

A Sobering Reality

Daniel 5:1-6

April 18, 21 (Cop Church)

Purpose statement: God's word is a sobering reality.

Attention Getter: Reality shows don't depict reality. In fact, I've yet to see a reality show that depicts the way things really are. Whenever there's a camera, people play to the audience. While the show may be entertaining, interesting, funny, or foolish, it's not real. When the cameras are turned off and the TV crew goes home, those in front of the camera must still face reality. LEOs, more than most deal with people who deny reality. We've all dealt with people who are out-of-touch with reality. However, from time-to-time, we all must have a reality check.

Sometimes reality is hard to face. We'd rather not face it. Some of us are so desperate to avoid reality we use escape mechanisms to get away from it. From time to time, a friend might say something like, "Wake up and smell the coffee!" What they're saying is, "Wake up and face the truth, quit denying what's before you—deal with it." Yet sometimes we just don't want to.

Introduction: Nevertheless, we must live in the real world and face reality. Things don't always go the way we want. In fact, many times they don't. In today's passage, the last king of the great Babylonian Empire used escape mechanisms in an attempt to avoid reality—the reality of God's word. But they didn't work; in the end he faced a sobering reality.

Read: Dan. 5:1-6 *"Then the king's color changed, and his thoughts alarmed him; his limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together"* (Dan. 5:6).

Background: Chapter five opens up with a new king on the throne in Babylon, Belshazzar by name. He was, by marriage, the grandson of Nebuchadnezzar.¹ It had been nearly seventy years since the beginning of Daniel. Daniel was captured in 605 BC. Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 BC.² Nebuchadnezzar had two children (a son and a daughter) the son, Evil-Mero-dach succeeded his father, but was assassinated by his brother-in-law, Ne-rig-lis-sar (his sister's husband). He usurped the throne and was subsequently killed in battle, then his son (Labasi-Marduk) became king.

Nebuchadnezzar's daughter remarried, this time to a man named Nabonidus, whose eldest son was Belshazzar. After only nine months, Labasi-Marduk was assassinated and Nabonidus took the throne and co-reigned with Belshazzar. History shows us that it was October 12th, 539 BC³ when the events recorded in Daniel 5 took place. In the text we'll see *the party, the pride, and the problem*. Belshazzar is believed to be 37 years old, and he was throwing a party.

I. **The Party (5:1)**

Chapter 5 opens with what seems to be a festive spirit—it was party time. There were 1,000 officials present and the king led in the drinking, **Dan. 5:1**. What's wrong with a party? The reality was Babylon was under siege. Hence, partying was irrational. Irrational partying is a **diversion** tactic. It's an attempt to hide from the truth and avoid reality. It's an attempt to make believe God doesn't exist. It's an attempt to avoid God with busyness, intoxication, or deflection.

Just days before, Nabonidus, who was leading the Babylonian army "suffered a crushing defeat" by the Persians and

¹ (Showers, 1982, p. 50)

² (Walvoord, 1971, p. 113)

³ (Miller, 1994, p. 151)

was on the run.⁴ And while Belshazzar partied with a thousand of his nobles, just outside the walls, the Medo-Persian army prepared to attack.

Apparently, Belshazzar felt quite safe inside the fortified city. “According to Herodotus, Babylon was about fourteen miles square, with great outer walls 87 feet thick and 350 feet high, with a hundred great bronze gates in the walls”.⁵ There was a deep mote surrounding the city that offered further protection. The wall was about 30’ thick at the top with soldiers posted all around it. The Euphrates River ran under the wall, through the city, and out the other side under the wall once again. There were provisions stored up for years and inside the walls were working farms and ranches that provided food. Apparently, the people felt secure as well. Archeologists have discovered documents that show real estate transactions were taking place during the siege.⁶

But even if Belshazzar was confident Babylon was secure, this doesn’t account for his partying. Rather than throwing a party he should have been about the business of governing and directing a defense for the city. But he wasn’t, why?

I believe he was scared. He wasn’t as sure of himself as he led on. The reality was Babylon was surrounded. The Medo-Persian army was just outside. His father fled. Why? Did dad know something he didn’t?

Rather than face reality, he sought to escape. He couldn’t escape like his father had, so he decided to muster up some false courage. Belshazzar didn’t have the courage to face reality, so he turned to **liquid** courage.

⁴ (Miller, 1994, p. 151)

⁵ (Walvoord, 1971, p. 119)

⁶ (Cambron, 1963, p. 25)

While large drinking feasts were common for kings to host, drinking in front of guests by a king was not.⁷ But Belshazzar was out front, leading the drinking that led to intoxication. Intoxication causes all kind of problems. One problem is forgetting God's laws. Isaiah speaks of six "woes" in chapter 5 of his book. Two of the six warn against intoxication. Note the downward spiral that results from intoxication, **Isa. 5:11-12; 22-23**.

What is lost by intoxication? Respect, jobs, families, and lives. On the other hand, what is gained by intoxication? A temporary thrill, false courage, acceptance by others who do the same, a false sense of reality.

