

DANIEL - PART 5
Handwriting on the Wall
Dr. Derek Morris

Preaching passage:	Daniel 5
Subject:	What happened to Belshazzar when he desecrated the sacred vessels from the Temple in Jerusalem
Complement:	he came under the judgment of God, his kingdom was taken from him, and he died.
Exegetical idea:	As a result of desecrating the sacred vessels from the Temple in Jerusalem, Belshazzar came under the judgment of God, his kingdom was taken from him, and he died.
Homiletical idea:	Belshazzar's tragic story doesn't have to be your story.
Purpose:	To remind my hearers God will show mercy and forgiveness to all those who call upon His name.

Introduction

Have you ever seen the handwriting on the wall? I'm not talking about the playful scribble of a child who is practicing with a crayon. Not that kind of handwriting on the wall. Or the colorful graffiti that is common in many urban areas. Not that kind of handwriting on the wall. I'm talking about a different kind of handwriting on the wall. A boyfriend notices that his girlfriend is always "too busy" when he calls or tries to plan an activity with her. And he tells one of his buddies at his after-school job, "I can see the handwriting on the wall!" A company announces that it is about to lay off dozens of employees, and one of its most recent hires says to her work associate, "I can see the handwriting on the wall!" There isn't actually any literal handwriting on the wall! But that boyfriend and that employee are getting a sense of what is about to happen. The handwriting is on the wall!

As far as I can tell, that expression, "the handwriting on the wall" comes from the story in Daniel chapter 5 that we are going to study today. This is the fifth episode of our study of the

book of Daniel. And in Daniel chapter 5 there actually is some handwriting on a wall. And that supernatural event is so terrifying to the man who sees it that he turns as pale as a sheet. His knees begin knocking together. Then he collapses on the floor. All because of some handwriting on the wall. Daniel chapter 5 - it's a tragic story indeed, and there is an important lesson for each one of us.

If you brought your Bible with you today, I invite you to open it to the book of Daniel, chapter 5. Now, look back to the last verse of Daniel chapter 4. Who is that last verse of Daniel chapter 4 speaking about? Now read the first verse of Daniel chapter 5. Do you notice anything strange or unusual? There is an abrupt jump from the testimony of King Nebuchadnezzar to the story of someone named King Belshazzar. No transition. No connecting sentences. Just an abrupt jump.

We read in Daniel 5:1, "King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine with them." And immediately we have a lot of questions. Who is Belshazzar? How much time has passed between the events of Daniel chapter 4 and the events of Daniel chapter 5?

We know that Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 BC and we know that the events of chapter 5 occurred in 539 BC. October 12, 539 BC, to be exact. That's a span of 23 years. So at least 23 years has passed, and perhaps up to 30 years. Other monarchs have ascended to the throne of Babylon, and the power of Babylon is now waning. In fact, only hours remain until the head of gold will be replaced with the chest and arms of silver, just as God had revealed more than 60 years earlier to King Nebuchadnezzar.

So many years have passed between the end of Daniel chapter 4 and the beginning of

Daniel chapter 5. At least 23 years. Perhaps as many as 30 years. But who is Belshazzar? He is described as King, but the name Belshazzar is not found on any of the cuneiform tablets that record the kings of Babylon.

For many years, liberal critics and hostile atheists have denied the historical accuracy of this chapter. They maintained the “King Belshazzar” never existed. After the death of Nebuchadnezzar in 562 BC, he was succeeded by his son, Evil-Merodach. He only lasted for 2 years and was assassinated by his brother-in-law. The brother-in-law died became king, but he died four years later. His young son was assassinated by conspirators, one of whom, Nabonidus, seized the throne. Nabonidus was the last recorded king of the Neo-Babylonian empire. So who is Belshazzar? He isn’t even mentioned in the list of kings. Are the critics correct? Is this book the work of a poor historian writing hundreds of years later?

A crucial piece of evidence is found in Daniel 5:7 and again in Daniel 5:29. In the midst of a desperate situation, Belshazzar makes this decree: “Whoever reads this writing and tells me what it means will be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed around his neck, and he will be made the **third** highest ruler in the kingdom.” Do you know why Belshazzar only offers to bestow the honor of third highest ruler in the kingdom? Because he isn’t the absolute monarch himself. He is the second highest ruler.

Careful research has revealed that Belshazzar was the oldest son of Nabonidus, the last recorded king of Babylon. In 1861, a cuneiform tablet was translated which contained a prayer of Nabonidus, asking the gods to bless his son Belshazzar. History also records that King Nabonidus spent most of his time away from home, particularly at the oasis of Tema, in North Arabia. Nabonidus made his oldest son Belshazzar co-regent in 553 B.C, leaving him on the

throne as “king” of Babylon. The Aramaic word translated “king” has several shades of meaning, and doesn’t necessarily mean an absolute monarch.

