

The Handwriting Is On The Wall

Daniel 5:1-31

Introduction: 1) Two of my favorite movies of all time are The Godfather I and II (1972, 1974). They are both classics. In Godfather II there is a scene where the Godfather, Michael Corleone (played by Al Pacino), is in Cuba sealing a deal with the Cuban government that will result in massive wealth for his family. Now, Michael has some inkling of rebel activity that have caused him concern, but he is told not to worry, the Cuban government has everything under control. Then suddenly, at a grand gala celebrating New Year's put on by president Batista, filled with wine, dancing, beautiful women, etc. the military leadership marches in to inform the most powerful man in Cuba that his government has collapsed, the rebels will soon have control, and everyone needs to get out immediately and flee to safety. Michael, the Godfather, escapes and the Cuban government falls into the hands of Communist rebels. Pride, arrogance and a sense of indestructability caused them to ignore "the handwriting on the wall!"

2) In Daniel 5 there is another instance of handwriting on the wall, but this one could not be ignored because what appeared (5:5) was written by the very finger of God. And, the message that God wrote would soon become clear and its promise certain. Anytime and any way God speaks, we should all listen very carefully.

3) In the flow of the book of Daniel chapter 5 comes out of nowhere, though there is a clear theological connection to the last verse of chapter 4 where we are told that when it comes to the “King of heaven, all his works are right and just; and those who walk in pride he is able to humble” (4:37). We have been dealing with King Nebuchadnezzar in chapters 1-4, and suddenly we meet King Belshazzar in 5:1. How did this come about? What happened? Dale Davis does a really good job of summarizing things in his work on Daniel, and so let us allow him to set the stage for the drama that is about to unfold: “Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 BC, after a reign of forty-three years. In less than another twenty-five years all was lost. Evil-Merodach (561-561), Nebuchadnezzar’s son, followed his father on the throne. He, however, was apparently assassinated by his brother-in-law Neriglissar, who had a tenure of about four years and was succeeded by his son, Labashi-Marduk. This poor creature was ‘liquidated’ within a month and one of the conspirators, Nabonidus, became king (555-539 BC). It seems that Nabonidus did not have designs on the throne himself but may have been placed there as a ‘compromise candidate’ by the conspirators. Some think that Belshazzar, Nabonidus’ son, was the real mover behind the conspirators. In any case, Nabonidus had a religious or ‘faith’ problem. He was a passionate devotee of the moon god Sin, to such a degree that he alarmed the Babylonian clergy, for he seemed intent on prying Marduk loose from his supremacy in Babylon. This may

have led to a ‘relocation programme’ for Nabonidus – he spent the next ten years at Taima/Tema, an oasis in the North Arabian Desert, five hundred miles from Babylon. His son, Belshazzar, functioned as *de facto* king in Babylon, operated in a more pro-Mardukian manner, and thus kept the local clergy from revolt. Which is why we are suddenly staring Belshazzar (553-539 BC) in the face at Daniel 5.” (Daniel, *BST*, 70-71).

So, now we can see where we are. There is a chronological gap between chapters 4 and 5 of approximately 20 years. Keep in mind, however, Daniel was never written to give us a history lesson about Babylonians, Medes and Persians. It was written to encourage the Hebrew people, God’s people, that though they had been defeated and exiled (3 times!), God was sovereignly in control and they should trust Him even when they could not trace His hand. He is working out His plans and accomplishing His purposes, and every now and then He lets us in on what He is doing. Daniel 5 is another occasion where God lets us see what He is up to. Like the fiery furnace of chapter 3 and the lion’s den of chapter 6, it is one of the most remarkable and memorable stories in all of the Bible. We will see again the truth of Daniel 4:25, “know that the Most High God rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom He wills” (5:21). Yes, our God gives kingdoms to whom He wills and He also takes them away from whom He wills. Belshazzar is about to

find that out this very night, what Ken Gangel calls, “the night of bad calls” (Daniel, *HOTC*, 128). The handwriting on the wall is on the way.

