

DANIEL INTERPRETS THE WORDS OF DOOM

DANIEL 5:17-31

SCRIPTURE READING AND INSIGHTS

Begin by reading Daniel 5:17-31 in your favorite Bible. Read with the anticipation that the Holy Spirit has something important to teach you today (see Psalm 119:105).

Yesterday we saw Belshazzar ask Daniel to interpret the handwriting on the wall. In today's reading, Daniel interprets the words of impending doom. With your Bible still accessible, consider the following insights on the biblical text, verse by verse.

Daniel 5:17

Daniel answered and said before the king (5:17): King Belshazzar offered Daniel a reward for providing the interpretation of the handwriting 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" (verse 16). Daniel responded, however, by asking the king to keep the gifts for himself and to give the rewards to another. Abram responded the same way to the king of Sodom: "Abram said to the king of Sodom, 'I have lifted my hand to the LORD, God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth, that I would not take a thread or a sandal strap or anything that is yours, lest you should say, "I have made Abram rich"' (Genesis 14:22-23).

It is not wise to receive gifts from unworthy leaders for services rendered to them (see 2 Kings 5:15-16). Besides, Daniel had never been motivated by or impressed by material rewards. He was more interested in doing what was right. He was not trying to be disrespectful, but he had to remain true to his principles. Further, Daniel knew that the rewards and gifts—mostly pertaining to increased authority in Babylon—would soon be worth nothing, for Babylon was under siege from the Medo-Persians.

I will read the writing (5:17): Despite declining the gifts and rewards, Daniel nevertheless assured the king, "I will make known...the interpretation."

Daniel 5:18-21

The Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar (5:18): Daniel first informed King Belshazzar of what God had given Nebuchadnezzar. By referring to God as "Most High God," Daniel was explicitly elevating Yahweh over all the false gods of Babylon, which Belshazzar worshiped (see Psalms 7:17; 9:2; 47:2; 57:2; 73:11; 83:18; 91:9). And by affirming that it was God who made Nebuchadnezzar great, glorious, and majestic, Daniel was pointing to God's sovereignty over human leaders. Daniel had earlier affirmed that God "removes kings and sets up kings" (Daniel 2:21). The psalmist likewise observed, "It is God who executes judgment, putting down one and lifting up another" (Psalm 75:7).

Because of the greatness that he gave him (5:19): Because of God's blessing on Nebuchadnezzar, people came to fear him and tremble before him. A single word from him could keep people alive or put them to death.

When his heart was lifted up (5:20): Daniel pointed to Nebuchadnezzar's life as a demonstration of the danger of pride and arrogance. Nebuchadnezzar remained prideful and did not humble himself before the true God, so God brought him down so he would be forced to learn humility.

He was driven from among the children of mankind (5:21): Nebuchadnezzar was removed from his throne, his glory was stripped from him, he was driven from among humans to live among animals, and he acted like an animal for seven years.

Until he knew that the Most High God rules (5:21): Nebuchadnezzar was forced to live this kind of existence until he recognized God's sovereignty. Belshazzar failed to absorb this lesson from Nebuchadnezzar's experience.

Daniel 5:22-23

You...Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart (5:22): Belshazzar should have learned from Nebuchadnezzar's experience. He should have humbled himself before God, knowing the judgment that had fallen on Nebuchadnezzar. He failed to grasp the critical lesson that "whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted" (Matthew 23:12).

You have lifted up yourself against the Lord of heaven (5:23): Instead of humbling himself, Belshazzar lifted himself up against God by defiantly using the holy vessels from the Jewish temple—the very house of God—for a wild, orgy-like feast.

You have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone (5:23): Instead of submitting to the one true God, Belshazzar worshiped idols, "which do not see or hear or know" (compare Jeremiah 10:5, 15; 14:22; 50:38; 51:17).

But the God in whose hand is your breath (5:23): Belshazzar worshiped gods that had no true life in themselves, ignoring the God on whom his own life depended. Belshazzar had entrusted his life to dead idols—the height of folly.

Daniel 5:24-28

From his presence the hand was sent (5:24): Daniel informed the king that the one true God—the God who had severely chastened Nebuchadnezzar for his pride and arrogance—sent the hand to write on the wall. Daniel, of course, knew that those words brought judgment. But rather than softening the stern message of God's judgment when speaking to Belshazzar, he told the truth.

This is the writing that was inscribed (5:25): The writing on the wall was a direct message from God: "MENE, MENE, TEKEL, and PARSIN."

MENE (5:26): This Aramaic word means "numbered" or "counted." It is doubled in the present context to bring emphasis. Because of Belshazzar's pride and wickedness, God had numbered his days and his kingdom. The invading Medo-Persian force would soon bring the kingdom to its demise.

