

BELSHAZZAR PARTIES IT UP AND SEES HANDWRITING ON THE WALL

DANIEL 5:1-9

SCRIPTURE READING AND INSIGHTS

Begin by reading Daniel 5:1-9 in your favorite Bible. As you read, notice how the Word of God is purifying your life (John 17:17-18).

In the previous lesson, God humiliated Nebuchadnezzar for seven years and then restored him. In today's lesson, Belshazzar, another king, is partying it up when he suddenly sees handwriting on the wall. With your Bible still accessible, consider the following insights on the biblical text, verse by verse.

Daniel 5:1

King Belshazzar (5:1): The time span between Daniel 4:37 and Daniel 5:1 was about 23 years. After Nebuchadnezzar's death in 562 BC, a number of obscure kings reigned in Babylon until Nabonidus took the throne in 556 BC. Nabonidus then placed his son Belshazzar on the throne as coregent in about 553 BC. Belshazzar was in charge of the city while his father was reopening trade routes that Cyrus and the Persians had taken.

Belshazzar's name means "Bel protects [the king]" (Bel was a Babylonian deity). The name was a sign of wishful thinking because Babylon was now under siege by the Medo-Persian army, and a sense of doom permeated the city.

A great feast (5:1): Belshazzar may have sponsored this feast to allay the fears and boost the morale of the people of Babylon in the face of impending defeat at the hands of the Medo-Persian army. It is noteworthy that two ancient Greek historians, Herodotus and Xenophon, document the all-night festivities and partying that transpired as Babylon was being taken over by the Medo-Persian army.

A thousand of his lords (5:1): Archeologists have uncovered a royal room in ancient Babylon large enough to accommodate this group.

Daniel 5:2-4

Vessels of gold and of silver (5:2): These items were taken from Solomon's temple when Babylon overran Jerusalem and its temple. They were considered precious, holy instruments.

Nebuchadnezzar his father (5:2): While Belshazzar was the "son" of Nebuchadnezzar, the Aramaic term for a son could also refer to a grandson, descendant, or successor. Belshazzar was not the literal son of Nebuchadnezzar, but was rather a descendant or royal successor of Nebuchadnezzar. In keeping with this, the Aramaic word for a father can refer to an ancestor or a predecessor.

The temple in Jerusalem (5:2): This was Solomon's temple. (See Major Themes.)

His wives, and his concubines (5:2): Belshazzar had many wives and concubines, though we are unsure how many. Bible expositors suggest this feast may have been like an orgy.

We should note in passing that monogamy has always been God's will for human beings. From the very beginning, God set the pattern by creating a monogamous marital relationship between one man and one woman, Adam and Eve (Genesis 1:27; 2:21-25). This God-established example of one woman for one man was the general practice of the human race (Genesis 4:1) until interrupted by sin (Genesis 4:23). The Law of Moses clearly commands that the king "shall not acquire many wives" (Deuteronomy 17:17). Our Lord affirmed God's original intention for one male and one female to be joined in marriage (Matthew 19:4). The New Testament stresses that "each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband" (1 Corinthians 7:2). Belshazzar was clearly outside of God's will in his countless wives and concubines.

Drink from them...drank from them (5:2-3): Nebuchadnezzar had honored the true God toward the end of his life, but Belshazzar chose to show contempt for God by defiling these holy vessels. Instead of using them to honor the true God, he used them to dishonor the true God and to honor the false gods of Babylon (see verse 4). Belshazzar was apparently trying to undo Nebuchadnezzar's influence and undermine his positive words about the God of Israel. Though Belshazzar was unaware of it at the time, God's judgment on him would be swift and devastating. Belshazzar was about to lose his life.

Praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone (5:4): Perhaps the act of drinking wine from these holy vessels and then praising the gods of Babylon was a desperate attempt to invoke Babylon's deities to rescue them from impending doom at the hands of the Medo-Persians.

Daniel 5:5-6

The fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote (5:5): As Belshazzar was partying it up, things took an abrupt turn for the worse. Fingers of a human hand suddenly appeared and began writing on the plastered wall. The king witnessed it with his own eyes and was stunned. This was not a mystical vision that Belshazzar alone experienced. The handwriting was visible to everyone.

Notice the irony taking place here. At Belshazzar's command, Babylonian hands had taken hold of God's holy vessels, defiling and polluting them at a pagan feast, thereby showing utter contempt for God. Now the sovereign hand of the Most High God responds by writing words of judgment on the wall.

The king's color changed (5:6): The king was terrified when the divine hand began writing God's message on the wall. A doomsday pallor came to his face. His legs weakened and his knees shook. The party was over.

Daniel 5:7-9

Bring in the enchanters, the Chaldeans, and the astrologers (5:7): Belshazzar had no idea what the handwriting on the wall meant. He immediately summoned his occultists to help him decipher the meaning of the words. He promised that any who could interpret the strange words on the wall would be given splendid purple attire—*royal* attire. The successful interpreter would also become the third ruler in the kingdom, after Nabonidus and Belshazzar.

