

Babylon's Last Meal

The First Wise Man, Part 4

Daniel 5

I read recently the following story of a missionary with the Navigators who had followed God's leading to Uganda to pioneer in that country this particular ministry. After a lot of prayer and discussion, he and his wife were convinced that God wanted them to move there and begin from the ground up.

They uprooted their family and flew into Kenya where he put his family in a hotel so he could rent a Jeep and travel across the border into Uganda.

He had no idea what he would encounter and he had no one waiting for him. In fact, he told the author who wrote his story that when he pulled into a village where he had planned to spend his first day, there were several young kids firing automatic weapons into the night sky. As he drove by, they pointed their weapons at him and just stared. Naturally he began to wonder if God was really in their decision after all.

After a long and tiring day of exploration, he pulled up to a dingy, dimly lit hotel. Inside, he the clerk spoke very little English, but they had one bed available. He walked up two flights of stairs and opened the door, turned on the light and saw a room with two beds – one unmade and one still made up. He immediately realized, "I am sharing this room with somebody else." A chill went down his spine.

He said, "I dropped to my knees and blurted out, "Lord, I am afraid; I'm in a country I don't know anything about; I'm in a culture that's totally unfamiliar to me; and I have no idea who's sleeping in that bed next to mine. Please show me that You are in this move for me and my family."

Just as I was finishing my prayer, the door flung open, and there stood a 6-foot 5-inch Ugandan man, frowning down at me. Then in perfect British English he said, "What are you doing in my room?"

Well, I'm with a Christian organization called the Navigators.

The Navigators?! And he broke into a huge smile as he pulled from his pocket a Scripture memory-verse pack and pointed to the bottom of the pack – "Look, The Navigators, Colorado Springs, Colorado – are you from Colorado Springs, Colorado?"

I said, "Yes" . . . but I'm praying about moving here to pioneer the work of Navigator's in Uganda.

That big Ugandan said, "I have been praying for 2 years for someone from that organization to come to my country.

He threw his arms around me, picked me up and literally danced around the room with me, laughing with joy.

That Ugandan believer became my closest ally; helping us find a place to live, assisting me with the language and eventually joining the board of the Navigator's for the country of Uganda.ⁱ

Isn't that great?!

I couldn't help but think of another faithful servant of God; a teenager who, in this case, was taken to a foreign land against his wishes – and he wasn't given a hug by anyone on his first day, for sure.

However, because of his trust in God, he became one of the greatest missionary pioneers to a pagan culture.

His name was Daniel.

When we first met him, he was around the age of 15. He risked his life by refusing to eat in the royal cafeteria. Even though he was in a foreign country, and didn't know what to expect, and may have prayed some rather desperate prayers, he refused to turn his back on his morals and his faith.

His trust in the Lord became not only apparent to the king and the royal staff, he and his three close friends distinguished themselves from all the other Jewish exiles who, fairly quickly, became little Babylonians.

Before you know it, Daniel is in his late teens, and he's promoted to a government post among the other leadership core of Babylon.

The next time we see him in action is in chapters 2 and 3 where Daniel, now in his early 30's, interprets a dream for Nebuchadnezzar. He prophesied in that interpretation of the future kingdoms that would rule the earth.

Following that act of insight and wisdom from God, Daniel was promoted to a position of what we might call, Prime Minister.

That's a pretty heady experience, by the way. You're in a foreign country, serving the greatest emperor on the planet and he promotes you to second in command, in only 15 years.

But Daniel didn't shelve his convictions or his faith during his meteoric rise.

In fact, 20 years later, chapter 4 opens – and this time the dream of Nebuchadnezzar is bad news. But you discover that Daniel, now 50 years old, hasn't changed a bit.

Still faithful to reveal God's word, he tells the king the bad news, but also challenges him to repent and follow God.

His honesty could have cost him his life – or at least his career, but he told the truth.

And just as he predicted, Nebuchadnezzar lost his sanity for 7 years as God humbled that king – eventually opening his eyes to the gospel that Daniel had been delivering for so many years.

With that, **chapter 5** opens, which is where we begin today.

Immediately you notice in **verse 1** that there is a new king in Babylon.

That's because **chapter 5** is taking place some 30 years after chapter 4.

Bible scholars place Daniel in his early 80's when chapter 5 takes place.ⁱⁱ

And you'll notice in **verse 1** that we are immediately introduced to a new king – a man named **Belshazzar**.

