

Daniel Interprets The Handwriting on the Wall

Daniel 5

Daniel 5 - *“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.*

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.”* *“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.*

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 Writing on the Wall Explained

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.”*

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.

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.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.

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.”

Background Notes

If you were to ask the average person today for the meaning of the expression “the handwriting on the wall,” they would rightly tell you that it means that certain present events are a prediction of events to come in the future. For example, a student’s poor test scores are “the handwriting on the wall” for a failing grade in that course of study. A company’s repeated “no profit” financial reports are “the handwriting on the wall” for future bankruptcy. So everyone understands the expression, “the hand writing on the wall.” But now ask people, “Do you know where that expression comes from? The average person today doesn’t have any idea that “the hand writing on the wall” comes from the book of Daniel in the Bible!

King Belshazzar was the grandson of Nebuchadnezzar. The Hebrew word translated *father* in verse 11 (“*in the time of your father*”) can be translated either “father” or “grandfather.” Historical records reveal that Belshazzar’s father’s name was Nabonidus. Nabonidus married one of Nebuchadnezzar’s daughters. We know from the “Nabonidus Chronicle” that Belshazzar and his father co-reigned over the Babylonian Empire for some time, including the time period when Nabonidus was retired and living in Arabia. That’s why Belshazzar said that he would make the one who could interpret the inscription the **third ruler** in the kingdom, rather than the second ruler in the kingdom (v7).

Verse 1 tells us that King Belshazzar made a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles. Archaeologists have uncovered a large palace room in the ruins of ancient Babylon, and it is possible that this banquet took place in that very room. Belshazzar brought the gold and silver vessels that had been captured from the Temple of the Lord in Jerusalem to be used for his great banquet. At this feast the revelers drank wine from the consecrated Temple vessels and praised

foreign gods—pagan idols! These actions desecrated the sacred vessels that had been consecrated for the worship of the LORD alone, and blasphemed the One True God, the God of Israel.

It was at this point that the fingers of a man's hand suddenly appeared and began to write on the wall! Verse 6 indicates how frightened Belshazzar was by telling us that his knees knocked against each other! Have you ever been so scared that your knees literally shook and knocked together? That's pretty scared! Belshazzar called for all his wise men, conjurers, diviners and scholars to interpret the handwriting, but no one could tell him the meaning.

Doctrinal Points

1. Unbelievers cannot understand God's handwriting on the wall.

Verses 8-9: *"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."* So all the Babylonian wise men, conjurers, and diviners, although they knew Aramaic, could not determine the exact words -- let alone how the words went together for some kind of meaning.

This is also true today. The Bible is God's "handwriting on the wall"! God's plans for the future and future events are clearly written right here in the Bible. The Bible is written in English (and many other languages) so unbelievers can read it for themselves. However, unbelievers don't understand it, even though they can read the words. They can't interpret God's handwriting on the wall.

Remember what the Lord said to His disciples about why He used parables when He spoke to the crowds? He did this so believers would hear and understand, but unbelievers would hear and not understand. This is a divine principle! Unbelievers **cannot** understand God's handwriting on the wall.

2. Believers can understand God's handwriting on the wall.

Verses 10-31: *"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 Beltshazzar, now let Daniel be called, and he will give the interpretation."*

The queen mentioned in verse 10 was probably the Queen Mother, Belshazzar's mother and Nebuchadnezzar's daughter. Daniel would have been in his eighties by this time, and was probably retired, but the Queen Mother recalled how Daniel had interpreted Nebuchadnezzar's dream that he would be humbled and then restored again after seven years (Daniel 4). Verse 22 tells us that Belshazzar knew of this event and he probably also knew about Daniel, but apparently he had not met Daniel. Daniel was probably at least semi-retired, and perhaps since he was a Jew he was no longer in the political limelight as he had been during Nebuchadnezzar's time.

So Daniel was brought in before the king, and after fearlessly rebuking Belshazzar, he faithfully gave the meaning of the handwriting on the wall. In his rebuke he reminded Belshazzar of how God had humbled his grandfather, King Nebuchadnezzar. But even though Belshazzar knew about that terrible period in his grandfather's life, Belshazzar had dared to defy and blaspheme the One True God and desecrate the sacred vessels from His Temple.

So here is the message, said Daniel. MENE: God has numbered your kingdom and it is finished! TEKEL: You have been weighed in the balances and found wanting. Peres: Your kingdom has been divided and given to the Medes and the Persians.

Daniel correctly interpreted the handwriting on the wall. That very night Belshazzar was killed. The Babylonian Empire came to an end, and the Medes and Persians took over Babylon. Darius the Mede was probably an official under the Persian Emperor Cyrus, and he ruled over the province of Babylon for a short time. Daniel was given a high place in this new government (as we'll see in Daniel 6).

Daniel interpreted the handwriting on the wall correctly because God gave him the ability and the insight. Certainly we have a spiritual lesson here! Believers can understand "God's handwriting on the wall." Believers have the Holy Spirit dwelling within them to guide them to a proper interpretation of prophetic Scripture. Believers **can** understand God's handwriting on the wall!

Practical Application

Don't put your hopes in the rewards of this world!

We certainly see an illustration of that truth here in Daniel 5, don't we? Daniel had told King Belshazzar to keep Babylon's gifts for himself (v17), but Belshazzar gave them to Daniel anyway, and rewarded him with a proclamation that made Daniel the third ruler in the kingdom (v29).

Big deal! Those worldly rewards and honors lasted for only a few hours! What an illustration of the short-lived honors and rewards of this world! This world is passing away, and all of its rewards and honors are passing away with it. 1 John 2:17 tells us, *"The world and its desires are passing away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever."*

If the Lord wants you to have honor and rewards in this world, those honors will come your way, as in the case of Daniel. Notice that Daniel gave all the honor and credit to God. In addition, he didn't **crave** worldly honor—and neither should we! As the old saying goes, "Only one life, 'twill soon be past; only what's done for Christ will last!" Only what's done for Christ will have eternal value.

Now let me ask you -- where are you putting your hopes? Where are you earning your rewards? Where are you working for honor? Don't put your hopes in the rewards of this world!