

The Bible's Most Amazing Stories:
The Hand Writing on the Wall

Daniel 5

King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine with them. While Belshazzar was drinking his wine, he gave orders to bring in the gold and silver goblets that Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken from the temple in Jerusalem, so that the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines might drink from them. So they brought in the gold goblets that had been taken from the temple of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines drank from them. As they drank the wine, they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone.

Suddenly the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall, near the lamp stand in the royal palace. The king watched the hand as it wrote. His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his knees knocked together and his legs gave way. The king called out for the enchanters, astrologers and diviners to be brought and said to these wise men of Babylon, "Whoever reads this writing and tells me what it means will be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed around his neck, and he will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom."

Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or tell the king what it meant. So King Belshazzar became even more terrified and his face grew more pale. His nobles were baffled.

The queen, hearing the voices of the king and his nobles, came into the banquet hall. "O king, live forever!" she said. "Don't be alarmed! Don't look so pale! There is a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods in him. In the time of your father he was found to have insight and intelligence and wisdom like that of the gods. King Nebuchadnezzar your father—your father the king, I say—appointed him chief of the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners. This man Daniel, whom the king called Belshazzar, was found to have a keen mind and knowledge and understanding, and also the ability to interpret dreams, explain riddles and solve difficult problems. Call for Daniel, and he will tell you what the writing means."

So Daniel was brought before the king, and the king said to him, "Are you Daniel, one of the exiles my father the king brought from Judah? I have heard that the spirit of the gods is in you and that you have insight, intelligence and outstanding wisdom. The wise men and enchanters were brought before me to read this writing and tell me what it means, but they could not explain it. Now I have heard that you are able to give interpretations and to solve difficult problems. If you can read this writing and tell me what it means, you will be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed around your neck, and you will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom."

Then Daniel answered the king, "You may keep your gifts for yourself and give your rewards to someone else. Nevertheless, I will read the writing for the king and tell him what it means.

"O king, the Most High God gave your father Nebuchadnezzar sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendor. Because of the high position he gave him, all the peoples and nations and men of every language dreaded and feared him. But when his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory. He was driven away from people and given the mind of an animal; he lived with the wild donkeys and ate grass like cattle; and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, until he acknowledged that the Most High God is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and sets over them anyone he wishes.

"But you his son, O Belshazzar, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this. Instead, you have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven. You had the goblets from his temple brought to you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines drank wine from them. You praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or understand. But you did not honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways. Therefore he sent the hand that wrote the inscription.

"This is the inscription that was written: Mene , Mene , Tekel , Parsin. This is what these words mean: Mene: God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end. Tekel : You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting. Peres: Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.

Then at Belshazzar's command, Daniel was clothed in purple, a gold chain was placed around his neck, and he was proclaimed the third highest ruler in the kingdom. That very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain, and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom, at the age of sixty-two.

Daniel in Chapter 5

It's interesting that Daniel was not part of the initial group of party guests. At this point in his life, Daniel was an older man, having come to Babylon during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar's grandfather. At the time of this story, Daniel may have been in semi-retirement. Daniel 8:27 tells us that Daniel had been in the service of the government as recently as the third year of Belshazzar's reign (see 8:1), but had not experienced good health. Apparently, the king did not know who Daniel was, except possibly by reputation (see Dan. 5:13). But the king's mother, who was in all probability a daughter of Nebuchadnezzar, thought of Daniel as soon as she had heard what had happened in the banquet hall (Gleason Archer, *Expositor's Bible Commentary: Daniel*, Zondervan, 72).

The History Between Daniel 4 and 5

After Nebuchadnezzar died, a revolt put Nabonidus on the throne. He was not related to Nebuchadnezzar by blood, but apparently married a daughter of Nebuchadnezzar in order to legitimize his ascension to the throne. He was probably a member of the wealthy merchant class, therefore he would have been cordially supported by the commercial leaders. During the last ten years of his life, he seems to have spent most of his time in the city of Teima in the north of his empire (possibly for reasons of health), and left the central administration of his empire to the charge of his son Belshazzar in Babylon itself.

The Babylonian kings were eventually conquered by the Persians, which this story in Daniel 5 recounts. Babylon was considered impregnable because of its magnificent

fortifications. It was surrounded by a large moat, walls 330 feet high, and 100 strongly fortified gates. This fortification made the Babylonians think that they were immune to any outside attack. They had stored enough supplies to keep the city going for many years and no invader had gotten into Babylon in over a thousand years in Belshazzar's day. However, this arrogance proved fool-hardy since the fall of the city took place the day after Belshazzar's feast.

