



FOCUS VERSES

Galatians 6:7

Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.

LESSON TEXT

Daniel 5:4–8, 11, 17, 25–28

4 They drank wine, and praised the gods of gold, and of silver, of brass, of iron, of wood, and of stone.

5 In the same hour came forth fingers of a man's hand, and wrote over against the candlestick upon the plaister of the wall of the king's palace: and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote.

6 Then the king's countenance was changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his loins were loosed, and his knees smote one against another.

7 The king cried aloud to bring in the astrologers, the Chaldeans, and the soothsayers. And the king spake, and said to the wise men of Babylon, Whosoever shall read this writing, and shew me the interpretation thereof, shall be clothed with scarlet, and have a chain of gold about his neck, and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom.

8 Then came in all the king's wise men: but they could not read the writing, nor make known to the king the interpretation thereof.

.....

11 There is a man in thy kingdom, in whom is the spirit of the holy gods; and in the days of thy father light and understanding and wisdom, like the wisdom of the gods, was found in him; whom the king Nebuchadnezzar thy father, the king, I say, thy father, made master of the magicians, astrologers, Chaldeans, and soothsayers;

.....

17 Then Daniel answered and said before the king, Let thy gifts be to thyself, and give thy rewards to another; yet I will read the writing unto the king, and make known to him the interpretation.

.....

25 And this is the writing that was written, MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN.

26 This is the interpretation of the thing: MENE; God hath numbered thy kingdom, and finished it.

27 TEKEL; Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting.

28 PERES; Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians.



FOCUS THOUGHT

History should be a clear indicator of what happens when God is ignored and mocked.



CULTURE CONNECTION

Finger Pointing

Once read a news story of a young boy suspended from school because a driver saw him point his finger at the bus and shout, “Bang.” Even though the boy was on his own lawn at the time, the school determined his actions violated the “no tolerance” policy related to school violence.

As someone who, as a boy, inflicted many unseen wounds with my trusty finger side-arm, I could relate to the boy. I found the extended forefinger and cocked thumb was all I needed to bring imaginary wrongdoers to justice and protect my neighborhood from invisible desperados. If passersby found themselves in my sight, it was only because they had unwittingly entered the boundaries of my fantasy world.

Of course, when playing with other children, there were the inevitable disagreements along the lines of “I got you!” “No, I got you.” These quarrels would usually ascend to the lofty heights of child logic, which avows that the child who could say “Did too!” or “Did not!” the most and with the greatest sincerity must have the weight of wise reason on his side.

Unfortunately, there are still times I use child logic. I’ll figuratively point my finger at God while whining, “No fair! I’ve got you.” I discover He’s already pointing back and saying, “No, I’ve got you.” And that settles it. His finger points at me with judgments or blessings that are always right. That’s the thing about God; you can never outdraw His finger.

OUTLINE

I. BELSHAZZAR’S PARTY

II. GOD’S RESPONSE

- A. Handwriting on the Wall
- B. Daniel’s Calling and Interpretation of Writing
- C. Belshazzar Condemned
- D. God’s Judgment Sure

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

Chapters 3–6 of Daniel relate historical events that provide practical foreshadowing related to the future as prophesied in the chapters preceding and following them. In these chapters we see clear evidence of God’s universal sovereignty. Christians today usually take it for granted that there is one God and that He is Lord of all. There is no place or time in which He does not reign supreme.

In contrast, ancient cultures usually saw their gods as residing in a specific place and belonging to a specific people. The Mesopotamians believed the spirits of their gods resided inside their idols. When the

Babylonians conquered a land, they often “captured” its gods by taking its idols to the temples in Babylon.

It must have been perplexing to find that Jehovah could not be captured and could not be confined. Moreover, the writing of the Jewish prophets proclaimed that Jehovah was not limited to the Jewish people but held sway over all the peoples of the earth. As Job proclaimed, “He makes nations great, and destroys them; he enlarges nations and disperses them” (Job 12:23, NIV).

Nations ignore God, withhold reverence and glory due Him, and struggle against His will at their peril. Prophecies will come to pass. “God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?” (Numbers 23:19).