TEKEL (5:27): This Aramaic word means "weighed" or "assessed." God is the one who weighs a person's actions and motives (see 1 Samuel 2:3; Psalm 62:9). He evaluates people as the divine Judge. Belshazzar had been weighed, and he and his kingdom were found to be ripe for judgment.

PERES (5:28): This Aramaic word means "divided." Babylon was soon to be destroyed and taken over by the Medo-Persian Empire.

In short, God's message to Belshazzar was this: "You have grievously sinned. You have been defiant. You have not repented. You are terminated."

Daniel 5:29-31

Then Belshazzar gave the command (5:29): One might think that after hearing such words of judgment, Belshazzar might have put Daniel to death. Instead, the king gave the command to give Daniel the gifts and rewards he had promised. Again, however, the rewards were essentially useless because Babylon was about to fall to the Medo-Persian army.

That very night (5:30): That very night, King Belshazzar—who had pridefully and arrogantly exalted himself—forfeited his life through divine judgment at the hands of the invading Medo-Persian forces.

PARALLELS

Daniel 5:30—Judgment struck Belshazzar suddenly and swiftly.

Revelation 18:10, 19—Judgment struck Babylon suddenly and swiftly.

We are reminded of the scriptural teaching that death often comes suddenly. We read in Ecclesiastes 9:12 that "man does not know his time. Like fish that are taken in an evil net, and like birds that are caught in a snare, so the children of man are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them." In Proverbs 27:1, the wise man urged, "Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring." Each new day may bring the prospect of death. For this reason, the wise person—unlike Belshazzar—maintains a consistent awareness of his mortality so he will make good use of the time God has given. The psalmist therefore prayed, "O LORD, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting I am" (Psalm 39:4). Those who maintain such an awareness live with great appreciation for each new day.

Darius the Mede (5:31): Darius was a popular name among Persian kings. The name is used most famously in reference to Darius the Mede. There has been much debate regarding Darius's actual identity. Three possibilities have been suggested:

- Darius could be an honored title for Cyrus.
- Darius could have been appointed by Cyrus to rule over Babylon.
- Darius may have been a son of Cyrus.

I believe the second option is probably best.

MAJOR THEMES

1. *Pride is predominant among human leaders.* Human leaders seem especially prone to pride and arrogance. Exodus 5:2 tells us that "Pharaoh said, 'Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and moreover, I will not let Israel go.'" Second Chronicles 26:16 says of Uzziah, "When he was strong, he grew proud, to his destruction. For he was unfaithful to the LORD his God." In the New Testament, Herod gave a speech, and the people shouted out, "The voice of a god, and not of a man!" Immediately following this, "an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last" (Acts 12:22-23). Godly leaders, by contrast, are humble (see Luke 22:26).
2. *The vanity of worshipping idols.* Worshipping idols is the ultimate futility. This is a common theme in the book of Daniel. Daniel 5:23 reveals the obvious: The false gods of Babylon "do not see or hear or know." Jeremiah 10:5 likewise tells us, "Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field, and they cannot speak; they have to be carried, for they cannot walk." Jeremiah 51:17 affirms that "every goldsmith is put to shame by his idols, for his images are false, and there is no breath in them." Habakkuk 2:18 warns, "What profit is an idol when its maker has shaped it, a metal image... Its maker trusts in his own creation when he makes speechless idols!" No wonder the apostle Paul declared, "An idol has no real existence" (1 Corinthians 8:4). Idolatry is sheer futility.

DIGGING DEEPER WITH CROSS-REFERENCES

Sudden destruction—Genesis 19:24, 28; Numbers 16:31-33; Deuteronomy 32:35; Psalm 35:8; Proverbs 6:14-15; Ecclesiastes 9:12; Isaiah 47:11; Jeremiah 15:8; Daniel 5:30; Luke 17:27; 1 Thessalonians 5:3

Death as a penalty for sin—Genesis 6:5-7; 1 Chronicles 10:13; Job 27:8; Proverbs 2:22; 10:27; Luke 12:20-21; Acts 5:1-10; Romans 5:12; 6:23

LIFE LESSONS

1. *Don't be enticed by what the world has to offer.* Notice that Daniel couldn't have cared less about the gifts the king offered. We should follow Daniel's lead. You and I must perpetually guard against the lure of what this world has to offer. "For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2:16-17).
2. *The humble are often exalted at the hands of others.* We have already talked in this book about how God humbles the proud and exalts the humble. But notice that when God chooses to exalt one of His servants, He often does so by means of another powerful person. For example, in Egypt, Joseph was elevated to a position of great authority by the pharaoh (Genesis 41:37-43). Daniel was exalted to a position of great authority by several kings (for example, Daniel 5:29). God can do the same today. God may use a president, a governor, a mayor, the president of a company, or some other person in authority to exalt one of His servants.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What does today's Scripture reading reveal about Daniel's character?
2. How would you characterize King Belshazzar's response to Daniel's words of impending judgment?
3. What is the most important spiritual lesson you learned from today's study?