Nebuchadnezzar has disappeared without a biblical trace. And that's because God has fast-forwarded the tape for us.

He's shown us the beginning of the Babylonian empire under Nebuchadnezzar and now [75 years later] He's going to show us the final act of the last Babylonian ruler.ⁱⁱⁱ

And the final act is actually a last meal.

But before we get to that meal, let me introduce you to this young king, Belshazzar.

For decades, the liberals and the critics have used this king as exhibit A for why the Book of Daniel is historically inaccurate. But that was until the 1920's when archaeologist's uncovered Babylonian documents that revealed the life of Belshazzar and his forefathers.^{iv}

Of course, the liberals apologized and converted to Christianity!

These discoveries, revealed that Nebuchadnezzar's son (Amel-Marduk) began to reign after his father's death. While Nebuchadnezzar reigned for 43 years, his son was

on the throne for only 2 years before he was assassinated by his brother-in-law.

I can't imagine what their family reunions looked like.

After reigning only four years, the assassin, Neriglissar, died and his son, Labashi-Marduk took over.^v

He was only a little boy when he began his reign and tragically, he was beaten to death by conspirators who placed their choice on the throne of Babylon.

And their choice was a man named, Nabonidus. Nabonidus had married the daughter of Nebuchadnezzar and would reign until the end of the Babylonian kingdom.

It's rather obvious that people wanted some kind of connection to the great king Nebuchadnezzar and the glory days of Babylon.

Nabonidus really didn't like to stay in Babylon all that much. In fact, it didn't suit his health and so he built a palace in Arabia.

But he named his son, co-regent – and placed him on the throne in the Capitol city of Babylon.

And his son's name was Belshazzar.

Belshazzar would have been around 14 years of age when his grandfather died. He would have heard the stories of his grandfather's insanity as well as his testimony of conversion to the God of Israel.^{vi}

That'll come back to haunt him, by the way . . . we'll get there in a few moments.

One more thing – I'm almost finished introducing this sermon – since Belshazzar was a descendant of Nebuchadnezzar's family – the son of his daughter – he could in typical oriental fashion refer to Nebuchadnezzar as his father – a term that can simply denote forefather.

We do the same thing in a spiritual sense – we talk about the faith of our fathers – those who are our spiritual forefathers.

Now with that as background – we are immediately swept into a lavish banquet room where a feast is taking place. And none of them know – none of them – that this will be their last meal.

Nor do we know, by the way, what meal will be our last meal. But we can prepare better – far better – than Belshazzar.

Verse 1. Belshazzar the king held a great feast for a thousand of his nobles, and he was drinking wine in the presence of the thousand. 2. When Belshazzar tasted the wine, he gave orders to bring the gold and silver vessels which Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken out of the temple which was in

Jerusalem, so that the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines might drink from them.

Now that information alone is alarming.

For one thing, women didn't normally banquet with men. You may remember Vashti and the women having a private banquet while the king got drunk with all his nobles.

The presence of all of these women confirms in the minds of Old Testament historians that this was nothing less than a drunken orgy.

We know from history now that Belshazzar was 36 years old at the time. He was decadent, idolatrous, immoral, impious and selfish.^{vii}

After all, he was the king.

We know from excavations that this banquet room was enormous – imagine seating 1,000 political and military leaders and several hundred women.

This banquet room was supported by pillars carved into the forms of elephants – each pillar standing 20 feet tall, supporting the ceiling. The tables were fashioned in the form of horseshoes with all the nobles and leaders of Babylon, along with their wives, seated.^{viii}

Trained peacocks dressed in gold-and-silver-trimmed harness drew miniature chariots around the banquet room filled with goblets of wine.^{ix}

Trained waiters served the masses while girls danced on raised platforms.

They were oblivious to the fact that within a matter of hours, their kingdom would end and they would be dead.

What a picture of lost humanity. What a tragic picture of our world today.

Our own culture is immoral, committed to the idols of their own making; addicted to pleasure and entertainment, self-centered, rebellious . . . drinking, feasting, fornicating . . . moving every day ever closer and closer to the cliff, until they crash over the guardrail of life and into eternity they are swept.

6,360 people on this planet will die before I finish this sermon; 152,000 will die before you go to bed tonight.

55 million people have already entered their eternal, unchanging, irreversible condition, this year

At any given moment, the valley of the shadow of death looks like rush hour.

How many of them stopped to think – in Babylon – maybe this meal will be my last.