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. BELSHAZZAR’S PARTY

In an attempt to discredit the historicity of the Bible, many scholars claimed there never

was a King Belshazzar, since it was known that Nabonidus was the last king of the Babylonian Empire. However, beginning about 1924 a number of archeological discoveries were made that verified beyond question the existence of King Belshazzar. Over time, the important role Belshazzar played in Babylonian history has been verified, and this information has shed light on the events of Daniel 5.

Several years after the death of Nebuchadnezzar, one of his sons-in-law, Nabonidus seized the throne by assassinating the young son of the previous king. Nabonidus had a passion for history. He is sometimes called the first archeologist because of his careful excavation of historic sites and display of artifacts in royal museums. He did not, however, have a passion for governance. In the third year of his reign Nabonidus moved to the Arabian oasis of Tayma, where he constructed a large royal compound as his permanent residence, leaving his eldest son, Belshazzar to rule the empire as his co-regent.

About twenty years later the empire came under attack by the Medo-Persian Empire led by Cyrus the Great. Nabonidus came out of retirement to lead the Babylonian forces in the field while Belshazzar remained in Babylon to defend the capital. Nabonidus also ordered the idols of surrounding cities brought to Babylon so the gods could defend the city. At the Battle of Opis (539 BC) the Babylonian army was decisively defeated and Nabonidus fled. As Cyrus continued to march toward Babylon, what remained of the Babylonian army was in disarray and its citizens demoralized. A few days later Sippar, the last major city between Cyrus and the capital, surrendered without a battle.

The city of Babylon was considered militarily impregnable. Conservative estimates place the outer walls of Babylon at seventeen miles long, twenty-two feet thick, and ninety feet high. Its guard towers were taller than an eighteen-story building. The city's intricate system of bronze gates, inner and outer walls, and moats meant that no known siege weapons could breach its defenses. It was protected against a siege by the Euphrates River and a system of canals that could provide fresh water. Fields and groves within the city walls provided food, and (according to the

fifth century BC historian Herodotus) there was enough stockpiled food to last for many years.

It seemed the greatest danger facing Belshazzar was from within. He had to boost the morale of the populace and convince his nobles that they need not fear Cyrus. Otherwise Babylon could easily go the way of Sippar. Under such conditions, a great feast for a thousand lords at which the king, contrary to the usual custom, could be observed by all reveling as if nothing were wrong became less an excuse to party and more a military strategy.

A century and a half before, Isaiah foretold Babylon's fall to the Medes and Persians (Isaiah 13:1, 17). He prophesied the name of their conqueror and his entry into the city through the "two-leaved gates" (Isaiah 45:1). Jeremiah gave a timeline for this event when he prophesied that the Babylonian empire would last until the reign of Nebuchadnezzar's grandson (Jeremiah 27:6-7).

Even in the royal compounds of Babylon, Jehovah repeatedly gave prophetic warnings of the fall through his servant Daniel. Early in his reign, Nebuchadnezzar had a dream which showed that an empire inferior to his own would succeed Babylon (Daniel 2). During the first year of Belshazzar's reign, Daniel saw a vision of Babylon's humiliating fall (Daniel 7), and two years later, he saw another vision in which the Medes and Persians conquered all the lands to their west, north, and south (Daniel 8).

Daniel 5:23 tells us that Belshazzar was familiar with at least a portion of these prophecies. With Jewish exiles holding positions within the Babylonian government and society, it is not a stretch of the imagination to assume the palace gossip was full of speculation concerning how closely current events tied to these prophecies. Likely, it is this connection that reminded Belshazzar of the sacred vessels his grandfather, Nebuchadnezzar, had taken from the Jerusalem Temple and placed in the imperial treasury. According to the inventory provided by Ezra (1:9-11) these vessels consisted of more than 5,400 gold and silver articles, chiefly cups and bowls.

At royal feasts it was customary to offer special praise to the Babylonian gods

through libation offerings (Daniel 5:4). This time, just as Belshazzar began to taste the wine, he hit upon an idea that would both honor his gods and prove he was not afraid of the proclamations of the Hebrew God who, it seemed, had taken the side of Cyrus.

Belshazzar ordered that Jehovah's sacred golden vessels be brought to the feast to be used in the worship of Babylon's false deities. Even by pagan custom of the day, such a defilement of vessels dedicated to the worship of a god was a clear declaration of disdain and mockery of that god. It went beyond the limits of decency. Thus, these vessels had been preserved undisturbed in the royal treasury until Belshazzar foolishly decided to declare war on Jehovah.

