

The Handwriting on the Wall

Daniel 5

“The handwriting on the wall” is a phrase so familiar it has become a modern day cliché. We use that phrase to refer to something that is obvious, ominous and imminent. There are clear signs that something unpleasant or unwelcome is going to happen. Today in Daniel 5 we will see the origin of that phrase and the message it brings.

Almost 70 years have passed since the day Daniel and the other Jewish teenagers arrived in Babylon as captives from Jerusalem. Daniel is now over 80 years old. King Nebuchadnezzar has been dead for 24 years. After Nebuchadnezzar’s death, it didn’t take long for greed and ambition to run amok in his royal family. His son, Evil-Merodach, reigned only two years before his power-hungry brother-in-law, General Neriglissar assassinated him and became king. After a six-year reign, Neriglissar died, and his young son, Labashi-Marduk, stepped into power. He only lasted a few months before he got killed by Nabonidus, a son-in-law of Nebuchadnezzar. Nabonidus, spent most of his reign away from Babylon, securing the borders and strengthening the empire while his son, Belshazzar, as co-regent was ruling in the city of Babylon.

His grandson Belshazzar sits on the throne of the shrinking empire centered in the great city of Babylon. According to secular history, the date is October 12, 539 BC. Outside the massive walls of Babylon the mighty Medo-Persian army has surrounded the city having already defeated the army of Nabonidus. From being the mightiest empire on earth, Babylon the city is all that is left.

Inside the heavily fortified city, Belshazzar thought that his kingdom was safe. Nebuchadnezzar had built this walled city to withstand any siege. An estimated one hundred towers built along the huge double walls provided the Babylonian military all the advantage it needed to fight off an attack against the city. The Euphrates River went right through the city providing an endless water source and the walls were built over the water so that no floating army could enter by surprise. It is said that the city contained a 20-year stockpile of food and supplies. Though surrounded, the people of Babylon felt that no army could conquer them. They could outlast any siege.

But as always, God has the final word. As Nebuchadnezzar had learned in chapter 4, “... **the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomever He chooses.**”

1. Belshazzar’s Blasphemous Banquet (5:1-4)

King Belshazzar has decided to throw a party of epic proportions for 1,000 of his nobles along with their wives and concubines. Five times in the first four verses of this chapter it says that the king and those at the party drank wine. So you see the nature of the party. Needless to say, this was a night of drunkenness with no inhibitions.

1 Belshazzar the king made a great feast for a thousand of his lords, and drank wine in the presence of the thousand. 2 While he tasted the wine, Belshazzar gave the command to bring the gold and silver vessels which his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple which had been in Jerusalem, that the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them. 3 Then they brought the gold vessels that had been taken from the temple of the house of God which had been 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 and iron, wood and stone.

A false sense of pride and self-sufficiency seems to have dominated the dinner party. The king remembered the expensive vessels which Nebuchadnezzar, his father, had taken when he defeated and captured Jerusalem. How much more impressive the evening would be if they drank their wine from the gold and silver vessels from the temple in Jerusalem.

Belshazzar seems to have decided to drink of out these vessels as a direct challenge to God, Most High. In verse 22 Daniel will show that Belshazzar knew about God and what the Lord had done in the days of Nebuchadnezzar. In verse 23 Daniel says that Belshazzar purposely lifted himself up against the Lord of heaven. In defiance of the Lord of heaven, the king decides to drink from the sacred vessels. He was challenging God Himself!

And so the vessels were brought in. The wine continued to flow freely, and toasts began to be offered. That these pagans were engaged in a kind of drinking bout with the sacred temple vessels was bad enough, but the ultimate blasphemy was toasting the gods of gold, silver, brass, iron, wood, and stone.

God has a limit to how far He will allow men to go in their sin. In His longsuffering and mercy, God may allow men to continue in their sin for a time. But there is a time for judgment. The king and his Babylonian dinner guests crossed the line that fateful night in the banquet hall of Babylon. Judgment day had come, and the writing on the wall announced its arrival.

2. The Handwriting on the Wall (5:5-9)

5 In the same hour the fingers of a man's hand appeared and wrote opposite the lampstand on the plaster 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 changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his hips were loosened and his knees knocked against each other. 7 The king cried aloud to bring in the astrologers, the Chaldeans, and the soothsayers. The king spoke, saying to the wise men of Babylon, "Whoever reads this writing, and tells me its interpretation, shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around his neck; and he shall be the third ruler in the kingdom." 8 Now all the king's wise men came, but they could not read the writing, or make known to the king its interpretation. 9 Then King

Belshazzar was greatly troubled, his countenance was changed, and his lords were astonished.