I. God sees our sin when we mock His glory 5:1-4

1) The last Babylonian king, a man named Belshazzar, decided to throw a big party even as Darius the Mede (5:31; possibly another name for Cyrus or even a dynastic title) is about to invade Babylon and bring its empire to a speedy end. To call this event a party is kind. The word “orgy” is probably more appropriate. And, it was quite the event which adds to the irony and foolishness of the moment. This feast was, “for a thousand of his lords” (*NIV*, “nobles”). Furthermore he did something kings normally did not do, he “drank wine in front of the thousand” (v. 1). He set the example of drunkenness, sensuality and revelry on this fateful night. He would be the life of the party even as his own life would soon come to an abrupt end. What a fool Belshazzar is.

However, his foolishness did not stop here. He decides to add blasphemy, mockery, idolatry, and sexual sensuality to the list. While he is drinking and getting drunk, he “commanded that the vessels of gold and silver that Nebuchadnezzar his father [actually his grandfather, a typical Semitic way of identifying one’s ancestor] had taken from out of the temple in Jerusalem be brought” that his fellow party animals might drink from them. Verse 2

records the command and verse 3, in almost identical language, used to emphasize the blasphemy and mockery of the command, records the response. Belshazzar along with his lords, numerous wives and concubines, drank their wine from the sacred vessels taken from Yahweh's temple, and, not interested in stopping here, added idolatrous worship to their debased behavior as they "praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood and stone" (v. 4). Almost sounds like an Olympic celebration with the gold, silver and bronze, but there is nothing noble about this night of debauchery and mockery.

The spiritual and theological significance of all of this cannot be overstated. The act is intended to mock the God of Judah and to celebrate the gods of Babylon as being superior. Appearing in public and drinking with his guest was not traditional protocol for a Babylonian king. No doubt Belshazzar wanted to make this banquet special and one way to do this is to make a spectacle of Judah's God. Belshazzar takes holy vessels and treats them as nothing more than common utensils. He then goes further and uses them in the worship of false gods. His royal guests, his many wives (he was a polygamist) and his concubines (his human sex toys) all joined in the frivolity and raunchiness of the evening. Perhaps Belshazzar was attempting to win the favor and protection of his false gods with the enemy at his

doorstep. In trusting in those gods who are no gods, he is making the biggest mistake of his life. The wisdom of Proverbs 6:12-15 is about to unfold before our eyes where the Bible says, “A worthless person, a wicked man, goes about with crooked speech, winks with his eyes, signals with his feet, points with his finger, with perverted heart devises evil, continually sowing discord; therefore calamity will come upon him suddenly; in a moment he will be broken beyond healing.” Indeed, the prophecy of Isaiah 47, given more than 100 years earlier, concerning the downfall of Babylon, is about to come to fruition. It is worth taking notice specifically of Isaiah 47:10-11. There God’s Word says, “You felt secure in your wickedness, you said, “No one sees me”; your wisdom and your knowledge led you astray, and you said in your heart, “I am, and there is no one besides me.” But evil shall come upon you, which you will not know how to charm away; disaster shall fall upon you, for which you will not be able to atone; and ruin shall come upon you suddenly, of which you know nothing.” Bryan Chappell is right, “There is no human wall so high, no human accomplishment so great, that it is secure against the judgment of God” (*The Gospel According To Daniel*, 97). Belshazzar is about to learn how true this is. The fact is, we all should learn how true it is as well before it is too late.

Afterall, there is a Belshazzar lurking in all of our hearts. We all need God to deliver us from us!