Now Belshazzar is actually bored with the banquet.

He wants to make a statement – a profound, startling statement.

You'll notice in *verse 3*, repeated again for emphasis, that ***they brought the gold vessels that had been taken out of the temple, the house of God which was in Jerusalem; and the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines drank from them. 4. They drank the wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone.***

Now at first glance you might have the idea that Belshazzar is just being blasphemous by drinking from temple vessels of the defeated God of Israel. He was, indeed.

But it was actually more than that.

According to historical sources, we learn that under the leadership of King Cyrus – the emperor of the Medo-Persian Empire who will overthrow Babylon that very night – has already surrounded Babylon.

In fact, they've been camped out around the walls for the past four months.^x

Oh, Belshazzar is not only glorifying his gods of gold and silver; he's not only blaspheming the God of Israel – saying effectively, you're good for nothing but to hold my wine.

He's going a great step further.

Daniel will point out later that Belshazzar knew about his grandfather's insanity and conversion to God; Belshazzar knew that Babylon was prophesied to fall at the feet of Persia.

He's even now surrounded by the Persian army and still he spits in the face of God.

This is what I think about your prophecy. This is what I think about your prediction through your prophet that Babylon will be conquered by the Medo-Persian Empire.

You can't conquer me!

That's what he was doing.

Even though the Babylonian army had suffered defeat only recently; even though all the nobles and soldiers and citizens with connections had come inside the walls of Babylon – Belshazzar led them all in a unanimous chorus which chanted down the prediction of defeat.

They did have good reason to boast. The outer wall was nearly 80 feet thick, surrounded by a moat. If someone could somehow scale the wall, they would drop down into an open area and then face yet another wall. They would be picked off easily as that inner wall had 100 fortified areas from which soldiers could shoot their arrows – and some

fortified areas for Babylonian soldiers were 300 feet tall.^{xi}

These city walls had never been breached before.

And they couldn't be starved out of the city either. The Euphrates River flowed through the city in different areas – providing endless supplies of fish and fresh water. Huge iron gates were crafted to sink down into the river at points where the river ran just under the city walls and through the Capitol city. Historians tell us that the Babylon had stocked enough grains to feed the entire population for 20 years.^{xii}

That's why even though the Persians had surrounded the city for four months, Belshazzar and all his nobles can afford to feast through the night.

And now the height of his arrogance as he calls for the vessels belonging to the God who dared to predict his downfall.

This is what I think of your prophecy . . .
Babylon will not fall to Persia.

We are unconquerable.

Heavens Hand Writing

And then it happened . . . *verse 5. Suddenly the fingers of a man's hand emerged and began writing opposite the lampstand on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace, and the king saw the back of the hand that did the writing. 6. Then the king's face grew pale and his thoughts alarmed him, and his hip joints went slack and his knees began knocking together.*

To this day, our culture uses the phrase – the handwritings on the wall – to refer to unchangeably bad news.

This is where that phrase originated.

This disembodied hand just appears and begins to write on the wall.

We're told here that this arrogant and boastful king loses all control. His hip joints went slack is a nice way of saying he lost control of his bowels.

His knees are shaking and his thoughts – his conscience is painfully alarmed.

Why?

Because even though he can't read that writing, he knows only a divine being could have written it.^{xiii}

Verse 7. And he literally screamed for the conjurers, the Chaldeans and the diviners – he pleaded with the wise men of Babylon . . . tell me what it means.

And they failed again. Have you noticed throughout the Book how they never do get the interpretation? That's because the natural man cannot receive the things from the Spirit of God – they are spiritually discerned (1 Corinthians 2:14).

The Queen – more than likely the Queen mother – Nebuchadnezzar's daughter and the mother of Belshazzar – hears the commotion and walks into the banquet room.

I find it interesting that she wasn't in there to begin with. And judging from her testimony about Daniel, she's probably a believer herself in the God of Israel like her father before her.

She says in *verse 11. There is a man in your kingdom in whom is a spirit of the holy gods; and in the days of your father, illumination, insight and wisdom like the wisdom of the gods were found in him* (by the way, those two phrases can be translated, the spirit of God and the wisdom of God – it requires an interpretive decision on the part of the translator and most assume she's not a believer and thus translate it in that manner.^{xiv}

I believe she's was a disciple of Daniel's faith – given the fact that she's avoided the drunken idolatrous fiasco to begin with; given the fact that she now enters only introduce Daniel to her son . . . and note how she insists on calling him by His Hebrew name.

