

The Handwriting on the Wall

Daniel 5:7-31

May 2, 2021

Purpose statement: God will humble the proud.

Attention Getter: Sometimes we just don't get it. Or should I say we don't want to get it. Traffic officers know this better than anyone. In the police academy, we learned how to direct traffic. We were told officers must give simple and clear instructions that are easy for drivers to understand. The biggest traffic headache for San Antonio is Fiesta.

Every year SA celebrates Fiesta. Fiesta is kind of like Marti Gras in New Orleans, except in SA it goes on for three weeks, and traffic is a nightmare. Streets are closed, traffic is rerouted, and the entire traffic division is put on special assignment, as are all the probationary officers. In 1984, I was one of those probationary officers. After the first rollcall we were instructed to report to the armory for flashlights with orange cones for directing traffic. In fact, after every rollcall the flashlights were issued, no questions asked, and no accountability. I wondered why some of the traffic officers had to replace their flashlights on a regular basis. I learned that before the city issued the disposable flashlights, officers often used flares to direct traffic. The flares had a nail that protruded from the bottom so the flare could be stuck in the asphalt.

Occasionally, during the course of Fiesta, a car would be seen with a flare sticking out of a fender or the trunk. For some reason, the driver refused to adhere to the clear instructions given by the traffic officer and the frustrated officer, who had his fill of disobedient drivers, decided to mark cars that disobeyed his command. The city figured it was cheaper to issue the cheap flashlights, that were

sometimes harmlessly thrown at vehicles, rather than risking a car going up in flames.

The same is true with God. Much of God's word is very clear, simply put, and easy to understand. But people try to complicate matters because they don't like what God has to say. It doesn't fit their lifestyle, their personal values, or how they think the way things ought to be; so, they try to change what God has said. This is at the heart of today's passage.

Introduction: God's word didn't line up with how Belshazzar perceived things—or perhaps wanted things to be—so he simply rejected it. First, he attempted to hide from the truth, and then he attempted to suppress the truth. Two common ploys still used today in an attempt to avoid reality. But find from today's passage that God's word will not be stopped by the wishes, plots, or the personal agendas of humans.

Read: Dan. 5:17-23a *“And you...have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this, but you have lifted up yourself against the Lord of heaven”* (Dan. 5:22-23a).

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

Nebuchadnezzar's daughter's second marriage was to a man named Nabonidus, whose eldest son was Belshazzar. Belshazzar co-reigned with his father. The events recorded in chapter five occurred on October 12th, 539 BC.² Belshazzar is believed to be 37 years old.

Belshazzar was in Babylon throwing a party for a thousand of his officials, **Dan. 5:1**. While Belshazzar partied, just outside the walls the Medo-Persian army prepared to attack to the city. Just days before, Nabonidus, who was

¹ (Showers, 1982, p. 50)

² (Miller, 1994, p. 151)

leading the Babylonian army suffered a crushing defeat by the Persians and was on the run.³

Nevertheless, inside the palace the wine flowed liberally, and Belshazzar led the drinking. These parties were known to continue for weeks at a time and digress into depravity of all sorts. Belshazzar added a new dimension of debauchery by having the vessels which were taken out of the temple of the Lord brought to the party to honor his gods, **5:3-4**.

But Belshazzar had a problem—reality would not go away. There was Belshazzar, drinking himself into a stupor with vessels from the 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 was visibly shaken. While praising his gods and honoring them he realized the writing was of divine origin. God's word shook him out of his stupor, **5:6**. Today's passage reveals the alarming handwriting on the wall and what it meant. We'll find that Belshazzar was alarmed by God's word; was against God's word; and in the end, was adjudicated by God's word. We begin with him alarmed by God's word.

I. **Alarmed by God's Word (5:7-16)**

After being sobered up by the mysterious handwriting, the belligerent Belshazzar demanded his counselors and advisors be brought in immediately to provide an interpretation of the writing, **Dan. 5:7a**.

Recall that, when Nebuchadnezzar brought in counselors to interpret his dream in chapter two, he threatened them with death if they couldn't provide answers. Belshazzar had

³ (Miller, 1994, p. 151)

another mindset. He thought **money** and **power** could buy answers, **5:7b**. Belshazzar promised wealth and position as the third ruler in the kingdom, why third? Belshazzar was second under his absentee father. But this didn't work either; it netted the same result Nebuchadnezzar received, **5:8**.

Their inability to provide the king an answer made things worse for the king. He went from being *alarmed* to being *greatly alarmed* and turned white as a sheet, **5:9**. We will discover that the writing wasn't in some mysterious language, it was in Aramaic. In fact, there were only four words written. The mystery was their meaning. He knew the message was of divine origin but didn't know its meaning. He knew it was intended for him but didn't understand. He needed answers.

Word quickly spread and the queen mother, who wasn't attending the party, heard what had happened. The queen mother was Belshazzar's stepmother and daughter of Nebuchadnezzar. Apparently, she was old enough and wise enough not to have been present at the party. Without thought of being invited or following protocol, she entered the banquet hall to help calm things down, **5:10**.

She knew where to turn, to the old man of God, Daniel. Notice the praise and adoration she had for Daniel, **5:11-12**. Apparently, after the death of Nebuchadnezzar Daniel was demoted to a lower position. However, the queen mother knew he was still alive and well and the only hope for the kingdom. She referred to Daniel by his Jewish name, *God is Judge*. She had the utmost confidence Daniel would give the interpretation. The use of the term "father" in reference to Nebuchadnezzar doesn't mean Nebuchadnezzar was Belshazzar's father, but that he was both the king before him and his grandfather by marriage.