II. God confronts our sins and we should tremble when He does 5:5-9

- 1) The Babylonians are having a gala to remember, completely out of touch with reality. Sin does this. It makes us dull. It makes us stupid. Sinclair Ferguson is right, “Belshazzar is perhaps the supreme Old Testament parallel to the rich fool in Jesus’ parable. Having already given expression to their lust for more (in the case of the rich fool his lust for more money), they would never be satisfied without more. Blinded by the pursuit of that lust, they were oblivious to the possibility that “‘This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?’” (Luke 12:20).” (*Daniel*, The Preachers Commentary, vol. 21, 102). Suddenly, (*ESV*, “immediately”), the king is brought to his senses. I’m sure Belshazzar set the record for the shortest time it has even taken for a drunk to sober up! My friend Ligon Duncan says, “from verses 5-7 this man goes from a break with reality to a check with reality. Suddenly, Belshazzar is yanked into the reality of the seriousness of the moment” (Sermon, “The Handwriting on the Wall,” 1-11-98). And what yanked him back into reality? “The fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall of the king’s palace, opposite the lampstand. And the

king saw the hand as it wrote” (v. 5). Yep, I think that would probably do it! The same fingers that wrote the Ten Commandments for the Hebrew people (Ex. 31:18; Deut. 9:10) now confronts blasphemous Belshazzar with his sins and imminent judgment. Verse six records his terrifying 4-fold response: 1) His facial color change. A red face flushed from drinking quickly turned as white as a sheet; 2) His mind went into a tizzy; 3) He went limp; and 4) His knees knocked together. Davis provides a descriptive and colorful commentary on what might be happening to this shaking sovereign, “Belshazzar’s demeaning of Yahweh’s vessels was his way of demeaning Yahweh. Belshazzar was not simply a drunken slob but a profane slob. God brought him to almost instant sobriety, however. Belshazzar came unglued – he was seeing the fingers of a man’s hand writing on the palace wall. He became deathly pale, his thoughts terrified him, and his lower body lost all strength. The clear sight and sheer spookiness of those writing fingers produced paralyzing terror (5-6)....Some think that ‘his limbs gave way’ (v. 6, *ESV*). Lit., ‘the knots of his loins were loosed’, may refer to his losing control of bladder or bowels.”(*Daniel*, BST, 74). I must admit that if this is what happened, I can certainly understand! I will make no further comment! The scriptures are more than sufficient!!

2) The king tries to gain his composure and get a grip on things, but it is a bubbling, stumbling effort to say the least. He “called loudly to bring in the enchanters, the Chaldeans (*NIV*, “astrologers”) and the astrologers” (*NIV*, “diviners”). He promised these “wise men of Babylon” (ha!) honor (“clothed with purple”), wealth (“a chain of gold”) and status (“third ruler in the kingdom”), after his father Nabonidus and himself, if they could read the writing on the wall and provide the interpretation (v. 7). The foolishness of this move only adds to the foolishness in verses 1-4. This braintrust, these cardinals of counsel, these intellectual elitists, these Ph.D.’s who commanded the respect of the common, everyday man, proved once more to be totally useless! These supposedly “wise men of Babylon” could not interpret Nebuchadnezzar’s dream in chapter 2 and had to be bailed out by Daniel. The same thing happened again in chapter 4! Now, for a third time, “all the king’s wise men” are brought in and once more they all strike out (v. 8). Belshazzar’s response by now is laughably predictable (v. 9), “Then King Belshazzar was greatly alarmed, and his color changed [again!], and his lords (*NIV*, “nobles”) were perplexed” (*NIV*, “baffled”). *The Message* reads, “So now the king was really frightened. All the blood drained from his face. The nobles were in a panic.” Belshazzar has been confronted with his sin by a holy and omnipotent God and he rightly trembles. The practical

and theological insights of Dale Davis are once more very helpful as we contemplate the impact these verses should make on us: “Where does one turn in such moments? Why, to religion, of course. Or at least that’s what Belshazzar did. He turned to his ‘faith’. He hollered for the conjurers, the Chaldeans, and the astrologers (7) to come in and interpret the mysterious text. So these losers came traipsing in again (cf. 2:2, 10-11 27; 4:7). Once more they fail (8) and Belshazzar’s alarm only intensifies (9). This is sometimes God’s pattern – to aggravate our helplessness by exposing the uselessness of our favourite props, even our favourite religious props. You may have your own paganism of choice – occultism, pluralism, machoism, feminism, agnosticism, moralism – and they will prove as petrifyingly useless as the Babylonian variety.