The Persians were able to enter the city by diverting the waters of the Euphrates to an old channel dug by a previous ruler. This reduced the water levels allowing the invaders to wade across the river at night and scale the banks of the river before the guards knew what was happening. Had the Babylonians been more watchful they could have prevented this attack (Archer, 69-70).

The Writing on the Wall

Before giving his interpretation, Daniel delivers a stinging rebuke to the king. Beginning with Samuel in his relation with Saul (cf. 1 Sam. 13, 15), a major role of the prophet has been to serve as the conscience of the king. While this role was primarily directed toward the Israelite king, Daniel took this opportunity in this story. Whenever the king fell to the temptation of power and forgot who the ultimate king was, the prophet was there to remind him (see also Nathan's relationship with David [2 Sam. 12], Elijah's with Ahab [1 Kings 18], and Jeremiah's with Jehoiakim [Jer. 36]). Now Belshazzar hears Daniel. He uses Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar's predecessor and by far superior, to redress the upstart, who is not only probably young and really the second in command to his father Nabonidus, but is also on the brink of disaster. Nebuchadnezzar was great, but when God confronted him, he ultimately acknowledged his subservience.

Belshazzar did not learn the lesson. He should have known better, thanks to the example of Nebuchadnezzar. Nonetheless, far from acknowledging his subservience to a greater power, Belshazzar went far beyond the sins of his predecessor by directly assaulting God through the profane and idolatrous use of the holy vessels of the temple. This admonition explains the presence of the hand and its inscription (Tremper Longman III, *The NIV Application Commentary: Daniel*, Zondervan, 141).

The writing on the wall consists of three nouns apparently written in Aramaic. The first word was repeated for emphasis. The nouns are units of money. But Daniel doesn't just see them as units of money. He interprets them as verbal forms. The three verbal forms may be translated as "numbered," "weighed," and "divided." Daniel uses the writing to make the statement that Belshazzar has been appointed, evaluated, and punished. The last word "Parsin" is changed by Daniel to "Peres." It is reminiscent of the name Persia, the nation which is about to devour the once mighty empire of Babylon. The wise men were probably unable to read the words because they were a series of jumbled consonants without vowels (Longman, 141-142).

Daniel's interpretation must have greatly disturbed Belshazzar, for it spelled his imminent doom. His natural response would have been to have the prophet executed on the spot for his bold condemnation of the king in front of the court. But perhaps the God-given authority Daniel spoke with awed Belshazzar, and he was afraid of incurring still greater wrath if he laid a hand on God's spokesman. Whatever his motives, the king fulfilled his promises to the letter,

bestowing the royal chain of gold on Daniel and having him proclaimed the third ruler in the kingdom. Possibly he thought that God might relent and not destroy Babylon if his prophet became prime minister (Archer, 75).

Belshazzar's Sin

What was the nature of Belshazzar's sin that evoked this shift and final judgment of God? Daniel himself analyzes it in his interpretation, but already at the beginning of the story we can see its major ingredients. 1) Belshazzar was consumed with his own pride. The reason that he threw the feast in the first place was for his own inflated ego. He wanted all eyes to see him. 2) Belshazzar expressed his sin in specific blasphemy. He mocked the God of Israel by drinking out of the utensils that were set aside for holy use in God's temple. It showed his superiority (in his own mind) to the God of Israel. 3) His pride caused him to be blind to the reality of his situation. He never considered that God would require his life that very night. He felt protected in the fortified city that he inhabited. He did not pay attention to the real threat outside his city walls and the threat of God's judgment that would be upon him (Sinclair Ferguson, *Communicator's Commentary: Daniel*, Baker, 111-112).

Belshazzar's Feast and Archeology

Archaeological excavations of the throne room have revealed that the descriptions of the room in Daniel 5 match the historical record. It was a 170-by-55 foot hall entered through three spacious courtyards that led from the entrance just inside the Ishtar Gate. The details found in the Daniel narrative match what archaeologists have found (John Walton, Mark Chavalas, and Victor Matthews, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary, IVP*, 738).

Home Group Questions

1. What sins does Daniel charge Belshazzar with?
2. What examples from this chapter demonstrate that Belshazzar's primary sin was pride?
3. Read Luke 12:16-21. What parallels do you see between the rich man in the parable and Belshazzar? What does this story teach us about ourselves?
4. How does pride blind us from our sin?
5. How does pride and being self-centered effect our relationships?
6. What can we do to see pride in our own life?

Questions for Personal Application

7. What do you need to do to eliminate pride from your life? How is pride effecting your relationship with God?