



The Handwriting on the Wall

Pilgrim Living in the 21st Century

Daniel 5

David Sunday

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Let's read God's Word together—Daniel 5:

King Belshazzar made a great feast for a thousand of his lords and drank wine in front of the thousand.

² Belshazzar, when he tasted the wine, commanded that the vessels of gold and of silver that Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken out of the temple in Jerusalem be brought, that the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them. ³ Then they brought in the golden vessels 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 wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone.

⁵ Immediately 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. ⁶ Then the king's color changed, and his thoughts alarmed him; his limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together. ⁷ The king called loudly to bring in the enchanters, the Chaldeans, and the astrologers. The king declared to the wise men of Babylon, "Whoever reads this writing, and shows me its interpretation, shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around his neck and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom."⁸ Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or make known to the king the interpretation. ⁹ Then King Belshazzar was greatly alarmed, and his color changed, and his lords were perplexed.

¹⁰ The queen, because of the words of the king and his lords, came into the banqueting hall, and the queen declared, "O king, live forever! Let not your thoughts alarm you or your color change. ¹¹ There is a man in your kingdom in whom is the spirit of the holy gods. In the days of your father, light and understanding and wisdom like the wisdom of the gods were found in him, and King Nebuchadnezzar, your father—your father the king— made him chief of the magicians, enchanters, Chaldeans, and astrologers, 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 show the interpretation."

¹³ Then Daniel was brought in before the king. The king answered and said to Daniel, "You are that Daniel, one of the exiles of Judah, whom the king my father brought from Judah. ¹⁴ I have heard of you that the spirit of the gods is in you, and that light and 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 make known to me its interpretation, but they could not show the interpretation of the matter. ¹⁶ But I have heard that you can give interpretations and solve problems. Now if you can read the writing and make known to me its interpretation, you shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around your neck and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom."

¹⁷ Then Daniel answered and said before the king, "Let your gifts be for yourself, and give your rewards to another. Nevertheless, I will read the writing to the king and make known to him the interpretation. ¹⁸ O king, the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father kingship and greatness and glory and majesty. ¹⁹ And because of the greatness that he gave him, all peoples, nations, and languages trembled and feared before him. Whom he would, he killed, and whom he would, he kept alive; whom he would, he raised up, and whom he would, he humbled. ²⁰ But when his heart was lifted up and his spirit was hardened so that he dealt proudly, he was brought down from his kingly throne, and his glory was taken from him. ²¹ He was driven from among the children of mankind, and his mind was made like that of a beast, and his dwelling was with the wild donkeys. He was fed grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, until he knew that the Most High God rules the kingdom of mankind and sets over it whom he will. ²² And you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this, ²³ but you have lifted up yourself against the Lord of heaven. And the vessels of his house have been brought in before you, and you and your lords, your wives, and your concubines have drunk wine from them. And 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 hand is your breath, and whose are all your ways, you have not honored.

²⁴ "Then from his presence the hand was sent, and this writing 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 your kingdom and brought it to an end; ²⁷ Tekel, you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting; ²⁸ Peres, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians."

²⁹ Then Belshazzar gave the command, and Daniel was clothed with purple, a chain of gold was put around his neck, and a proclamation was made about him, that he should be the third ruler in the kingdom.

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

Thus reads God's Word. Amen.

“For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fools.” That’s what Solomon said in Ecclesiastes 7:6. Daniel wasn’t at the king’s party on that fateful night of Babylon’s demise, but I imagine the laughter could be heard for miles in every direction. Like “the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of fools.” While the Persians huddled outside the city walls, damming up the River Euphrates enough to covertly enter through the river bed, Belshazzar and a thousand of his nobles, surrounded by the seductive sights of the king’s wives and concubines, were partying as if the night would have no end.

Loosened up by the fine wines of Babylon, the king became inebriated by his own power and prestige. “Where are those vessels of gold and silver my father Nebuchadnezzar seized from the temple in Jerusalem when he brought those captive low-lives here to our great civilization? Bring them to me.” So the holy vessels of Yahweh were filled up with the libations of Babylon. And the more the king drank, the less he feared—until he took hold of one of the holy goblets of gold and lifted it up in a toast to the idols of Babylon, the idols of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood and stone—an act of brazen blasphemy.