Belshazzar, son of king Nabonidus, was #2 in the kingdom of Babylon. But as co-regent with his father, it was certainly appropriate to refer to him as king. Unfortunately, Belshazzar wasn’t much of a king. While his father Nabonidus was fighting military campaigns in defense of his kingdom, Belshazzar was partying back home. Just two days before the events of Daniel chapter 5, Belshazzar’s father, king Nabonidus was defeated by the advancing armies of Cyrus, king of Persia. And what was Belshazzar doing? Planning another party.

Let’s pick up the story in Daniel 5, starting with verse 1. “King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine with them. [2] While Belshazzar was drinking his wine, he gave orders to bring in the gold and silver goblets that Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken from the temple in Jerusalem, so that the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines might drink from them. [3] So they brought in the gold goblets that had been taken from the temple of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines drank from them. [4] As they drank the wine, they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone.”

Belshazzar was desecrating the sacred vessels taken from the Temple of God in Jerusalem. He was deliberately mocking the God of Israel. And as he and his guests lay around in a drunken stupor, Scripture records in Daniel 5:5, “Suddenly the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall, near the lampstand in the royal palace. The king watched the hand as it wrote. [6] His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his knees knocked together and his legs gave way.”

Why was Belshazzar so terrified? You say, "I'd be frightened if I saw the finger of a human hand writing in the plaster of a wall!" And I'd be frightened too. But I want to suggest that Belshazzar's terror is related to his deliberate mocking of the God of heaven. He knew the testimony of Nebuchadnezzar that the God of Daniel was the God of heaven above and the earth below. But Belshazzar was deliberately turning away. No! He was doing more than turning away. He was deliberately mocking Daniel's God.

And when the finger of a human hand began to write on the wall of the banquet hall, Belshazzar was terrified. His knees began to knock together. He collapsed to the floor. Even before the handwriting had been interpreted, he knew that he had been weighed in the balances and found wanting. The handwriting was on the wall, and the judgment against him was certain.

We read on in Daniel 5:7, "The king called out for the enchanters, astrologers and diviners to be brought and said to these wise men of Babylon, 'Whoever reads this writing and tells me what it means will be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed around his neck, and he will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom.'"

There is the admission that he is not sole king, but rather co-regent with his absent father Nabonidus. The story continues: "Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or tell the king what it meant. [9] So King Belshazzar became even more terrified and his face grew more pale. His nobles were baffled. [10] The queen, (or queen mother) hearing the voices of the king and his nobles, came into the banquet hall. "O king, live forever!" she said. "Don't be alarmed! Don't look so pale! There is a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods in him. In the time of your father he was found to have insight and intelligence and wisdom like that of the gods. King Nebuchadnezzar your father--your father the king, I

say--appointed him chief of the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners.

Now here was have another problem. Nebuchadnezzar was not Belshazzar's father. Belshazzar's father was Nabonidus. So what is going on here? Two possibilities. The Aramaic word can also be translated ancestor. Some have suggested that Belshazzar's mother was the daughter of King Nebuchadnezzar. Listen to her testimony in Daniel 5:12, "This man Daniel, whom the king called Belshazzar, was found to have a keen mind and knowledge and understanding, and also the ability to interpret dreams, explain riddles and solve difficult problems. Call for Daniel, and he will tell you what the writing means." She seems to be well acquainted with Daniel, doesn't she? It may be a correct assumption that she was a daughter of Nebuchadnezzar. That would make Nebuchadnezzar Belshazzar's grandfather. His ancestor.

It is also possible that the term "father" is used figuratively, just as Elisha calls Elijah his "father". In other words, the queen is saying to Belshazzar that Nebuchadnezzar was the one who went before you--your forefather.

You choose which option makes the most sense. I happen to believe that Belshazzar was a descendent of Nebuchadnezzar, most probably his grandson. And yet, when he should have been defending the kingdom, he is getting drunk and deliberately mocking the God of heaven.

Belshazzar listens to the counsel of the queen. We read in Daniel 5:13. "So Daniel was brought before the king, and the king said to him, "Are you Daniel, one of the exiles my father the king brought from Judah? [14] I have heard that the spirit of the gods is in you and that you have insight, intelligence and outstanding wisdom. [15] The wise men and enchanters were brought before me to read this writing and tell me what it means, but they could not explain it. [16] Now I have heard that you are able to give interpretations and to solve difficult problems. If

you can read this writing and tell me what it means, you will be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed around your neck, and you will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom."

