

BELSHAZZAR REQUESTS DANIEL TO INTERPRET THE HANDWRITING

DANIEL 5:10-16

SCRIPTURE READING AND INSIGHTS

Begin by reading Daniel 5:10-16 in your favorite Bible. As you read, keep in mind that the Word of God brings spiritual maturity (1 Corinthians 3:1-2; Hebrews 5:12-14).

In yesterday's lesson, Belshazzar was partying it up when suddenly he saw fingers writing on the wall. In today's reading, Belshazzar asks Daniel to interpret the handwriting. With your Bible still accessible, consider the following insights on the biblical text, verse by verse.

Daniel 5:10-12

The queen (5:10): This was apparently the queen mother. All the wives of the king were present at the feast. However, this woman had easy access to the king as only a queen mother could. (See Major Themes.)

Because of the words of the king and his lords (5:10): The queen mother was on top of things. She was aware of the crisis facing the king. She heard the king and those under him strategizing on what to do next.

Came into the banquet hall (5:10): Because of what she heard taking place, she decided to get involved. She had a solution to the king's problem and would now share it.

O king, live forever (5:10): As we have seen, this was apparently a common greeting of courtesy to kings in ancient times. The Chaldeans had earlier addressed Nebuchadnezzar in this way (Daniel 2:4; see also 3:9; 6:6). Bathsheba used a similar phrase when addressing King David: "Bathsheba bowed with her face to the ground and paid homage to the king and said, 'May my lord King David live forever'" (1 Kings 1:31; see also Nehemiah 2:3; Daniel 3:9; 5:10; 6:21).

Let not your thoughts alarm you or your color change (5:10): The queen mother spoke to the king in motherly terms. In modern vernacular, she said something like this: "You're looking pale. Don't worry. Things will work out."

A man...in whom is the spirit of the holy gods (5:11): The queen mother described Daniel in terms similar to how he'd been described throughout his captivity in Babylon (Daniel 4:8-9, 18). Some take this to be a claim that in some sense the gods of Babylon communicated their wisdom through Daniel. The phrase can also be translated, "the Spirit of the holy God," in which case it could refer to the one true God of Israel working in Daniel.

In the days of your father (5:11): Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 BC. The year was now 539 BC, more than 20 years later. By now, Daniel was about 80 years old. Perhaps as an old man he had retired. With the change in kings, Daniel might have faded in importance. Or perhaps the present administration simply distanced itself from both Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar because they both praised the one true God of Israel, and the present administration wanted to exalt Babylon's gods. In any event, the queen mother now indicated to the king that Daniel was the right man to solve the king's crisis.

Light and understanding and wisdom (5:11): Daniel's "light and understanding and wisdom" had enabled him to interpret Nebuchadnezzar's strange dreams. That being so, surely he would also be able to interpret the handwriting on the wall. The queen mother seemed to reason that a mystery is a mystery. Whatever form the mystery may take, Daniel would be able to figure it out.

Nebuchadnezzar...made him chief (5:11): To add a stamp of authority to Daniel, the queen mother reminded Belshazzar that Nebuchadnezzar had appointed Daniel to be "chief of the magicians, enchanters, Chaldeans, and astrologers." Daniel could thus succeed where the other wise men failed.

An excellent spirit, knowledge, and understanding (5:12): The queen mother

continued to sing Daniel's praises. She said he had "an excellent spirit, knowledge, and understanding to interpret dreams, explain riddles, and solve problems." This was in dire contrast to Babylon's wise men, who were completely unable to solve such mysteries during Nebuchadnezzar's reign and now in Belshazzar's reign.

Daniel...Belteshazzar (5:12): It is interesting that the queen mother first referred to Daniel using his proper Hebrew name, but also mentioned his Chaldean name. Belteshazzar means "Bel, protect his life," or "Bel, protect the king's life." (Bel was a Babylonian deity.)

He will show the interpretation (5:12): The queen mother urged the king to call for Daniel. There is a sense of immediacy to her words.

Daniel 5:13-14

You are that Daniel (5:13): The king took the queen mother's advice and summoned Daniel to appear before him. As soon as he arrived, the king said to him: "You are that Daniel, one of the exiles of Judah, whom the king my father brought from Judah." The king was seeking Daniel's help, but he was also putting Daniel in his place. Belshazzar is the king, whereas Daniel is a mere captive.

I have heard of you (5:14): The king said to Daniel, "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." The king was issuing a challenge: "I've heard you're good at interpreting mysteries. Well, let's see how good you really are."

Daniel 5:15-16

The wise men...could not show the interpretation (5:15): Maintaining this sense of challenge, the king informed Daniel that Babylon's wise men had been brought in to interpret the handwriting on the wall, but they were unable to do so. He was implying, "Let's see if you can succeed where the others have failed."