The fact that Belshazzar promised such a great reward is an indication of the great fear in his heart.

We recall that Pharaoh similarly rewarded Joseph. "Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph's hand, and clothed him in garments of fine linen and put a gold chain about his neck. And he made him ride in his second chariot. And they called out before him, 'Bow the knee!' Thus he set him over all the land of Egypt" (Genesis 41:42-44). Such rewards seem to have been common among kings who lived in ancient times.

They could not read the writing (5:8): The Babylonian deities were impotent in helping these occultists, which is understandable because these deities did not really exist (see Daniel 2:4-11; 4:7; 5:15). Only Daniel, who depended on the one true God, would be able to help the king understand the mysterious words.

Greatly alarmed (5:9): "King Belshazzar was greatly alarmed, and his color changed, and his lords were perplexed." Though the king had no idea about the meaning of the words, he surmised that they did not bring good news.

MAJOR THEMES

1. *Solomon's temple.* Daniel 5:2 tells us that when the Jewish people went into Babylonian captivity, Nebuchadnezzar took precious items out of Solomon's temple in Jerusalem. This temple was rectangular, running east and west, and measured about 87 feet long, 30 feet wide, and 43 feet high. The walls of the temple were made of cedar wood, and carved into the wood were cherubim angels, flowers, and palm trees. The walls were overlaid with gold. The floor was made of cypress. This temple had a Holy Place and a Most Holy Place. The Holy Place (the main outer room) housed the golden incense altar, the table of showbread, five pairs of lampstands, and utensils used for sacrifice. Double doors led into the Holy of Holies, where the Ark of the Covenant sat. This temple—the heart and center of Jewish worship—was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians in 587 BC.
2. *The finger of God.* The finger of God often symbolizes God's interaction with His creation in some way. When the Egyptian magicians could not

mimic one of Moses' miracles, they acknowledged, "This is the finger of God" (Exodus 8:19). The two stone tablets containing God's Law that He gave to Moses were "written with the finger of God" (Exodus 31:18). Indeed, "The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets" (Exodus 32:16; see also Deuteronomy 9:10). When the psalmist looked up at the stars at night, he asked, "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him?" (Psalm 8:3-4). The miraculous writing on the wall was also a manifestation of the finger of God, appearing as a human hand.

DIGGING DEEPER WITH CROSS-REFERENCES

Feasts in the Bible—Leviticus 23:5-8, 34-44; Exodus 5:1; 23:16; Deuteronomy 12:5-14; John 7:37-39; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Concubines—Genesis 16:1-4; 21:9-14; 25:6; 30:4; 35:22; 2 Samuel 3:7; 5:13; 1 Kings 11:1-4; 2 Chronicles 11:21; Daniel 5:3, 23

Terror—Genesis 35:5; Leviticus 26:16; Job 9:34; 24:17; Psalm 91:5; Ezekiel 21:12; Luke 21:9; 24:37; Hebrews 12:21; 1 Peter 3:14

LIFE LESSONS

1. *Rich apparel.* People often pay great attention to what they wear. Nothing is wrong with wearing nice clothes, but one must be on guard against impure motives. Jesus, for example, warned, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces" (Mark 12:38). In this case, fine clothing was a manifestation of arrogance and pride. James warned of the sin of showing favoritism toward those who dress better than others (James 2:3-4). We glean an important insight from the Lord's words in 1 Samuel 16:7. Israel was seeking a king to lead the people, but God told Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature... The LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." In other words, God cares more about our hearts than our clothing. With this in mind, Paul exhorted Christians to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 13:14)

and to “put on...compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience” (Colossians 3:12).

2. *Turn from idolatry.* The guests at Belshazzar’s feast “praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone” (Daniel 5:4). This is idolatry—the worship of other things in the place of the one true God. Pagan nations like Babylon typically believed in a plethora of gods who were often represented as statues of humans or animals. People would then worship these images. Some scholars have suggested that by promoting the idolatrous gods of Babylon, Belshazzar was attempting to undo any influence of Nebuchadnezzar’s earlier honoring of the God of Israel (recall Daniel 4:34-35). The New Testament consistently urges Christians to avoid all forms of idolatry (1 Corinthians 5:11; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Galatians 5:19-21; Colossians 3:5; 1 John 5:21).
3. *The fear of the Lord.* Belshazzar was terrified at this communication from God, and he had good reason to be. Thankfully, you and I need not feel terror in our relationship with God. But we are nevertheless called to live in reverent fear of Him (1 Samuel 12:14, 24; 2 Chronicles 19:9; Acts 10:35; 1 Peter 1:17; 2:17). Fear (or reverence) of the Lord motivates obedience to God: “Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man” (Ecclesiastes 12:13; see also Deuteronomy 5:29). It also fuels our desire to serve Him (Deuteronomy 6:13). In that sense, fearing God is a good thing.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Why might God have chosen to use visible fingers as a means of communicating His message to Belshazzar?
2. What can you conclude about the character of Belshazzar in Daniel 5:2-4?
3. How do you assess your heart’s attitude regarding external appearances versus inner beauty?