Verse 12. He has an extraordinary spirit, knowledge and insight, interpretation of dreams, explanation of enigmas and solving of difficult problems were found in this Daniel – that's his Hebrew name – *whom the king named Belteshazzar. Get this – forget his pagan name – Let Daniel now be summoned and he will* – not he might – *he will declare the interpretation.* Man, I'd love to know a little more about the testimony of this woman who brings Daniel out of retirement and back into the palace scene.

Josephus, the first century Jewish historian wrote that the king didn't want to hear from the old prophet and she had to literally beg the king to send for Daniel.^{xv}

Isn't it interesting that even when someone comes in contact with an unexplainable supernatural moment, they'd rather get an explanation from another pagan, rather than ask someone who believes in the God of Israel.

That's why they'll run to everybody else but you . . . until they know it isn't the right answer and then they come to you . . . maybe.

In fact, when Daniel finally arrives and enters that banquet room the king says in *verse, 13*. ***“Are you that Daniel who is one of the exiles from Judah, whom my father the king brought from Judah?”***

Why ask? He already knew this was Daniel the exile.

One Old Testament scholar wrote that you can actually translate these words indicatively. Belshazzar actually said it this way, ***“So you’re Daniel, one of the exiles of Judah, whom my father brought from Judah.”***^{svi}

You can hear the sarcasm and derision in his tone can’t you?

So you’re the Jew exile, defeated by my father.

Well, I’ll tell you what, Daniel, if you can interpret this dream, *verse 16*, ***I’ll cloth you with purple*** – that was the garment of royalty; ***I’ll put a necklace of gold around your neck*** – such chains of gold could only be worn if given by the King, and they were worn with unbelievable pride; ***and I’ll also make you the third ruler in the kingdom?***

Why the *third*? Because Nabonidus was first – living in Arabia; Belshazzar was second, co-reigning in Babylon . . . but you, Daniel, you can be third.

I love Daniel’s answer – *verse 17*. ***Then Daniel answered and said before the king, “Keep you gifts for yourself or give your rewards to someone else; however, I will read the inscription to the king and make the interpretation known.***

Wow – can you see, white haired, 81 year old Daniel standing in the midst of a thousand people – you could have heard a pin drop – and they gasp when they hear Daniel turn down the King’s reward.

Daniel was refusing what nobles and the wise men could only dream of.

The purple clothing of kings . . . gold and riches and jewelry and more . . .

And Daniel is treating them like trinkets.

Why? Listen, Daniel knew what was coming. And he also had no personal guarantee from God that he’d even be alive the next morning.

If Babylon dies, he probably assumed he’d die with it. He’s now 81 and no longer serving.

But more importantly, he refused because he couldn’t be bought. He was God’s ambassador to this foreign field . . . and he had an eternal perspective.

Ladies and Gentlemen, when you’re eating your last meal, it really doesn’t matter what you’re wearing . . . it doesn’t matter how much money you have in the bank . . . it doesn’t matter how much

jewelry you have around your neck or what your nameplate says on the door of your office.

None of that stuff matters an hour before you die; and they will.

And because of that, Daniel – who will, by the way, survive, doesn’t interpret the message on the wall right away. Would you notice here – what he does first is preach a message to all the nobility of Babylon and especially to this 36 year old king.

Heaven’s Prophet Preaching

I’ll just simply read his sermon manuscript – it’s fairly self-explanatory; beginning in *verse 18*. ***O king, the Most High God granted sovereignty, grandeur, glory and majesty to Nebuchadnezzar your father. 19. Because of the grandeur which He bestowed on him, all the peoples, nations and men of every language feared and trembled before him; whomever he wished he killed and whomever he wished he spared alive; and whomever he wished he elevated and whomever he wished he humbled. 20. But when his heart was lifted up and his spirit became so proud that he behaved arrogantly, he was deposed from his royal throne and his glory was taken away from him. 21. He was also driven away from mankind, and his heart was made like that of beasts, and his dwelling place was with the wild donkeys. He was given grass to eat like cattle, and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven until he recognized that the Most High God is ruler over the realm of mankind and that He sets over it whomever He wishes. 22. Yet you, his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, even though you knew all this, 23. but you have exalted yourself against the Lord of heaven; and they have brought the vessels of His house before you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines have been drinking wine from them; and you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which do not see, hear or understand. But the God in whose hand are your life-breath and all your ways, you have not glorified. 24. Then the hand was sent from Him and this inscription was written out. 25. “Now this is the inscription that was written out: ‘MENĒ, MENĒ, TEKĒL, UPHARSIN.’ 26. This is the interpretation of the message: ‘MENĒ’— God has numbered your kingdom and put an end to it. 27. ‘TEKĒL’—you have been weighed on the scales and found deficient. 28. ‘PERĒS’—your kingdom has been divided and given over to the***