Notice Daniel stern response. Daniel 5:17 "Then Daniel answered the king, 'You may keep your gifts for yourself and give your rewards to someone else.'" Doesn't that sound a little stern to you? Keep your gifts for yourself and give your rewards to someone else! Why is Daniel so stern? Because Belshazzar has been deliberately defiant. He has deliberately mocked the God of heaven. He cannot buy his way out of this one.

But Daniel does offer the interpretation to the handwriting on the wall. "Nevertheless, I will read the writing for the king and tell him what it means. [18] O king, the Most High God gave your father Nebuchadnezzar sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendor. [19] Because of the high position he gave him, all the peoples and nations and men of every language dreaded and feared him. Those the king wanted to put to death, he put to death; those he wanted to spare, he spared; those he wanted to promote, he promoted; and those he wanted to humble, he humbled. [20] But when his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory. [21] He was driven away from people and given the mind of an animal; he lived with the wild donkeys and ate grass like cattle; and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, until he acknowledged that the Most High God is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and sets over them anyone he wishes. [22] **"But you his son, O Belshazzar, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this.** [23] Instead, you have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven. You had the goblets from his temple brought to you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines drank wine from them. You praised the

gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or understand. But you did not honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways. [24] Therefore he sent the hand that wrote the inscription. [25] "This is the inscription that was written: mene, mene, tekel, parsin.

I can only imagine that Belshazzar is getting paler by the minute. He's not partying now. He is not mocking the God of heaven now. He has set down the sacred golden vessel that he filled with wine. He's still staring at the handwriting on the wall as Daniel continues: " "This is what these words mean:

Mene: God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end.

Tekel: You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting.

Peres: Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians."

[29] Then at Belshazzar's command, Daniel was clothed in purple, a gold chain was placed around his neck, and he was proclaimed the third highest ruler in the kingdom.

Why did Belshazzar do that? Daniel had clearly stated that he wanted to reward. What did Daniel desire? Repentance. The same desire that he had for King Nebuchadnezzar. But no word of repentance is recorded. No contrition. No recognition of his foolishness. And the story of Belshazzar ends with these tragic words: "That very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain." And Xenophon, the Greek historian, confirms that the king of Babylon was killed when the Persian soldiers entered the city of Babylon that night.

What a tragic story! What a waste! Belshazzar lived close to one of the greatest prophets of God of all time. But Belshazzar refused to listen to God. He not only turned a deaf ear to the voice of God. He deliberately mocked the God of heaven.

Is there any grace in this story? Is there any good news? Yes, there is! Have you ever asked yourself why God wrote a message on the wall of that banquet hall? The Persian armies were on their way whether there was handwriting on the wall or not. So why did God write a message on the wall that night? Let me suggest two reasons. God was wanting to catch the attention of many who were in that banquet hall. He wanted everyone present to know that there is a God in heaven. The word spoken by His prophet Daniel was true. The head of gold was about to be replaced by the chest and arms of silver. God was giving those present an opportunity to repent of their sins and to trust Him as the God of heaven above and of the earth below. You see, God is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. That is why, over 500 years later, God sent His only Son, born of a virgin, to live in our midst, and to die as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

We all have a choice to make. Will we accept His mercy and grace, or suffer the consequences of our rebellion? Belshazzar's story is a tragic one, but it doesn't have to be that way for you. You have another option. You can either be weighed in the balance and found wanting. Or you can be weighed in the balance and found wanting a Savior! And the good news is that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved! He is able to save to the uttermost all those who come to Him. Belshazzar's tragic story doesn't have to be your story. You can choose to be weighed in the balance and found wanting a Savior. Choosing a Savior. Having a Savior. And then you don't have to stand around terrified, shaking in your shoes, with your knees knocking together. Oh no! You can look forward with joy to the return of our soon coming King. You can read the handwriting on the wall, you can see the signs all around that the coming of King Jesus is near, you can know that the rock of Daniel chapter 2 is about to

come blazing through the skies, and you don't have to be afraid. Because you have a Savior.

If someone asks you today, "Why are you so cheerful, after studying such a tragic story in Daniel chapter 5, you can tell them, "Belshazzar's tragic story doesn't have to be my story!" Belshazzar's tragic story doesn't have to be your story! While there is still time, we can call upon the name of the Lord God of heaven. And let the entry be made in the books of heaven: Weighed in the balances, and found to have a Savior!

I appeal to you today: Listen when God speaks to you. Listen to His Word. Listen to His prophets. Do not deliberately turn away. Do not mock the God of heaven. The handwriting is on the wall. Your life is uncertain. And so is mine. The kingdoms of this world will soon become the kingdom of our God. Receive His mercy today. Belshazzar's tragic story does not have to be your story. You don't have to be weighed in the balances and found wanting. You can be weighed in the balances and found to have a Savior!