The human defiance is quite clear, but you may wonder where the divine opportunity appears. Precisely here, at the end of verse 9! God has frightened Belshazzar; religion has failed him; he is reduced to a shivering, sniffling mess with no supports whatever. He is therefore on the edge of the abyss of hope, is he not? He is the object of God’s terror, but in one sense it is a kind terror. God does Belshazzar the favour of leaving him without any recourse, in utter helplessness – and hence with a huge opportunity.

Whenever God brings a man to the end of himself, smashing all his props

and wasting his idols, it is a favourable moment indeed. If he will but see it.” (p. 74-75).

III. God exposes our sins and we are found wanting

5:10-28

1) We have arrived at the crisis moment, the moment of truth. David Dorsey calls verses 10-12 the “turning point”, and sees them as the apex of a chiastically arranged chapter 5.

Story 5: Belshazzar’s feast (5:1-31 [5:1-6:1])

- a) Introduction: Belshazzar in prosperity; his feast and mockery of Yahweh’s vessels (5:1-4)
- b) Handwriting on the wall (5:5-6)
- c) Magicians are summoned; failure of magicians to interpret the writing (5:7-9)
- d) Turning point: Daniel is remembered (5:10-12)
- c’) Daniel is summoned; failure of magicians recounted (5:13-16)
- b’) Handwriting on the wall interpreted by Daniel (5:17-28)
- a’) Conclusion: Daniel is honored and Belshazzar’s kingdom is overthrown (5:29-31 [5:29-6:1])

(The Literary Structure of the Old Testament, 261).

Dorsey notes, “structured repetition is used throughout Daniel to emphasize the book’s two main themes: Yahweh’s supremacy over all earthly powers and the importance for Jews to remain loyal to their God even in exile.” These two themes are emphasized again, Dorsey says, “by the matching stories about Yahweh’s supremacy over the two powerful and proud Babylonian monarchs: Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar (chaps. 4, 5).” [p. 262].

- 2) Hearing the words, the loud cry of the king and his lords, the queen, probably the queen mother, “came into the banquet hall” (v. 10). She respectfully addresses the king in a traditional manner (“O king, live forever!”) and tells him to get a grip on himself. “There is a man in your kingdom in whom is the spirit of the holy gods” (or “Spirit of the holy God”). Your father Nebuchadnezzar recognized that “light and understanding and wisdom like the wisdom of the gods were found in him” and he elevated him above all these losers who really have no ability to give you what you need or ask (v. 11). Why? Because as I have already said, “an excellent spirit, knowledge, and understanding to interpret dreams, explain riddles, and solve problems were found in this Daniel” (v. 12). Don’t you know this? Have you forgotten about him

after these many years? Well, let Daniel be called out of obscurity and retirement “and he will show the interpretation.”

- 3) Daniel, the man of God, is brought before the king. There may be something of a dig at the old man, now in his 80’s most likely, as he is referred to as “one of the exiles from Judah” (v. 13). Interestingly, the king calls him by his Jewish name. Belshazzar repeats what the queen mother said in verse 14 (v. 11-12). He recounts the failure of his impotent soothsayers (v. 15) and reaffirms his promise of purple, gold and promotion to 3rd ruler in the kingdom if Daniel can interpret the handwriting on the wall (v. 16).
- 4) Daniel’s response is not disrespectful but it is direct. Keep your stuff or give it to someone else. I don’t need it and I don’t want it. Still, “I will read the writing to the king and make known to him the interpretation” (v. 17). As an aside, that is a pretty good summary of faithful, biblical exposition!
- 5) Before Daniel interprets the handwriting, he does a little preaching and schools Belshazzar in recent history and biblical theology. Note that God is referenced five times in verses 18-28. He is called “the Most High God” (v. 17, 21), “the Lord of heaven” (v. 23) and “the God in whose

hand is your breath” (v. 23). Here is a summary of his message in outline form:

- 1) The Most High God gave your father Nebuchadnezzar his kingdom with the glory and privileges that go with such a position (v. 18-19).
 - 2) Your father became arrogant and prideful and so God took him down and caused him to live like a beast with animals like oxen and donkeys. God did this so that he would know “the Most High God rules the kingdom of mankind and sets over it whom he will” (v. 20-21).
 - 3) You, Belshazzar, are just like him and you should know better! You are even more responsible than your father! You have blasphemed and mocked me with your revelry and idolatry and you knew better! Indeed, “the God in whose hand is your breath, and whose are all your ways, you have not honored” (v. 22-23).
 - 4) Therefore, the Most High God has exposed your sin, weighted your evil and wicked actions, and you are found wanting (v. 24-28).
- 6) Verses 24-28 need further attention for us to understand what had been written on the wall. The writing on the wall was inscribed in Aramaic as

MENE, MENE, TEKEL, and PARSIN (v. 26). There would have been no vowel markings and the letters would have run consecutively.

Daniel's first step is to rightly separate the letters into the appropriate word division. He does this. There are four words to the inscription that read "numbered, numbered, weighted, divided." Daniel then provides the devastating interpretation in verses 26-28, "God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end" (v. 26). "You have been weighed in the balances and found wanting" (v. 27). "Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians" (v. 28). God is closing the books on your kingdom Belshazzar. You are a lightweight! My measuring standard proves it. You challenged the Most High God and you lose. You crossed the line and the gig is up. God saw your sin just like he sees everyone's sin. You may enjoy sin for a season, but "payday someday" is coming to all who refuse to bow and humbly submit to "the Most High God." Remember, there is coming a day "when every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:10-11).

IV. God deals with our sins of unrepentance with appropriate judgment

5:29-31

- 1) It is interesting to note that, “chapters 2, 3, and 4 all end with some ‘confession’ by Nebuchadnezzar (2:46-47; 3:28-29; 4:34-37), but there is none of that at the end of chapter 5” (Davis, 71). Turn out the lights, the party’s over. Tell the band they can all go home. And, they don’t need to come back. Ever! “The Most High God” is taking Belshazzar out and setting up a new world monarch name Cyrus, here identified as Darius the Mede (vs. 30-31).
- 2) Belshazzar showed no signs of repentance for his arrogance, blasphemies, idolatry, pride and sensualities. He did however, and probably reluctantly, keep his word to Daniel. Like wicked King Herod who murdered John the Baptist, he no doubt was “exceedingly sorry because of his oaths” (Mark 6:26). But to save face, he had to keep his word. How often it is that our words come back to bit us!
- 3) “Belshazzar gave the command,” and Daniel was clothed in purple, got his gold chain, and was raised up to “be the third ruler in the kingdom” (v. 29). Once again God has honored his faithful servant in this hostile and pagan world. Daniel had been sent to the retirement home by men of power. God brought him out of retirement and made him “third ruler in

the kingdom.” After Nabonidus and his son Belshazzar, no one was more powerful than the “exile of Judah” (v. 13).