Notice that the failure of the wise men has now become a recognizable pattern in the book of Daniel. They claimed to be empowered by Babylon's gods, but they consistently failed to interpret mysteries. Daniel, a worshiper of the one true God, consistently succeeded in revealing the meaning of mysteries.

I have heard that you can give interpretations (5:16): We must not forget that Daniel consistently indicated that he had no special gift in himself. Rather, the one true God enabled him to decipher mysteries. Daniel 1:17 tells us, "God gave them [Daniel and his Hebrew buddies] learning and skill in all literature and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams." Daniel boasted of God, "He reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwells with him" (2:22). In keeping with this, Daniel informed Nebuchadnezzar, "There is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries" (2:28).

If you can read the writing (5:16): The king informed Daniel what would happen if he provided the proper interpretation of the words on the wall. "You shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around your neck and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom." This is the same thing that had been earlier promised to Babylon's wise men if they were able to interpret the words. Purple attire is royal attire. A chain of gold held great monetary value. Becoming the third ruler in the kingdom would place Daniel right after Nabonidus and Belshazzar. This is similar to the type of reward Pharaoh gave Joseph (Genesis 41:42-44).

One cannot help but notice that Belshazzar's offer to Daniel would soon be absolutely worthless. Babylon was now under siege by the Medo-Persians. That very night Babylon would fall, so being given royal attire and being made "third ruler" in the kingdom would essentially amount to being third ruler over nothing.

MAJOR THEMES

1. *Divine communication through writing.* In today's Scripture passage, God used fingers writing on a wall to communicate revelation about impending judgment. This may seem a rather bizarre episode, but it reminds us that over and over again in the Bible, God instructs that His revelation be written down and preserved for coming generations. "Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD" (Exodus 24:4). Joshua "wrote these words in the Book of the Law of God" (Joshua 24:25-26). Samuel "told the people the rights and duties of the kingship, and he wrote them in a book and laid it up before the LORD" (1 Samuel 10:25). God instructed Isaiah, "Take

a large tablet and write on it in common characters” (Isaiah 8:1). Isaiah was told, “And now, go, write it before them on a tablet and inscribe it in a book, that it may be for the time to come as a witness forever” (Isaiah 30:8). Belshazzar was frightened (with good cause) by the fingers and their written message, but you and I should be thankful to God for going to such pains for us to have the written Word (the Bible).

2. *The queen.* The reference to the queen in our biblical text was the queen mother. Four reasons are offered in support of this view:

- She seems to be distinct from Belshazzar’s many wives mentioned in Daniel 5:2-3.
- The queen freely and without restriction entered the king’s presence as easily as a mother would enter to see her son—something none of the common wives would dare do (5:10).
- Her personal knowledge that Daniel had been active “in the days of your father” (5:11) must mean she’d been around for a while and was therefore older than the common wives.
- She was influential—the king acted on her advice.

DIGGING DEEPER WITH CROSS-REFERENCES

Men with wisdom—Deuteronomy 1:13; 1 Kings 3:12, 28; 4:29; 5:12; 10:3, 24; 2 Chronicles 9:22; Proverbs 28:2; Daniel 1:4, 20; Acts 6:3

Spiritual discernment—Job 12:11; Psalms 82:5; 92:5-6; 119:125; Acts 17:11; Romans 3:11; 1 Corinthians 2:14-16; 1 John 4:1-6; Revelation 2:2

LIFE LESSONS

1. *An earthly perspective versus a divine perspective.* The queen mother, speaking from an earthly perspective, said to the king, “O king, live forever” (Daniel 5:10). But Daniel, who spoke for God, would soon inform the king that he was doomed. The king actually died that night (we’ll address this in detail in the next lesson).

You and I as Christians are called to maintain an eternal perspective, for

we do not know how long we will live. In Colossians 3:1-2, we read, "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth." The original Greek of this passage is intense, carrying the idea: "Diligently, actively, and single-mindedly pursue the things above." It is also a present tense, carrying the idea, "*Perpetually* keep on seeking the things above. Make it an ongoing process." Christians who maintain an eternal perspective are highly motivated to serve God.

2. *The importance of a good reputation.* Daniel had a stellar reputation, dating back to the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, who first took him into captivity. His good reputation not only brought him before kings but also brought him great honor throughout life. This reminds us of Proverbs 22:29: "Do you see a man skillful in his work? He will stand before kings" (see also Genesis 41:46). As Christians, we too ought to pursue a reputation of honesty and integrity, of being honorable, wise, and self-giving, like Daniel (see Proverbs 22:1; Ecclesiastes 7:1).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Do you have a good reputation before others, or could you stand to improve in this area? What steps might you take to improve?
2. Someone claimed that some Christians think about heaven so much that they are of no earthly good. Do you agree with that statement, or do you think the opposite may be true?
3. Would you say you are very wise, somewhat wise, not too wise, or unwise? How might you become more wise? (See Proverbs 1:1-7.)