Suddenly, he witnessed a sight none could have foretold. Rembrandt portrays it here, and Lord Byron, the English poet, described it like this:

In that same hour and hall,
The fingers of a hand
Came forth against the wall,
And wrote as if on sand:
The fingers of a man;—
A solitary hand
Along the letters ran,
And traced them like a wand.

The monarch saw, and shook,
And bade no more rejoice;
All bloodless wax’d his look
And tremulous his voice.
“Let the men of lore appear
The wisest of the earth
And expound the words of fear
Which mar our royal mirth.”



But none could be found who could interpret the handwriting on the wall. Not alone of the enchanters, astrologers and fortune tellers of Babylon could read the writing and tell the king what it meant. As Isaiah the prophet had foretold, “The wisdom of the wise has perished; the intelligence of the intelligentsia has vanished.”

Suddenly this boastful king melts in terror. The color drains from his face, his knees are knocking together, and “his limbs gave way” (verse six). Many scholars of Aramaic think that’s a euphemism for saying he wet his pants. And all his nobles are equally petrified. In times like this, a man needs his mother. And so she comes (verse ten), the queen—or as the ESV footnotes says, “queen mother.”

We need to understand that many years have passed since Nebuchadnezzar’s reign, and it says frequently in this passage that Belshazzar is his son. But in this culture, you would call your grandfather “father” as well, and grandfathers would call their grandsons and great-grandsons their sons. Belshazzar is most likely Nebuchadnezzar’s grandson. He’s second in the kingdom, which is why he can promise Daniel third place in the kingdom. The true heir, Nabonidus, is probably off fighting somewhere.

Anyway, the queen mother shows up. Help is on the way. When she hears what’s happening, she comes into the banquet hall and says, “Son, what’s wrong with you. Get your act together! Long live the king. Don’t be so pale and frightened.” I don’t know how well you like it when someone tells you, “You look awful today. Don’t look so pale and frightened.” There’s not a whole lot we can do about that.

But the queen mother offers a solution. “There’s a man in Belshazzar’s kingdom. He’s an old man now, and it’s been many years since he’s been called upon to serve his royal majesty, the king. But during the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar, this Daniel was known to have exceptional insight, understanding and wisdom.” She says, “The spirit of the holy gods is in him” (verse 11). “He has divine knowledge and understanding. He can interpret dreams and explain riddles and solve difficult problems. Call for Daniel and he will tell you what the writing means.”

Now, let’s just pause there for a second. I don’t know if you’ve ever found yourself in the position of sitting at home alone at night, feeling a little sorry for yourself because there’s a party going on—and you weren’t invited. You might see it on Facebook. All these people you know are having fun, but here you are at home alone. If you’re a follower of Jesus, get used to that. You’re not going to be in the center of the night life. You’re not going to fit in at every party. You’re not going to be popular among the rich, famous and powerful people of our culture.

But if you follow Jesus, you can be the kind of person people call upon when they need help. You can be the kind of person who is known for wisdom, insight, honesty, humility and helpfulness. Who do you want to be? Do you want to be the life of the party, or do you want to be the person who can be counted on to help when help is really needed? That’s who I want to be.

What will it take for you to cultivate the kind of virtues—virtues like self control, wisdom, faithfulness, steadfastness, integrity—that would make you the kind of person whom people call

upon when they have nowhere else to turn? Daniel is such a man. Imagine this bold, old prophet of God stepping into this party that has gone south, this party that has turned sour.

The king and his guests are still inebriated, but the music has stopped. The atmosphere is charged with tension and desperation. The drunken and trembling king tries to put Daniel in his place, to remind him who's boss around here. He says in verse 13, "You are that Daniel, one of the exiles of Judah, one of those low-life captives Nebuchadnezzar brought over here many years ago? That's who you are. Don't you forget, you're just a captive slave in my kingdom."

But then this king is forced to look to someone he would normally dismiss as a loser, whose God he despised, while holding in his hands the goblets of gold from the holy temple in Jerusalem and praising the idols of Babylon. This king offers Daniel a rank and a role in the kingdom, and some bling—a cloak of purple and a chain of gold—as if to say, "Daniel, I can make you rich. I can make you powerful. You need me, Daniel."

