

Like Father . . . Like Grandson

Daniel 5

Introduction

Turn in your Bible to Daniel chapter 5. In our last discussion, we spent our time in Daniel chapter 4 and I mentioned that some passages of scripture seem to preach themselves. Daniel chapter 5 is another one that does so. In fact, as I read this chapter, I scoot up to the edge of my seat in anticipation. Since it preaches itself, I will, as best I can, stay out of the way.

Daniel chapter 5 introduces us to another king, another wicked man, another feast. It seems that history is about to repeat itself and, in fact, it may do just that. Let me give some background that will be helpful, as we approach this passage.

The dynasty of Babylonian kings had erected a tremendous city called Babylon. The walls of this city stretched 350 feet into the air and were 87 feet thick. It was thought, by historians and even by men living during that time, that this city could not be overthrown.

To show off the magnificence of this city, four chariots, pulled by black stallions, would march abreast around the top of the massive city wall, as if to say, "We are the leader in the world." In fact, they were.

Outside the 87 foot thick city wall, was a 30 foot wide moat. This was to insure that no one could just come up and begin battering at the wall to crash their way in. This was impossible – the enemy would have to swim first.

There was also a canal that had been dug from the Euphrates River that stretched through the entire city of Babylon and went out the other end. It brought a continuous supply of water to this great city.

In that day, when a king wanted to overthrow another city, he would surround it. This was called besieging a city. It was effective because no food could be brought into the city and no one could get out of the city. Eventually, the enemy would starve that city out. Babylon, however, had 20 years of supplies stored away.

In Daniel chapter 5, the enemies of Babylon are outside the gate besieging the city. So audacious was

the king of Babylon that, while the Medes and the Persians were knocking at the gate, he threw a party. He even invited a thousand of his nobles to come and celebrate.

Belshazzar's Feast

Let us begin the story by looking at Daniel 5:1-4.

Belshazzar the king held a great feast for a thousand of his nobles, and he was drinking wine in the presence of the thousand.

When Belshazzar tasted the wine, he gave orders to bring the gold and silver vessels which Nebuchadnezzar his father [literally, his grandfather] 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.

Then 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.

They drank the wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone.

Imagine the blasphemy of this party. It was as if Belshazzar was sticking his face into that of the God of Israel, and saying, "Look, I am all powerful and I am even more powerful than You."

Within twenty-four hours, however, Belshazzar would be dead. As one commentator wrote, "His cup of iniquity was full and his doom was sealed."

Belshazzar's Fear

Notice what happens in Daniel 5:5-6.

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.

Then the king's face grew pale and his thoughts alarmed him, and his hip joints

went slack and his knees began knocking together.

The king was completely limp.

Imagine this blasphemous, arrogant king who, by the way, did not build Babylon. He was the grandson of a man who was a great builder and, as a result, he was, as it were, born with a silver spoon in his mouth in that he inherited this great city. This king had never worked a day in his life.

Imagine the boldness of this man to shake his fist in the face of God. Then, in the middle of all the revelry, in the middle of all the music and the dancing and all of that, a hand appears.

As I thought about this, I could not help but think back to some old black and white movies that were nothing more than a camera following some man's hand around town. Have you ever seen any of these old movies? The camera follows a man's hand as it goes down dark alleyways, as it climbs walls into the bedroom of some unsuspecting villain, and as it crawls up and over the bedpost and along the covers. By a trick of photography, the camera can follow this hand around town.

This hand at the king's feast was no trick. This was a hand only, from the wrist to the fingertips, which appeared at the wall. The band stopped playing. The dancing stopped. The revelry stopped. There was a silence so thick that it could have been cut. Then, the hand begins to write.

Notice the king's reaction in Daniel 5:7.

The king called aloud [shrieked] to bring in the conjurers, the Chaldeans and the diviners. The king spoke and said to the wise men of Babylon, "Any man who can read this inscription and explain its interpretation to me shall be clothed with purple and have a necklace of gold around his neck, and have authority as third ruler in the kingdom."

We have been introduced to this lousy group of men before, in Daniel chapters 2 and 4. They have always failed. The king keeps calling these guys, who are living off the kingdom, and bringing them in.

The king speaks the language of these men. He tells them, "If you can tell me what this writing means, I will give you purple and gold and I will make you a ruler in the kingdom."

What an incentive program this is! We would expect these men to at least make something up, since

the letters were written in Chaldean and they could read Chaldean. The problem was, however, not that they could not read it, but that they could not interpret it.

Notice Daniel 5:8.

Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the inscription or make known its interpretation to the king.

This was the jackpot of a chance for these men; it was the thing they had been waiting for. However, they could not read the writing with understanding.