Daniel was quickly summoned and brought before the king. The king addressed Daniel as if he was a legend, which in fact he was, **5:13-14**. Belshazzar continued and promised him the same wealth and position he did the others, **5:15-16**.

God's word got Belshazzar's **attention**. It wouldn't go away. He couldn't drink reality away and he couldn't mock it away. He couldn't hide from the truth and he couldn't suppress the truth. There it was—God's word—staring him in the face. He decided to go against God's word.

II. **Against God's Word (5:17-23)**

Daniel wanted nothing to do with the king's wealth or the position he offered. Belshazzar didn't attempt to buy off Daniel, but to buy off Daniel's God. Little did he know that God's favor can't be bought. Nevertheless, Daniel agreed to interpret the writing, **Dan. 5:17**.

Prior to interpreting the writing, Daniel gave Belshazzar a crash course in theology and human government, the same one Nebuchadnezzar received years earlier. What Daniel said wasn't what the king wanted to hear; but it was the truth. God's preachers are called to preach accurately, which many times, is against what society wants to hear. Daniel had three simple lessons for the king:

Lesson one: Nebuchadnezzar's power, glory, and majesty were **given** by the *Most High God*, **5:18-19**.

Lesson two: Nebuchadnezzar's power, glory, and majesty were **taken** by the *Most High God*, **5:20**.

Lesson three: Nebuchadnezzar was **humbled** by the *Most High God*, **5:21**.

These three lessons were summed up by Job after losing everything he had, *“The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord”* (Job 1:21b).

Belshazzar was aware of all this, yet he still did not heed the *Most High God*, but went against him, **5:22-23a**. Belshazzar would have been old enough to witness what happened to Nebuchadnezzar. He would have read the edict that Nebuchadnezzar published as recorded in chapter four. Historical documents show that Belshazzar held a position as a chief administrator just two years after Nebuchadnezzar’s death; hence he would have been well aware of Nebuchadnezzar’s sickness and recovery.⁴

But rather than humble himself, Belshazzar lifted himself up against the Lord. How did Belshazzar do this? The remainder of v.23 details his rebellion. Belshazzar praised all sorts of false gods; those that do not see, or hear, or know; but the God who gives him breath he mocked, **5:23b**.

It was God’s word that had alarmed him, and it was God’s word that he went against. In the end, it would be God’s word that judged him.

III. **Adjudicated by God’s Word** (5:24-31)

Adjudicate means to judge, to decide a matter, to settle an issue. Daniel continues; it was the Lord of Heaven, the *Most High God* who sent the personal note, in writing, **Dan. 5:24**.

⁴ (Miller, 1994, p. 163)

The words were written in the Aramaic, so the words were understood, but not their meaning, **5:25**. In ancient Aramaic (like Hebrew) only consonants are written, Daniel interpreted the words as passive participles, *mene* means numbered, *tekel* means weighed, and *parsin* means divided.⁵ The prefix to “u” on uparsin (as is used in some translations) is the conjunction “and”.⁶ Therefore what was written was **“NUMBERED NUMBERED WEIGHED and DIVIDED.”** Daniel then provided the interpretation. This is just like the Bible, written so anyone can read it, but the Holy Spirit provides interpretation.

The word *mene* means God has numbered his days and they are at an end, **5:26**. His time was up. Life was over, he was about to meet his Creator. His days were numbered. He had an appointment with God.

God is the supreme Judge that will weigh the works of nations and men, **5:27**.

Daniel changed the last word from the plural to the singular. It's believed he did so because in Aramaic “*peres*” sounds a lot like Persia, **5:28**. The bottom line is he will be judged by God.

Proclaiming Daniel as third over Babylon was Belshazzar's final act as king, **5:29**. Even after God's word was explained to him, Belshazzar did not act on its truth, he ignored God word and went on with life as if the words were merely a riddle to be solved!

Daniel's co-regency would be short-lived, as would Belshazzar's life, **5:30-31**. The reign of the gold head had

⁵ (Miller, 1994, p. 165)

⁶ (Walvoord, 1971, p. 128)

come to an end, the reign of the arms and the breast of silver had begun.

Conclusion: Belshazzar faced three questions we do today: “What is God saying?” “What does God mean?” “What will I do?” Not only will kings and nations have to answer to God, but all will. Belshazzar learned his days were numbered and he had an appointment with judgment. Belshazzar was divided from his kingdom into death. Scripture tells us our days are numbered, and we too have an appointment with death, **Heb. 9:27a**.

After death, we too will be weighed and face judgment, **9:27b**. What’s your response to God’s word? Like Belshazzar, we all have been found wanting. “*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*” (Rom. 3:23).

And because we sin, we must answer to God. God himself provided the only answer he will accept, **9:28**. Christ has dealt with my sin, what about yours? Will you allow Christ to deal with it, or are you going to take care of it yourself?

What God says is really quite simple: “*For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord*” (Rom. 6:23)—**SALVATION!**

The sin of pride is a costly sin. It cost Satan his place among God’s angels and his final destination is the Lake of Fire. It cost a pharaoh of Egypt his firstborn son. It cost Saul his kingdom. Solomon writes, “*Pride goes before **destruction**, and a haughty spirit before a fall*” (Prov. 16:18).

Do you, like the disobedient driver, complicate matters because you don’t like what God has to say? Because it doesn’t fit your lifestyle, your personal values, or how you

think the way things ought to be? Do you try to change what God has said to your own liking?

What's your response to God's word? Will you respond like Nebuchadnezzar or like Belshazzar? In humility or in pride? Accepting or rejecting? With God or against God?