Suddenly God crashes the party in a most dramatic fashion. Without warning a disembodied hand began to write on the plaster wall near the lampstand in the royal palace. No body, no face, no torso ... just some fingers writing on the plaster wall. When the king saw the words being formed on the wall, the color drained out of his face and he turned white as a sheet, his knees begin knocking together, his legs give out, and the king cries out in terror.

Now, anyone would be afraid after seeing something supernatural, like that hand from God writing on the wall. But I think the reason that the king is extra terrified is because of his guilt. He knows what he has been doing with God's things. He has been caught in the act. Therefore, he knows that the handwriting on the wall has to mean something bad.

Just like his grandfather before him, Belshazzar calls in all his wise men and promises great rewards to the one who interprets the handwriting on the wall. And just as in the days of Nebuchadnezzar, the wisdom of men falls short. The natural man cannot discern the things of the Spirit of God.

3. The Recommendation of Daniel (5:10-12)

So again like has happened twice before, they finally call in Daniel.

10 The queen, because of the words of the king and his lords, came to the banquet hall. The queen spoke, saying, "O king, live forever! Do not let your thoughts trouble you, nor let your countenance change. 11 There is a man in your kingdom in whom is the Spirit of the Holy God. And 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, astrologers, Chaldeans, and soothsayers. 12 Inasmuch as an excellent spirit, knowledge, understanding, interpreting dreams, solving riddles, and explaining enigmas were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Belteshazzar, now let Daniel be called, and he will give the interpretation."

The queen mother does not seem to have attended the banquet, but eventually the cries of those in the banquet hall reach her ears, and she arrives on the scene. Taking note of Belshazzar's anxiety, she tries to calm him. The queen who was probably Belshazzar's mother and a daughter of Nebuchadnezzar gave advice to this soon-to-be-killed king. She informs the king that in the past a man named Daniel had successfully dealt for many years with such difficult matters. Daniel could decipher the words and their meaning.

4. Daniel is Summoned (5:13-16)

13 Then Daniel was brought in before the king. The king spoke, and said to Daniel, "Are you that Daniel who is one of the captives from Judah, whom my father the king brought from Judah? 14 I have heard

of you, that the Spirit of God is in you, and that light and understanding and excellent wisdom are found in you. 15 Now the wise men, the astrologers, have been brought in before me, that they should read this writing and make known to me its interpretation, but they could not give the interpretation of the thing. 16 And I have heard of you, that you can give interpretations and explain enigmas. 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."

Now in his eighties, Daniel carries himself with a steadiness born out of a lifetime of faith in God in the enemy's territory. Still treating Daniel as nothing more than a Jew from a conquered land, Belshazzar tries to buy his interpretation.

5. Daniel's Indictment of the King (5:17-28)

Daniel does not care for the king's gifts. And he proceeds to give Belshazzar history lesson, a theology lesson, and a reading lesson. First, the lesson from history, Daniel reminds Belshazzar of the lesson that his father King Nebuchadnezzar had learned:

17 Then Daniel answered, and said before the king, "Let your gifts be for yourself, and give your rewards to another; yet 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 a kingdom and majesty, glory and honor. 19 And because of the majesty that He gave him, all peoples, nations, and languages trembled and feared before him. Whomever he wished, he executed; whomever he wished, he kept alive; whomever he wished, he set up; and whomever he wished, he put down. 20 But when his heart was lifted up, and his spirit was hardened in pride, he was deposed from his kingly throne, and they took his glory from him. 21 Then he was driven from the sons of men, his heart was made like the beasts, and his dwelling was with the wild donkeys. They fed him with grass like oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till he knew that the Most High God rules in the kingdom of men, and appoints over it whomever He chooses.

Next Daniel gives the king a theology lesson:

22 But you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, although you knew all this. 23 And you have lifted yourself up against the Lord of heaven. They have brought the vessels of His house 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, bronze and iron, wood and stone, which do not see or hear or know; and the God who holds your breath in His hand and owns all your ways, you have not glorified.

Daniel gives three indictments against the king. First, he did not humble his heart even though he knew about God. He exalted himself against the Lord of heaven. Second, he took the holy vessels from the Lord's house and drank from them, praising false gods in their act of blasphemy. And third, he did not glorify the true God who holds the king's life in His hands.

Finally Daniel interprets the words on the wall:

24 Then the fingers of the hand were sent from Him, and this writing was written.

25 "And this is the inscription that was written:

MENE, MENE, TEKEL,

UPHARSIN.