But Daniel sees right through it and says to the king, "Keep your gifts, or give them to someone else. But I will tell you what the writing means" (verse 17). And with fearless fervency, this aged prophet of God stands before this younger, drunken king and reminds him of how the Most High God humbled his forefather Nebuchadnezzar when his heart and mind were puffed up with arrogance. He described how God brought Nebuchadnezzar down from his royal throne and stripped him of his glory. He told how Nebuchadnezzar was driven from human society and was given the mind of a wild animal, living among the wild donkeys and eating grass like a cow, drenched with the dew of heaven.

Here are the key words, reiterated from Daniel 4. We see them at the end of verse 21 in chapter five: "*Until he knew that the Most High God rules the kingdom of mankind and sets over it whom he will.*" In other words, "Belshazzar, don't you remember what happened to Nebuchadnezzar? Haven't you learned the lesson he needed to learn? The Most High God rules over the kingdoms of men, and He sets over them whomever He wishes."

Here's what we should find sobering about this. We can know all of this. We can see all of this in Scripture. We can watch God dealing severely with the pride of other people—and we can still strut about in our own pride, as if what happened to Nebuchadnezzar will never happen to us.

I don't know if Belshazzar was embarrassed by his grandfather's seven seasons of mental instability. These aren't the kind of family secrets you want to broadcast all over the place. I don't know if he found his grandfather's worship of Yahweh just evidence of the weakness of old age. Or maybe he thought, "Whatever the Most High God did in my grandfather's life, that was

decades ago. It has nothing to do with me today. The worship of the living and true God is for old people. It's not for me."

I don't know why Nebuchadnezzar's repentance and worship of God did not have a greater influence upon future generations, but Daniel makes it very clear that Belshazzar will be held accountable for his failure to follow the footsteps of his forefather Nebuchadnezzar in repenting of his pride and worshipping the Most High God of heaven. "You will be held accountable."

Look at verses 22 and 23. These are the key verses of the chapter that we must take to heart. "*And you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this.*" This is what I would underline. This is what I'd lay hold of in my mind: "You knew all this! But you have not humbled your heart."

You have lifted up yourself against the Lord of heaven. And the vessels of his house have been brought in before you, and you and your lords, your wives, and your concubines have drunk wine from them. And 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 hand is your breath, and whose are all your ways, you have not honored.

It's the Romans 1 of the Old Testament. You've seen His glory. You've enjoyed His gifts. But you've not honored Him or given Him thanks. That's speaking truth to power. That's courage. That's boldness. That's the way we need to be. That's the message we need to hear today. The problem, friends, is not that we don't know enough about God. The problem is not that we do not know enough about God—the problem is what we do not do with what we know about God. That's the problem.

Belshazzar knew enough about God's ways that he should have humbled himself. But in verse 22, even though he knew all this he lifted up his heart against the Lord of heaven. Even though it was God's breath in his lungs, he didn't use that breath to pour out God's praise. Instead, he used that breath to blaspheme God's name by lifting up God's holy vessels and praising the idols of Babylon.

Friend, if you've been coming to this church for a while, you've heard a lot about God. You've heard a lot from His Word about His ways. The question I have for you today is: has what you have learned had the effect of humbling you before the Lord? Has it had a humbling effect on your life? Do you bow your heart before God as the One Who holds your breath in His hands

and Who controls your destiny? Does what you know about God have a humbling effect on your heart?

This is a conviction that's crucial for the vitality and spiritual health of our church. We need to believe this, friends. Education does not equal transformation. Just knowing truth in itself does not transform the heart. In fact, knowledge can puff up. If what we know does not humble our hearts, then our knowledge will not save us in the day of judgment.

Why would Belshazzar hold these golden vessels in his hands and praise the gods of wood and stone? Gods that do not see or hear or know? Why would he do that? Because he wanted a god he could control, a god he could hold in his hand and manipulate for his pleasures. He wanted to be in control of his destiny.

It really raises the question, doesn't it: what is it that gets me out of bed in the morning? What is it that really gives me life? Am I living for the gods of bronze, iron, wood and stone which do not see or hear or know? Or do I arise with a sense of dependency on the God Who gives me breath? Do I say to Him, "Unto You, O Lord, I offer my heart promptly and sincerely? All that I am, all that I have, comes from You and belongs to You. I want to live for You today, O God. I want to honor You today."