Medes and Persians.” - now look at this – *verse 29. Then Belshazzar gave orders, and they clothed Daniel with purple and put a necklace of gold around his neck, and issued a proclamation concerning him that he now had authority as the third ruler in the kingdom.*

What’s he doing? I’ll tell you – he’s defying everything he just heard from Daniel.

It’ll never happen! Okay, I can’t explain the hand part, but now that I’ve had time to get cleaned up and think about it – we’re not going to overthrown and I’m promoting you, Daniel. Look, we’re surrounded by a wall 80 feet thick; we have fresh food and water for 20 years or more; Cyrus has been camped out there by the Euphrates and he knows he can’t get in here . . . we’ve got iron gates that go down to the bottom of the Euphrates river.

I’m not going to repent or buy your stuff about your God who holds my life in his hand.

Nice try.

Drink up, boys . . . Daniel, whether you want it or not, enjoy your purple robe and gold necklace.

Herodotus informs us that the engineers of the Persian army had found a solution – and that night they diverted the Euphrates river into an old channel and having lowered the water level of the river – now below their waists – they waded under cover of darkness right through the waterways in the walls where the Babylonians in their overconfidence had not even bothered lowering the gates.

He writes that they came to the palace where dancing and reveling was taking place – in other words, the party started back up as soon as Daniel walked out – and the soldiers burst into the banquet room which conveniently for them held every military officer and every political leader in the kingdom of Babylon and they put everyone there to death.^{xvii}

The Bible records simply, in *verse 30, that same night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was slain.*

I want to close our study today with three quick, concise comments that translate all the way from Babylon to every kingdom and person today.

1. First, God’s rule may be invisible, but He still rules.

Paul preached the same thing to the proud Greeks living in Athens – Acts 17:26 – God has appointed the length of a nation’s existence and even their borders . . . so that they might seek after Him.

God established nations to seek after Him.

The nation that’s in deep trouble is any nation that instead of seeking Him, excludes Him . . . ignores Him . . . relegates Him to the sidelines.

But don’t be fooled . . . He still rules.

2. God’s judgments may be delayed, but He still judges.

Job in his wisdom said, *“Do you not know that the triumphing of the wicked is short, and the joy of the godless momentary? Though his loftiness reaches the heavens, and his head touches the clouds, he perishes forever . . . and people say, “Where is he [now]?” (Job 20:4-7)*

Belshazzar, you’re going to be here today and gone tomorrow . . . the handwriting is on the wall. Judgment is coming . . . repent . . . follow after the God of your father Nebuchadnezzar and, like him, turn your heart toward the God of Israel while you still have breath.

And Belshazzar effectively said, “No . . . I’d rather get on with the party.”

3. God’s offer may be ignored, but He still offers.

May I encourage you today, to accept His offer of salvation through Christ alone?

Your next meal may very well be your last.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 12/9/2012 by Stephen Davey.

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i Charles R. Swindoll, *Embraced by the Spirit* (Zondervan, 2011), p. 111

ii Frank E. Gaebeline, ed: *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Volume 7* (Zondervan, 1985), p. 71

iii Sharon Pace, *Daniel* (Smyth & Helwys, 2008), p. 159

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- iv Renald Showers, The Most High God (Friends of Israel, 1982), p. 49
- v John MacArthur, The Rise and Fall of World Powers (Word of Grace Communications, 1989), p. 91
- vi Showers, p. 51
- vii MacArthur, p. 89
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- viii John Phillips, Exploring the Book of Daniel (Kregel, 2004), p. 85
- ix Ibid, p. 86
- x Showers, p. 51
- xi Expositor's Bible Commentary, p. 70
- xii Showers, p. 52
- xiii Pace, p. 167
- xiv Adapted from Pace, p. 170
- xv Ibid, p. 171
- xvi Ibid, p. 172
- xvii Expositor's Bible Commentary, p. 75