *Daniel 5*, he was the first ruler of Babylon. Belshazzar, his co-regent, was the second ruler.

Therefore, the promise to make whoever could read the writing on the wall "*the third ruler in the Kingdom*" (v 7) is accurate in every detail.

Nabonidus was actually living in self-imposed exile in Arabia, and Belshazzar was literally ruling as the "King" of Babylon.

**V 8 – What was the result of calling in the "wise" men of Babylon?** They didn't have a clue

**V 9 – What was the reaction this time?** He was greatly alarmed, his face grew even more pale, and his nobles didn't know what to do

## **Daniel 5.10-12**

**V 10 – What was the reaction of the queen?** "Calm down – I have a recommendation"

-Was there another wife in the Bible who gave excellent advice to her husband? Pilate's wife (Matt. 27.19 – advice which he ignored)

**V 11 – What was her recommendation?** Nebuchadnezzar had a prophet "of the gods" who could interpret these things

-Had she devoted herself to studying the one true God? No – still referred to "the gods"

**V 12 – What kind of problems could Daniel solve?**

1. The interpretation of dreams
2. Explanation of enigmas (hidden messages)
3. The solving of difficult problems

-What was the Babylonian name that they had given to the prophet Daniel? Belteshazzar

-What did she recommend? That Daniel be "*summoned*" immediately

## **Daniel 5.13-16**

**V 13 – What did Belshazzar want to know?** If this man was the prophet that Nebuchadnezzar had brought from Judah at the fall of Jerusalem

-We believe that Daniel was taken from Jerusalem in the 606 BC attack, and this would have been 539 BC – If Daniel was about 20 at the time of the exile, he was a very old man now, about 80

-So imagine the great prophet Daniel with his gray hair and great wisdom from God standing before this "twerp" of a king, this contemptible person

-What a great scene that must have been

**V 14 –** Belshazzar had heard of the prophet Daniel

**V 15 –** Belshazzar admitted that his astrologers and magicians and wise men could not interpret the handwriting on the wall

**V 16 – What did Belshazzar offer the prophet Daniel?** All that he had offered his wise men...

## **Daniel 5.17-24**

**V 17 – What was Daniel's response to the offer of gifts and power to Daniel?** He told Belshazzar

he could keep all his gifts

**V 18 – Who had put Nebuchadnezzar into power in the first place? God**

- God had raised up the Babylonian Empire to punish the nation of Israel – It is God who raises up nations and puts down nations in human history
- It is not based on our own power as a country – Things are done according to the will of God, not according to the puny armies of men

**V 19 – How much power did Nebuchadnezzar have (from God)?**

- He could kill whom he wished
- He could spare the life of all he wished
- He could elevate those he wished to elevate
- He could humble those he wished to humble
- A great lesson here in world politics and how God doesn't need our help in world history (as seen especially in the book of *Habakkuk*)

**V 20 – What caused God to humble Nebuchadnezzar to fall? He became too arrogant (a reference to *Daniel 4* – the humbling of Nebuchadnezzar)**

**V 21 – A summary of *Daniel 4* – God sent Nebuchadnezzar out to live like an animal for 7 years, and at the end of the 7 years, he had learned to honor God**

**V 22 – How did Daniel rebuke Belshazzar? You knew all this, but were still arrogant in your heart**

**V 23 – What an indictment of Belshazzar and of our own generation today**

- What had Belshazzar done?**
- He and his concubines were drinking out of the sacred vessels from the temple in Jerusalem
- He was praising the gods of silver and gold and bronze, iron, wood, and stone
- What did Daniel say about these false gods?** They can't hear or see or understand
- How did the prophet Elijah prove these things about the idol of his age?** Contest with the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel

**V 24 – Where did Daniel say that the hand had come from? The God of the universe**

## **Daniel 5.25-28**

**V 25 – Here was the inscription on the wall: *Mene mene, tekel, upharsin***

**V 26 – What was the meaning of "*mene*"? God has numbered your kingdom and is bringing it to an end – "Numbered, numbered"**

**V 27 – What was the meaning of *Tekel*? You have been weighed on the scales and have been found lacking – "Weighed"**

**V 28 – *Peres* [*Upharsin*]? – Your kingdom is being given over to the Medes and the Persians**

- Peres** = singular participle form = "fragmented" – *BBC*, IV, 646-47
- Note:** Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin = numbered, numbered, weighed, fragments (broken up)

## **Daniel 5.29-31**

**V 29** – **What did Belshazzar do?** He still didn't worship the one true God, but he gave these phony gifts to Daniel (which meant nothing at all to him)

**V 30** – **What happened to Belshazzar later that night?** He was killed

**V 31** – **Who was the king of the Medes and Persians who took over at that time?** Cyrus the Great, who then handed the kingdom over to Darius [da-ri'us] at the age of 66

### Lessons:

**What mistakes had Belshazzar made as the king of Babylon?** Not submitting himself to the one true God

**How long did it take for the nation of Babylon to fall?** One night

**How long would it take God to bring down our country?** About one night

We are not to place our faith in weapons and armaments and the newest tanks and ships and planes

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