I love how David Helm outlines the narrative of this chapter. He put it like this:

- Verses 1-4 – Wine and gold
- Verses 5-9 – Blood runs cold
- Verses 10-23 – The preacher bold
- Verses 24-31 – The verdict told

That's a great outline. I wish I would have thought of that myself.

What's the verdict for Belshazzar—and what's the verdict for any person who refuses to repent and humble himself before the Lord? It doesn't matter whether you're the king or queen of Babylon or just making your own little kingdom in your job or with your talents or with your money or with your relationships. To anyone who says, "My kingdom come" instead of "Thy Kingdom come," God looks at you and says, "*Mene, Mene, Tekel, Parsin.*"

Mene means numbered. "God has numbered the days of your reign, Belshazzar, and brought it to an end." And friends, God has numbered the days and moments of your life too—and mine. All the days ordained for us were written in God's book before one of them came to pass. We're alive today because He gives us breath.

Tekel (verse 27) means weighed. "You, O king, have been weighed on balances and found wanting. God's not pleased with what He sees in you. You have not measured up, O king."

Friends, 1 Samuel 2:3 says, “*The Lord is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed.*” He weighs our lives too.

Parsin. There’s a play on words here. *Parsin* means divided. *Peres* means Persians. “*Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians, O king.*” Daniel doesn’t hold back. He tells it straight. “The kingdom is about to be taken from you and handed to another.” In the words of Dale Davis, “You, Belshazzar, you? You, who think I’m just an exile from Judah, do you know who you are? You are flimsy, you are finished, and you are fractured. That’s who you are, king.” Finished, flimsy and fractured.

Here’s what’s striking. Belshazzar listens to all of this, up through verse 28, and he doesn’t get offended. In fact, he gives Daniel the purple robe and the gold chain that he had promised—that Daniel doesn’t want—and proclaims him the third highest ruler in the kingdom. Now, that’s an appointment that’s not going to last very long.

You’ve heard about President William Henry Harrison getting pneumonia on inauguration day because he stood out in the cold when he gave his speech, then he died less than 40 days later. This appointment for Daniel will be even shorter than William Henry Harrison’s presidency in 1841.

Notice what Belshazzar does not do when he hears all this. He does not humble himself. He does not repent of his wickedness. He does not do like the king of the Ninevites in Jonah’s day, proclaiming a fast and calling everyone who hears to wear sackcloth and ashes in repentance. He doesn’t do that. He doesn’t confess, “I have sinned against the Lord.” He doesn’t ask Daniel to pray for him that God might humble his hardened heart and show him mercy. He’s insensitive and stubborn, and his heart is hardened.

Friends, I’ve seen that and it is scary when we stand before God and His Word and our hearts are not affected. We don’t humble ourselves, but our hearts remain hardened. Charles Simeon asks:

Do we not often see a similar result from all the most faithful expositions of God’s Word? A momentary fear perhaps may be excited even to terror, but no solid improvement follows it. No godly sorrow is produced in the soul. No humiliation before God. No cries for mercy. No departure from iniquity.

Do we not often see a similar result from the most faithful expositions of God’s Word? Do we? We look at Belshazzar and how unaffected he is by what Daniel has just told him. It should drive us, friends, to pray for the Holy Spirit to illuminate our darkened minds, to elevate our cold affections, to transform our stubborn wills.

Do you know what happens if you hear the Word but you don't have the Spirit working on your heart? It's like clay in the hot sun. You just get harder and harder—not more tender. It's the Spirit Who takes away the heart of stone and gives us a heart of flesh and makes us want to obey and submit to God. Oh, how we need to pray for the working of the Holy Spirit upon the ministry of His Word, because Word without Spirit is dead, and it can only produce hardness.

Let us beware, friends. Proverbs 29:1 says, *“He who is often reproved, yet stiffens his neck, will suddenly be broken beyond healing.”* And that's what happens to Belshazzar. Verse 30, *“That very night”—chilling words—“Belshazzar the Chaldean king was killed. And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old.”* From a feast to an invasion to an execution—all in the matter of a few short hours. That's all it takes. He's killed that very night. Such haunting words!

How many people have gone from a party in the dark of night, never to return home safely? Who among us doesn't know someone who woke up healthy one morning and was dead before the night was done? Can any of us be sure that this very night we will go to sleep and wake up again tomorrow morning? Is there any guarantee that the God in Whose hand is our breath will continue to sustain our lives in this world another day before He calls us to give account to Him for the lives He's given us?