We are told these men came and tried to interpret. I can imagine this in my mind, as I speculate on this scene. I bet they raced each other to that banquet room, trying to beat each other to be the first one in the door to read it, interpret it, and be wealthy. However, they rush into the banquet room and stop short as they look at the words and are then, speechless. They do not know what the words mean.

Continue to Daniel 5:9, which states the situation mildly.

Then King Belshazzar was greatly alarmed, his face grew even paler, and his nobles were perplexed.

Belshazzar's Future

Let us look at what happens at this moment. At this very moment, in walks the queen – perhaps the Queen Mother. We can only guess at this, but because she knew who Daniel was, and because she was not part of the banquet, there was a chance that she may have literally been his grandmother, the wife of Nebuchadnezzar, who had been converted. Notice what she says, in Daniel 5:10-12.

The Queen entered the banquet hall because of the words of the king and his nobles; the queen spoke and said, "O king, live forever! Do not let your thoughts alarm you or your face be pale.

"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. And King Nebuchadnezzar, your father, your father the king, appointed him chief of the magicians, conjurers, Chaldeans and diviners.

“This was because an extraordinary spirit, knowledge and insight, interpretation of dreams, explanation of enigmas and solving of difficult problems were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Belteshazzar. Let Daniel now be summoned and he will declare the interpretation.”

Notice the queen’s description of Daniel and that she refers to him as Daniel, his Hebrew name.

Let us stop at this point for a moment. Daniel, at the time of this occurrence, is probably between the ages of 85 and 90. Somewhere, between the point of his interpretation in chapter 4 and this part of chapter 5, he has aged 75 years. However, as we are about to be introduced to this aged man, notice that he has never changed. Daniel has not been tainted by his times. For 75 years he has stayed pure and clean.

I cannot help but apply this to our lives. Daniel was 13 years old when he was brought into this kingdom; when he was brought into this system in which there was no temple worship; no Sabbath observance. He probably did not have Old Testament writings. Yet, for 75 years this man stayed committed. I get away from church for two weeks and I turn into a pagan. Imagine that this man, after 75 years without any external influence to worship God, stayed committed. No one was pushing, no one was prodding, no one saying, “Okay, Daniel, time for the sacrifices,” yet he stayed pure.

Notice what happens in Daniel 5:13-15.

Then Daniel was brought in before the king. The king spoke and said to Daniel, “Are you that Daniel who is one of the exiles from Judah, whom my father the king brought from Judah?”

“Now I have heard about you that a spirit of the gods is in you, and that illumination, insight and extraordinary wisdom have been found in you.

“Just now the wise men and the conjurers were brought in before me that they might read this inscription and make its interpretation known to me, but they could not declare the interpretation of the message.”

I would imagine, in the corner of this banquet room, there were a bunch of embarrassed men. They were probably thinking, “Oh no, not again. Here

comes Daniel. We have to go through this embarrassment once again.”

Look at the last part of Daniel 5:16. The king gives Daniel the same incentive that he gave the others.

. . . Now if you are able to read the inscription and make its interpretation known to me, you will be clothed with purple and wear a necklace of gold around your neck, and you will have authority as the third ruler in the kingdom.

This implies quite a bit. Daniel had been promoted, probably to the locale of the third ruler. He had been put in charge of all of the nobles when Nebuchadnezzar had been converted. Evidently, between that period of time and the time of Belshazzar’s reign, he had been demoted and cast aside. Perhaps out of respect for his grandfather, Belshazzar had allowed Daniel to live. Now he is promising him a promotion back to the place he had once enjoyed. This sounds like something that would make us drool, does it not?

However, notice Daniel words, in Daniel 5:17.

Then Daniel answered and said before the king, “Keep your gifts for yourself or give your rewards to someone else; however, I will read the inscription to the king and make the interpretation known to him.”

Do you know what Daniel is saying? He is saying, “The truth is not for sale. I’m going to tell you the writing on the wall, but I can’t be bought. In fact, Belshazzar, you should have learned that from your grandfather, Nebuchadnezzar. I could not be bought. I didn’t have a price tag.”

However, Belshazzar had forgotten.

What an application this is for men and women of today who speak the truth of scripture – we do not have price tags. In the life of Daniel, they could change his culture, they could change his name, they could change his locale, but they could not change his character. He remained pure; he could not be bought. He says, “King, you just keep that junk for yourself. I don’t need it.”

Daniel briefly outlines Nebuchadnezzar’s past

Now Daniel will begin to review for Belshazzar, the history of his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar.

- First, Daniel talks about Nebuchadnezzar's progress, in Daniel 5:18.