Daniel 5:22–24 shows this was a deliberate act of rebellion against Jehovah's authority and power. Belshazzar knew that God had in turn elevated, humbled, and restored his grandfather. Jehovah had guaranteed the integrity of the empire but placed limits on the time it would stand. Perhaps relying on the multitude of idols Nabonidus had ordered moved to Babylon, Belshazzar decided that the false gods could overturn the will of Jehovah. He was categorically wrong.

II. GOD'S RESPONSE

A. Handwriting on the Wall

Immediately after this sacrilege, Jehovah responded to Belshazzar's challenge through a unique miracle. A human hand suddenly appeared and began to write upon the "plaister" (white gypsum covering) of the wall. The feast was no doubt held in the principal audience chamber at the royal palace in the southern citadel of Babylon. This 56- by 170-foot room discovered by German archeologist Robert Koldewey had an external façade of dark blue with intricate designs in bright blue, white, yellow, and black, but the windowless interior walls were covered in white gypsum. Daniel 5:5, NKJV, states that the handwriting was "opposite the lampstand," meaning the light would shine directly upon it. The combination of lighting, bright white background, and the appearance of a human hand made Jehovah's message impossible to overlook, but the cryptic nature

of the message made it equally impossible to understand.

The four words written on the wall, MENE, MENE, TEKEL, and UPHARSIN, were all Aramaic terms that would have been recognized easily by the Babylonian wise men. MENE signifies numbering, taking account, or reviewing. TEKEL means weighing and is a unit of measurement (the shekel). UPHARSIN is also a unit of measurement equal to one-half a shekel, and therefore signifies dividing. However, without a context to provide more information, the message was just a collection of words. So it is that to many who are wise in this world, the Bible is just a collection of words lacking the context of a relationship with God.

Jesus told his disciples, "What I tell you in darkness, that speak ye in light: and what ye hear in the ear, that preach ye upon the housetops" (Matthew 10:27). At His trial, Jesus answered His inquisitors, "I spake openly to the world; I ever taught in the synagogue, and in the temple, whither the Jews always resort; and in secret have I said nothing" (John 18:20). Therefore, "if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: in whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them" (II Corinthians 4:3–4).

B. Daniel's Calling and Interpretation of Writing

In just a moment Belshazzar was turned from a courageous king demonstrating his resolve in the face of imminent military threat to a terrified, quaking wreck by a single act of the God he thought he could defy. He screamed loudly for his wise men to come and interpret the writing on the wall, but none could understand the significance of the words.

Upon hearing of the commotion at the feast, the queen entered the hall with the answer. Because Daniel 5:2 specifically states that Belshazzar's wives and concubines were already present, this queen must have been Nitocris, the daughter of Nebuchadnezzar, wife of Nabonidus and mother of Belshazzar. According to Herodotus, she was responsible for the design and construction of the moats and canals that were a significant part

of the defense of Babylon. She had firsthand knowledge of Daniel's service to her father as well as the authority and wisdom to comfort and confront her terrified son. Since Daniel had been the human source of a number of dire warnings concerning the fall of Babylon, the queen introduced him simply as "a man in thy kingdom." From anyone else, the advice to call Daniel could have been perceived as a slap in the face of a king who had just committed sacrilege against Daniel's God.

Daniel was probably in his mid to late seventies at this time and no longer held the office of master of the wise men; therefore he would not have been summoned as part of the general call. The queen knew Daniel had "an excellent spirit, and knowledge, and understanding, interpreting of dreams, and shewing of hard sentences, and dissolving of doubts" (Daniel 5:12). She twice referred to Daniel by his Hebrew name, perhaps indicating a personal acquaintance. She also used his Babylonian name, Belteshazzar, which is the same name as her son the king, but with a slight variation in spelling. Finally, she emphasized by repetition ("the king Nebuchadnezzar thy father, the king, I say, thy father") that placing trust in Daniel would be honoring Belshazzar's renowned ancestor. Above all else, she showed no doubt whatsoever that Daniel could provide the needed interpretation.