Jesus tells a parable in Luke 12 of a rich fool whose land produced so plentifully he had nowhere to store his crops. It sounds just like people today.

And he said, “I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.” But God said to him, “Fool” [You never want to hear God say to you, “Fool!”] “This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.

Can you see the handwriting on the wall? Do you see what God is saying to us? There is a “this very night” appointed for every single one of us. One day the curtain will fall, and He Who weighs the hearts and minds of all people will call for you, for me, for all. He will call. *Mene*: your days are numbered. *Tekel*: weighed in the balanced of God's justice, we will be found wanting.

Parsin: if all that we've been building for in this world—if all our investments are for this life only—it's all going to be taken from us when our never-dying souls are divided from our bodies at death. We won't be able to take any of these worldly treasures with us. Naked we came

into this world, and naked we shall depart. That's the handwriting on the wall for every one of us. "It is appointed unto man once to die, and after that comes judgment," God says (Hebrews 9:27).

But look at Daniel. He sees the writing on the wall. He hears the Persian army coming. He knows everything's going to be turned upside down that very night. But does Daniel look afraid? Do you see Daniel trembling? Is he running around like the sky is falling? "Oh, no! Who is going to get elected in November? What's going to happen? Is the world going to fall apart?" No. Look at how calm, confident and at peace Daniel is. We can be too. Because Daniel knows the One in Whose hand is his breath. He knows the One Who controls his destiny. He's fearless.

He's going to receive a Kingdom that cannot be shaken. And at the center of that Kingdom stands a cross, on which the King of the universe has offered Himself up as the sacrifice that justice demands for our many transgressions. He is a humble King Who gave Himself for our pride and rebellion. Jesus has been weighed in the balances of God's justice, and He's been found perfect and sufficient for all our sin and guilt.

Because Jesus died and rose again, listen to what the Apostle Paul says has happened to everyone who believes in Jesus. Colossians 2:13-14 (NKJV), "God the father has made us alive together with Christ, having forgiven you"—you believer—"having forgiven you all trespasses..." How? "*Having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us,*" this handwriting on the wall against you and me. And left to ourselves, we will be weighed in the balances and found wanting. But that handwriting that is against you and against me—contrary to us—Jesus has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. Praise the Lord.

What would have happened if Belshazzar had humbled himself that night? What would have happened, if instead of lifting himself up against the God of heaven, he would have repented of his pride and bowed before the God in Whose hand is his breath and Who controls his destiny? What if he had said, like his forefather Nebuchadnezzar, "I praise and exalt You, Most High God"? What would have happened? We'll never know, for in the words of Lord Byron:

Belshazzar's grave is made,
His kingdom passed away,
He, in the balance weighed,
Is light and worthless clay;
The shroud, his robe of state,
His canopy the stone;
The Mede is at his gate!
The Persian on his throne!

But this I know: everyone who repents of their sins and falls before the God of heaven in praise for what He has done in Jesus—for you, for me, for one who humbles himself before Jesus

and yields allegiance to Jesus as his or her King—you can be sure God has wiped out the handwriting on the wall that was against you. He has taken it all away, so you can say:

My sin, O the bliss of this glorious thought,
My sin, not in part, but the whole
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more!
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul.

[From "It is Well With My Soul" by Horatio Spafford]

Let's pray.

Thank You Lord that You make a way for proud sinners to humble ourselves and find mercy from You. Thank You that there is refuge in You from the wrath we deserve, from the judgment that would fall on every one of us if we were standing on our own merits. God, we confess how often we live as if we are in control. We forget that our breath is coming from You. You're alive and present in our lives, and we live for Your pleasure. We live to know You and enjoy You.

But we forget these things, God. So as we come to this Communion Table, we thank You that this is medicine for the sick. It's life for those who are dead in themselves, healing for the broken, comfort for those who are distraught and salvation for us who are sinful. God, we come saying how much we need You. I pray, Lord, for anyone here who has not humbled themselves before You, who is living in brazen pride, thinking, "I'm in control of my life." Lord, I pray that You would do something that would shake them up, that would alarm the casual, apathetic, complacent soul. Bring to repentance all within the hearing of Your Word today, for Jesus' sake and for our own eternal good. Amen.

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