O king, the Most High God granted sovereignty, grandeur, glory and majesty to Nebuchadnezzar your father.

- Then, Daniel talks of Nebuchadnezzar's power, in Daniel 5:19.

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.

- Daniel then talks about Nebuchadnezzar's pride, in Daniel 5:20.

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.

- Then, as we discussed in our last study, Daniel tells of Nebuchadnezzar's punishment, in Daniel 5:21. Note these words.

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.

Now, after this, we would think that Belshazzar would say, "Wow! I didn't know that. I didn't realize that my grandfather had been through this whole process. I had no idea."

Notice the next verse, however, in Daniel 5:22.

Yet you, his son [grandson], Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, even though you knew all this,

Belshazzar knew all that Daniel was telling him. He had observed it.

Belshazzar is exactly like us. We have perhaps heard truths of scripture for years and have seen it

work. Maybe we have seen our parents, our grandparents, or our friends around us living for Jesus Christ. We have observed it and heard things taught and preached, yet it does not make a dent.

The truth is that it is not what we know that makes a difference; it is what we practice with what we know. We have all of the facts; we are over exposed. At the Christian bookstore, there are books on every subject. We are over exposed, but like any poor snapshot, we are under developed.

Belshazzar was well aware of the situation. However, notice Daniel 5:23.

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 your ways, you have not glorified.

Now the king brought Daniel in to just interpret three words, and he gets a sermon. Note the courage of this man. Daniel is 90 years of age. He probably shuffled into the banquet room, stooped a little, with his clothes pulled around him, but his eyes were crystal clear. He goes up to the king and ignores the words for a moment, and points his finger and says, in effect, "King, God holds your breath in His hands. He has complete control of all your ways. Who do you think you are?"

Daniel interprets the writing on the wall

Three words were written on the wall and now Daniel will get to that. Look at Daniel 5:25.

Now this is the inscription that was written out: "MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN."

These are Chaldean words that perhaps the fingernail of the hand had scratched into the plaster of the wall. It would be written, in fact, with no vowels, only consonants sandwiched together.

Daniel read the words, "MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN," and then paused to let it sink in. The people could not understand that it meant calculated or numbered, "Numbered, numbered, weighed, divided."

- Daniel goes on to explain. Look at Daniel 5:26, as he begins.

This is the interpretation of the message: “MENE” – God has numbered your kingdom and put an end to it.

This word “MENE” was probably written twice for emphasis. In other words, “God has numbered the beginning of your kingdom and He has the number of the end of your kingdom, and your number is up.”

- Daniel continues with the interpretation, in Daniel 5:27.

“TEKEL” – you have been weighed on the scales and found deficient.

These scales were accurate, unlike the ones in our homes. We fudge and we roll the thing back a little, and then stand on it.

My dear mother – I cannot believe she does this to my father – keeps the scales rolled five pounds ahead so she can constantly stay after my father to lose five pounds. I do not think he knows to this day that she does this.

Our scales are inaccurate, but God’s are perfect. Daniel says, “God put you on the scale and weighed you, and you’re come up short; you’re found wanting.”

As Proverbs tell us,

. . . the Lord weighs the motives [of man]. (Proverbs 16:2)

- Then Daniel, to simply explain the meaning, uses “PERES,” the singular of the word “UPHARSIM,” in Daniel 5:28.

“PERES” – your kingdom has been divided and given over to the Medes and Persians.

“In fact, King, they are outside the gate.”

In England, there was a man who was called “the sleeping judge”. The reason for this name was that when he would sit on the bench, he would slouch in his chair as if he were sleeping. The evidence would be presented and he would appear to be drowsy and asleep. However, after all the witnesses had spoken and all the evidence had been presented, this judge would give the clearest judgment and prove that he, in fact, had never been asleep.

Perhaps Belshazzar thought that God, the God of Israel, was asleep. As a result, he thought he could

pour wine into the holy vessels, drink from them, and raise them in praise of his gods of gold and silver and wood. He thought he could blaspheme God’s name.

However, God is *not* asleep. In fact, Belshazzar, “He’s seen the evidence, and your kingdom has been taken away from you.”

Note carefully the words that one commentator writes. His last name is Strauss, and he is a converted Jew.

Empires do not stand by human might, man made machines and missiles. There is not a wall high enough or thick enough to prevent a nation from falling when God pronounces that nation’s doom. Now I know that the scoffers will jeer at what I have just said, but the true fact of it remains and it is corroborated by history. Possibly there were scoffers in Belshazzar’s palace who laughed that night as Daniel interpreted the writing. But the fact remains that on that night, Babylon went down in defeat. . . . There is a last night for every nation and there is a last night for every individual person. Every nation and every man is held accountable to God. And the Almighty holds an indictment against any and all who defy divine light and desecrate holy things. The handwriting is on the wall.