The queen was an integral part of bringing God's message to Belshazzar and his lords. She had the opportunity to observe Daniel's life for many years and to learn his true nature. Daniel's years of faithful service to his unbelieving captors together with his consistent godly living in an ungodly society opened avenues of witness that withdrawal from society could not. In this Daniel foreshadowed the persecuted church of which Jesus spoke in Luke 21:12-15:

"But before all these, they shall lay their hands on you, and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues, and into prisons, being brought before kings and rulers for my name's sake. And it shall turn to you for a testimony. Settle it therefore in your hearts, not to meditate before what ye shall answer: For I will give

you a mouth and wisdom, which all your adversaries shall not be able to gainsay nor resist."

C. Belshazzar Condemned

When Daniel reported to Belshazzar, the king tried to humble him by reminding him that he was a captive and in exile, but he also promised to promote him to dizzying heights by offering him the third place in the empire (behind Nabonidus and Belshazzar). Daniel declared he was uninterested in what Belshazzar could give him, and he began to openly rebuke the king for forgetting the lessons learned by Nebuchadnezzar that produced in his illustrious grandfather a humble heart before Jehovah. He reminded Belshazzar that Jehovah had established the empire he ruled, and He even held Belshazzar's breath (or spirit) in his hand. Everything Belshazzar possessed belonged to God, but instead of glorifying Him, he dishonored Him by using the vessels dedicated to the worship of Jehovah as instruments of praise to false gods who could not even see, hear, or understand the praise.

Only after this thorough rebuke did Daniel interpret the handwriting on the wall. God had numbered Belshazzar's kingdom and brought it to a finish. Belshazzar was weighed in the balance and found wanting (a lightweight). The kingdom would be divided and given to the Medes and the Persians. One can only imagine the silence pervading the feasting hall as Daniel finished speaking. Would Belshazzar order Daniel tortured or killed for his impudence? Would he fall upon his face begging the forgiveness of Jehovah? Would he try to save his life by surrendering the city to Cyrus? Instead, Belshazzar's final recorded act was to fulfill the promise of reward he had made for interpreting the handwriting. He proved himself faithful to his promises on the night God proved Himself faithful to His.

That very night Belshazzar was executed when Babylon fell to the Persian army without a fight. Herodotus records that for some inexplicable reason, the gates to the inner wall and to the palace were left open.

D. God's Judgment Sure

"And, behold, here cometh a chariot of men, with a couple of horsemen. And he answered and said, Babylon is fallen, is fallen; and all the graven images of her gods he hath broken unto the ground" (Isaiah 21:9).

God is the great and righteous judge of all the earth. He judges peoples and nations, determining beforehand their boundaries in space and time. He uses them to fulfill His glorious plan, but He also rewards or punishes them according to their acts toward His people. While He is longsuffering and gracious, He is also righteous and just. Should a kingdom continue a thousand years, yet it will one day give account before the King of kings.

"Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting" (Galatians 6:7-8).

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

We may look upon the scene at Belshazzar's banquet as an extraordinary story of an

REFLECTIONS

- List some major historical events in the last 150 years that may have been judgment for ignoring or mocking God.
- How are the events of Daniel 5 related to the prophecies contained in the book? In what ways are they foreshadowing the end time?
- What clues do we have within the text that might indicate why God chose to use the miracle of the handwriting on the wall to communicate with Belshazzar and his nobles?
- What can we do so we do not get so caught up in the spirit of the age that we lose sight of God's grand plan?

ancient time. But if we see modern events through biblical lenses, we will recognize that the handwriting is already on the wall for the societies of our own time. The words are plainly written, but the world lacks the context to understand God's message. Apostolics face the challenge of standing fast in a hostile world while serving their neighbors and their society in love and humility. The church must prepare servants of God, filled with His knowledge and wisdom, who can earn the respect and recognized authority necessary to be heard in the courts of power. We must raise up modern Daniels to stand in the public marketplace of ideas and fearlessly rebuke those who would mock or fight against the will of God.

It is a simple thing for us to judge the pride and sacrilege of Belshazzar, but we must see as clearly our own pride and failures. As God's holy vessels, do we glorify Him or live our lives in praise to idols of health, comfort, wealth, and fame? We cannot become so immersed in the present that we are unable to see the signs of increasing corruption and decay coming upon the world. The story of Belshazzar challenges us to place current events in a context that will allow us to interpret the message of God to our modern society. Do we believe what the prophets have said is coming upon this world? ■