26 This is the interpretation of each word. Mene: God has numbered your kingdom, and finished it; 27 Tekel: You have been weighed in the balances, and found wanting; 28 Peres: Your kingdom has been divided, and given to the Medes and Persians." 29 Then Belshazzar gave the command, and they clothed Daniel with purple and put a chain of gold around his neck, and made a proclamation concerning him that he should be the third ruler in the kingdom.

Daniel's explanation is short and to the point. *Mene* means "numbered." God has numbered the days of your reign, and now your number is up. *Tekel* means "weighed." God has weighed your life in the scales of justice and you've come up short. O king, you do not measure up. *Peres* or *Parsin* means "divided." "Your kingdom is about to be broken up." These mysterious words are a message from God that Belshazzar's reign is over, his life will soon end, and his kingdom will be divided and given to someone else.

6. Belshazzar's End (5:30-31)

The end of story comes quickly:

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

Daniel's account is short and to the point. What God had declared came to pass that very night. Secular history fills in the gaps. Historians tell us that Babylon fell to the Medes and the Persians in a surprise attack. The army of the Medes and Persians was camped near the Euphrates River. They diverted the river into a nearby swamp. With the river dried up, the Persian Army came in under the walls through the riverbed. They found the Babylonians feasting in a time of drunken revelry. Before sunrise Belshazzar was dead and the Babylonian Empire came to an inglorious end.

Conclusion

We could draw a number of lessons from this account today. Let me just give you three,

A. God's Word is sure.

Forty or fifty years earlier Daniel had told King Nebuchadnezzar that the golden empire of Babylon would be replaced by a kingdom of silver. On October 12, 539 BC it happened just as the prophet had spoken. God had written His word on the wall and that very night it came to pass.

The same is true for everything found in God's Word. It all comes true sooner or later. Though the days turn into months, the months into years, the years in decades, and the decades into centuries, in the end every word of the Lord will come to pass. Nothing will be left unfulfilled. Belshazzar discovered this truth the hard way. If God says it, you can take it to the bank.

The judgment of Babylon and of Belshazzar were certain. They were also imminent. Yet the king never seemed to grasp this and act accordingly. His actions are typical of all who are blinded by sin. For this reason, our Lord warned of the dullness of men's hearts and minds, even as the day of judgment approaches. In Matthew 24:36-39 Jesus warned,

36 "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only. 37 But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. 38 For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, 39 and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be.

God's word declares that the Lord Jesus will return. His word is sure. It cannot fail. Are you ready?

B. God's Spirit does not strive forever.

Sinners like to believe that God will never punish them, or if punishment is coming, it is so far off in the distant future that they have plenty of time to repent and be ready to meet the Lord. This is a dangerous and even deadly attitude. God is not obligated to continually send his Spirit to convict us of our sin.

The opportunity to get right with God ends with our death. After we die, there is only the judgment to come (Hebrews 9:27). It is foolish to presume upon the grace of God. He owes you nothing at all. If you reject His offer of salvation, there remains no other sacrifice for sin (Hebrews 10:26). If you turn away from Jesus, or if you put off trusting him, where else will you go to have your sins forgiven? Those who take God's grace for granted will end up eternally disappointed.

C. God weighs every human heart.

Here is a message for all of us—Christians and non-Christians alike. We know from many passages that God knows what is in every human heart. He knows

our motivations, thoughts, dreams and secrets. Everything is laid bare before Him.

Belshazzar had been weighed and found wanting. Just as Belshazzar was accountable for what he knew about King Nebuchadnezzar, even so we are all responsible for the light we have received. The more light, the greater our accountability in the eyes of God. Because you were put on earth to glorify God, you will be judged according to what you have done with what you have received.

One day we will individually stand before God. I know that some people think that God will weigh their good deeds versus their bad deeds, and if the good outweighs the bad, they will be admitted into heaven. That's a nice thought, but it fails on one crucial point. God has said that [Rom 3:23 NKJV] 23 for **all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**, and that [Rom 3:20 NKJV] 20 **Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law [is] the knowledge of sin.**

You need someone to stand in your place on the scales of justice. You need Jesus Christ to take your place. He never sinned—not in thought, word, or deed. By his perfect righteousness He fulfilled the Law of God in every detail. He succeeded where you failed, and because He died in your place and was raised from the dead, He is able to save all who come to Him. If you stand on your own merits, you will be found “wanting.” If Jesus stands in your place, you will be found fully qualified to enter heaven.

The choice is very simple. You can represent yourself, be judged for your sin and end up in hell. Or Jesus can take your place and you will go to heaven. There is no other option.