- 4) Daniel’s ascending in the Babylonian empire was very short-lived. It was like getting a promotion the day before the company goes bankrupt. It was like getting a medal even though you lost the war. It lasted only a night. However, Darius will wisely recognize the value of this man of God in the days that follow (6:3). “That very night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was killed” (5:30), not exactly the way he expected his party to end. According to the Greek historians, Herodotus (5th century B.C.) and Xenophon (c. 434-355 B.C.), the Medo-Persian army did not attempt to storm the impregnable Babylonian walls which were at least 40 feet high and 25 feet in width. It has to be noted that Herodotus exclaimed “Babylon surpasses in wonder any city in the known world” and said the walls were 56 miles long, 80 feet thick, and 320 feet high! While this may have been an exaggeration (this would have been almost 30 stories high), no one denies their magnificence. So, how did the Medo-Persians get into the city? “They diverted water from the Euphrates River (which ran under the walls of Babylon) into a marsh. With the level of the water lowered, the soldiers were able to wade the river under the walls and enter the city. Xenophon added that the city

was invaded while the Babylonians were feasting in a time of drunken revelry....As a matter of fact, Xenophan cited the festival as the reason the Persians chose to attack Babylon on that particular night.” The dates were Oct. 11-12, 539 B.C. (Miller, *Daniel*, NAC, 167).

- 5) Belshazzar bites the dust, “And Darius the Mede received the Kingdom [from God!], being about sixty-two years old” (v. 31). The Babylonian king had challenged and mocked the Most High God and it was no contest. He had been confronted with his sin and showed no repentance. God says fine, and He takes him out. God’s judgment did not come, on this occasion, like a frog being boiled in a kettle. It struck like a lightning bolt from heaven. To those who knew their Bible, this was no surprise. God’s prophets had already laid out Babylon’s destiny and that this kingdom was a passing fad, here today and gone tomorrow, according to a divine timetable, not a human one (see Isa. 21:1-10, Jere. 50-51). Sinclair Ferguson, in his context, directs us to the wisdom of Proverbs 29:1 and 1:22-26 (*Daniel*, The Preacher’s Commentary, vol. 21, 114). There we read, “He who is often reproved, yet stiffens his neck, will suddenly be broken beyond healing.” “How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge? If you turn at my reproof, behold, I

will pour out my spirit to you; I will make my words known to you. Because I have called and you refused to listen, have stretched out my hand and no one has heeded, because you have ignored all my counsel and would have none of my reproof, I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when terror strikes you.”

In Revelation 18 we read of the destruction of Babylon, that evil and wicked world system that stands against the kingdom of God economically, morally, politically, and spiritually. In Daniel 5, we have received a preview of that eschatological day. Here we find words of wisdom. We find words of warning for sure.

Conclusion: Where is Christ in this text?

In the story of God’s handwriting on the wall, a Hebrew exile comes out of nowhere to confront the powers of this world with their sins of blasphemy, mockery, arrogance, pride and idolatry. Given that Daniel has been off the historical scene for many years, it is almost as if he has risen from the dead. He is a man of impeccable character who cannot be bought or seduced by the idols of this world. Why? Because in this man of unsurpassing wisdom is the Spirit of the Holy God (v. 11). In fact even the pagans acknowledge his good testimony (cf. III John 11-12), acknowledging he has “an excellent spirit, knowledge, and understanding to interpret dreams, explain riddles, and solve problems” (v. 12; cf.

6:3). This sounds rather familiar with respect to another exile from Judah who comes on the scene in the 1st century, a man by the name of Jesus who said of Himself, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me” (Luke 4:18). Later, we are not surprised to hear even His enemies admit, “No one ever spoke like this man” (John 7:46). That Daniel typifies in our text the coming Messiah is hard to deny. This servant of the Lord foreshadows the Servant of the Lord upon whom rest “the Spirit of the Lord...the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord” (Isaiah 11:2). Daniel’s wisdom and abilities and position is similar in many ways to the patriarch Joseph (Gen. 37-50). His life looks back. However, as the mediator of God’s wisdom to sinful humanity, his life looks forward to the ultimate mediator between God and humanity, the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 2:5), the one Paul calls “the wisdom of God” in 1 Corinthians 1:30, the one Paul tells us “in whom are hidden all treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3).