Notice Daniel 5:29.

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.

Imagine this scene. Daniel has just said, “You’re going to lose your kingdom. It’s going to be taken away.”

Think about this. What good is a promotion when the company has just declared bankruptcy?

The king robes Daniel in purple. What good is a medal of honor when your army has lost the war? Who cares?

I would imagine Daniel is looking at these things, thinking, “Didn’t you listen?! Didn’t you hear?!”

Belshazzar, evidently, did not listen. Unlike his grandfather, who heard the indictment, received the

punishment, and repented, Belshazzar ignored the indictment and would that night, in fact, be killed.

Belshazzar's Fall

Notice the finality of this chapter and the finality of Belshazzar's life, in Daniel 5:30-31.

That same night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was slain.

So Darius the Mede received the kingdom at about the age of sixty-two.

We could spend a lot of time talking about the courage of this gray-headed man, stooped with age, as he came before the king. Daniel went one step further, just as he did with Nebuchadnezzar, and just like you and I must do. We must take that extra step and confront people with their need for Christ because there is a last hour; there is a last night. We do not know that tonight may be our last night.

Application – Learning from the Past

Let me apply this passage in two ways. Learning from the past account of this man Daniel, I will give two principles.

1. First, to those who know Christ, personal integrity can survive ungodly circumstances.

In all that occurred, Daniel never rejected; never left the God of Israel. In fact, as we will learn in our next discussion, he prayed three times a day.

Let me read an account of a man who spent seven years in the POW camps of North Vietnam. He reminded me of Daniel. Listen carefully.

Junior officers remained in communal living status for the rest of their imprisonment, but the senior officers were eventually locked in what we called "building zero". When Lieutenant Colonel Reisner and I arrived in zero, we found small cells, appalling filth, and extreme heat. At least ten men were in irons, sometimes two on a bunk. They were not permitted out and had to perform all their bodily functions with their legs shackled to the slab. Lieutenant Colonel Reisner and I were not in irons, so we set about to begin communication, which was, of course, against the regulations, and raise the spirits of the men who suffered there.

Here in building zero, code named "Rawhide," I talked for the first time, through closed doors, to Colonel John Flynn, the senior prisoner in North Vietnam. He had been informed of the church in cell block seven and had decided for us to have church in building zero. Remember Rawhide imprisoned men in cells, isolated from each other, shackled in solitary confinement or small groups, but we were determined to have a church. We plotted carefully to clear the area and conduct the service.

This was the first service: Robbie Reisner prayed a magnificent prayer, I quoted, imperfectly but with enthusiasm, the 101st Psalm, Jack Finley, an Air Force lieutenant colonel, whistled a hymn for special music. I do not remember hearing anything so beautiful in my life as Jack's version of that great old song.

We worshiped regularly in Rawhide, in spite of barriers of brick and cement. In fact, we even formed a choir, with individual members separated by themselves.

I never stopped doing my daily routine. Some part of each day was filled with scripture recall. We would work together to find more. I imagine that Daniel and his three friends did the same thing. Every man found some scripture floating in his memory and contributed to the pile. Daily I would pray for my family and renew my commitment to Christ.

In prison, I firmly believed that there was a God who loved me and was working in my life. I cannot explain with reason or proof why my faith was central to my survival, but it was. Other men went in unbelieving and came out the same. I did not. And for me, my faith in Christ made all the difference.

Wow! I do not know what kind of difficult situation you are facing today, tomorrow morning, or this week, but God is in control and it is possible, even in the most ungodly or difficult circumstances, to keep your personal integrity.

2. Secondly, to those who do not know Christ, God's judgment never comes without warning.

In Genesis chapters 6-7, Noah preached for 120 years, and then God's judgment came to everyone in the known world. The people had 120 years to repent.

Nebuchadnezzar had a warning from God, and as a result, repented. Belshazzar also had a warning from God.

The greatest warning is the cross of Christ. It stands, not only as the greatest encouragement to those who know Him that we will never face judgment, but as the clearest warning of impending judgment that this world has ever been given. It stands, as it were, with arms stretched outward, like the song says, as if to say, "Whosoever will may come." Yet, it stands as a declaration that God's judgment *is* coming.

Belshazzar did not listen. Daniel stayed true.

Wherever you are today, if you are a believer, take heart. In the midst of all of the ungodliness, God is in control. In the midst of all of the difficulty, there is the Most High in heaven who reigns in the affairs of men.

Are you committed to God's plan? If you do not know Christ, let today be the day when you, unlike this king, submit and say, "Lord, I give You my life."