Listen to the words of a country song that tell how one man tries to escape reality through intoxication:

*I can almost see me now In Acapulco I can almost feel
the breeze That makes the palm trees sway The motion
of the ocean In the bottle Says loving her is just A sip
away*

*Taking me a whiskey trip Loving her with every sip I'm
just like a sailing ship Awaiting for the winds to blow
Whiskey, you're a friend of mine You can blow away my
mind To some other place and time Taking me a whis-
key trip*

*I can almost see her now Here beside me I can almost
smell the perfume Drifting from her hair And living with
this feeling Of wanting her One more drink and I know
I'll be there*

⁷ (Miller, 1994, p. 151)

Taking me a whiskey trip Loving her with every sip I'm just like a sailing ship Waiting for the winds to blow Whiskey, you're a friend of mine You can blow away my mind To some other place and time Taking me a whiskey trip Taking me a whiskey trip Loving her with every sip I'm just like a sailing ship...⁸

However, intoxication isn't the only way people attempt to avoid reality. Some use other things. Video games, hobbies, work, or exercise to name a few. While in and of themselves these things may not be bad, and even healthy, when used to avoid reality they become harmful. Some use their own pride to avoid reality.

II. **The Pride (5:2-4)**

Belshazzar took his avoidance strategy to the next level. To further mask his fear he turned to pride. Solomon wrote, "Wine is a **mocker**, strong drink a **brawler**, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise" (Prov. 20:1). Belshazzar wasn't wise. If he couldn't drink reality away, perhaps he could mock it away. Mockery is evidence of pride.

When Jerusalem was attacked in 605 BC, Nebuchadnezzar took vessels from the temple and placed them in the temple to his gods, **Dan. 1:1-2**. Nebuchadnezzar did this out of ignorance. At the time he believed in many gods and thought that by adding to his collection of gods he could become stronger. Later we know Nebuchadnezzar came to understand the Lord God of Israel is the one true God. His grandson never learned this important lesson.

⁸ ("Whiskey Trip" by Wayne Carson and Donn Tankersly)

Recall Solomon said, *“Wine is a mocker.”* While some try to avoid reality through diversion tactics, others do so through mockery. We put ourselves above others by poking fun or mocking. By putting someone else down we feel superior. This is what Belshazzar did next. Pride is a **superiority** tactic. It’s an attempt to suppress the truth. It’s an attempt to deny God’s existence. It’s an attempt to avoid God with intellect, philosophy, or power. Let’s get back to the party.

These parties continued for weeks at a time and digressed into depravity of all sorts. Belshazzar added a new dimension of debauchery by having the vessels that were taken out of the temple brought to the party, **5:2-3**.

Why have the vessels from Yahweh’s temple brought? Belshazzar was about 14 years old when Nebuchadnezzar died.⁹ Belshazzar’s age and his close ties to the royal family (not to mention the fact that Daniel later mentioned it) affirms that he was well aware of Nebuchadnezzar’s seven years of insanity documented in the previous chapter. Further, he would have been aware of Nebuchadnezzar’s decree, **4:34-35**.

Belshazzar was told that the Lord God *“does according to his will...and none can stay his hand.”* Not only that, but he would’ve been aware of the meaning of the dream Nebuchadnezzar had about the image. Recall the head of gold represented Babylon and the arms and chest of silver represented the Medo-Persian Empire. God’s word to Nebuchadnezzar was that the Medes and Persians would defeat Babylon. Guess who was right outside? Belshazzar didn’t agree with what God said and tried to **change** it.

⁹ (Showers, 1982, p. 51)

The reason the temple vessels were brought to the party was because Belshazzar was defying Yahweh. Belshazzar's name means "Bel has protected the king".¹⁰ Even knowing the Medes and the Persians were right outside the city, he wanted to feel that his fortress, army, and gods could protect him. He had the temple vessels brought so he could laugh in the face of the *Most High God*, **5:4**. By mocking the *Most High God* Belshazzar asserted that he was superior to God. But there was a problem.

III. **The Problem** (5:5-6)

Belshazzar had a problem. The problem was reality would not go away. There he was, drinking himself into a stupor with the vessels from the Lord's temple, mocking the Lord, and laughing in the face of danger; when suddenly a hand appeared and wrote a message on the wall, **Dan. 5:5**.

At the sight of the hand the king became visibly shaken—he was downright scared! As he was praising his gods and honoring them, he realized the hand and the writing were of divine origin. God's word shook him out of his **stupor**, **5:6**.

Why is God's word able to awaken people? Why is it so scary? God's word is sobering because it can discern the **thoughts** and **intentions** of the heart, **Heb. 4:12-13**. That's scary—God knows our thoughts and our intentions and holds us accountable.

But what's more, the word of the Lord is sure and should awaken us out of any stupor we may be in, **Rev. 21:5**. When God says it, it is done, **21:6a**. The certainty of his word is not

¹⁰ (Wolvoord & Zuck, 1985, p. 1344)

only convicting it's also comforting. God's word includes his promise of salvation, **21:6b—SALVATION!**

Conclusion: Belshazzar attempted to avoid the reality of God's word through party and pride. Irrational partying is a diversion tactic. A diversion tactic is an attempt to **hide** from the truth. It's an attempt to make believe God doesn't exist. It's an attempt to avoid God with busyness, intoxication, or deflection.

Pride is a superiority tactic. A superiority tactic is an attempt to **suppress** the truth. It's an attempt to deny God's existence. It's an attempt to avoid God with intellect, philosophy, or power.

Both of these are attempts to avoid reality and silence God. God will not be silenced. God's word will go forth and accomplish the purpose for which it was sent forth. Isaiah writes,

*¹⁰ "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
¹¹ so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isa. 55:10-11)*