Westlake Church Lausanne

The Writing on the Wall
Daniel 5

Now imagine a football team facing relegation from the league – and they've just lost again. Or imagine a politician, whose poll ratings are heading south. And in response you might say, 'well, if you ask me, the writing's on the wall; it's as good as over.'

Well, this morning we're going to see where that expression comes from, because Daniel 5 deals with the night it all comes crashing down, and the Babylonian Empire falls to the Medes and Persians.

But in telling us the story of a fall of an empire, Daniel makes it very personal. And it's the story of human pride. And if, as we've seen, Babylon was founded on men seeking to find meaning in life apart from God, then it's sadly fitting that it all ends with a man turning his back on God.

But before we read the chapter, some background. King Nebuchadnezzar died in 562BC and was eventually succeeded by Nabonidus. But Nabonidus spent his last 10 years in Arabia, leaving his son, Belshazzar, to rule Babylon. So by the time of chapter 5 Daniel is an old man, in his eighties. So if you get nothing else out of this morning, this can be a reminder that whatever your age, your best years of service may yet be ahead of you.

Daniel 5:1-31

Sacrificing the Sacred

Look at v1, 'King Belshazzar made a great feast for a thousand of his lords and drank wine in front of the thousand.' So over a thousand of Babylon's elite are present at this feast, and all eyes are on Belshazzar as he stands up and starts drinking. What do you think he's trying to do? Is he trying to prove how hard he is? How macho? How much alcohol he can consume? You see, Nebuchadnezzar, his ancestor, had much to be proud of, didn't he: he had built Babylon into a glorious city, and extended her empire. But Belshazzar, he was there because daddy had put him there. And he had no achievements to earn the allegiance of others. So all it seems he can do is to make himself the centre of attention, and say, 'look how hard I am'.

But then look what he does: verse 2, 'Belshazzar, when he tasted the wine, commanded that the vessels of gold and silver that Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken out of the temple in Jerusalem be brought, that the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them.'

Now, do you remember meeting these vessels before, back in chapter 1? And how Daniel began this book by telling us about these vessels looted from the temple and placed in the treasury of Nebuchadnezzar's gods. Well, here they are again, taking centre stage for the final drama of the Babylonian empire.

So why does Belshazzar ask for them? Is it just about aesthetics, and he wants the best silver for his feast? There's more than that, isn't there. Because he and everyone else in the room would know that if you take something dedicated to a god and you abuse it, you're making some kind of statement, aren't you? And this is Belshazzar's way of saying, I care nothing for this God. I'm greater than this nonsense.

When I was at college there was a time when as a Christian Union we enjoyed some success in getting the gospel out to our fellow students; and as a result there was something of a backlash, and some fairly unpleasant posters were put up, insulting Christianity by using pornographic images. It was a deliberate attempt to mock God.

And that's what Belshazzar does here. Because whilst Nebuchadnezzar conquered God's people, he still treated these vessels with respect. But here is Belshazzar saying, I can go further than that. Nebuchadnezzar may have taken them, but I can take them and abuse them. And of course, today, we see the same kind of things happening within our own culture, don't we: things that were once considered no go areas, things that once would not be spoken against, are publically ridiculed. So, when it comes to culture, we too have moved from Nebuchadnezzar to Belshazzar. From respect to ridicule. And in a deliberate act of sacrilege, Belshazzar goes for the shock factor, because it's not so much the vessels he's treating with contempt, as God himself.

But did you notice the context in which he does this? It's one of idolatry. Verse 4: 'They drank wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood and stone.' But if that seems shocking, it's not so alien to today, is it? You see, in Romans 1 the apostle Paul says that we are all guilty of failing to honour God as God, and instead we exchange Him for something else. And just because our Western culture has turned it's back on the God of the Bible, it doesn't mean we have turned our back on worship, it's just that what we worship, what we lift our glasses to, has changed. And we've exchanged God for other gods, for other things that we have made the ultimate. So whilst Belshazzar might lift these temple vessels to toast stone idols, today society gives itself to our own 21st century idols, of personal freedom, or money, or sex, or power.

But ask yourself, why is Belshazzar doing all this in the first place? Why the need to prove he's a man like this? Well, we know from history that camped outside the city walls, is the army of the Medo-Persian empire. So in front of all his leaders, this is Belshazzar's show of defiance: 'I'm untouchable. I fear nothing and nobody.' And when you fear nothing, nothing is sacred.

So, whether or not he was drunk, the real issue is not so much alcohol as arrogance.[1] And that's a dangerous place to be in. Because when we harden our hearts to God, when we refuse to fear him, we might think we're so strong, but in reality we're more vulnerable than ever.

So, imagine you were reading this for the first-time, wouldn't you be thinking, 'Is God going to let this pass, and let him get away with it?' And maybe as you seek to stay faithful to God in a rapidly changing world, you have the same kind of questions. You see God being mocked, or evil and injustice seeming to triumph, and you wonder, is there ever going to be a reckoning?

Well, Belshazzar is about to encounter the God he does not believe in.

The God Who is There

Put yourself in such a banquet. You're enjoying the food and wine, you're trying to talk to the person next to you, when this spectral hand appears: v5, 'Immediately the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall.' How would you have felt?

How does the king feel? The man who supposedly fears nothing is terrified isn't he. Verse 6, 'The king's colour changed, and his thoughts alarmed him; his limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together.' But why is he terrified? What's he reacting to? Well, he has just discovered that the God he does not believe in, or fear, is the God who is there.

So what does he do? He needs answers, doesn't he, he needs to know what all this means, so where does he turn? In his spiritual emptiness he turns to that which is spiritually empty, and he asks his enchanters and wise men and astrologers to help him. And today, whilst society may be turning it's back on Christianity, the questions that nag away at us, the questions we need answers to, questions about the meaning of life, or about our significance in the universe, or about suffering and death and what lies beyond, have not gone away. And like Belshazzar, we too need answers, but like him we can also look in the wrong places. Because scientific materialism, or secularism, or atheism, can never give you the answers to meaning that you're looking for, can they? Or the inner peace we're all searching for.

But then the queen mother hears the commotion, enters the hall, and tells Belshazzar to calm down, which is what mothers are supposed to do! And she tells the king who he should ask: v11, "There is a man in your kingdom in whom is the spirit of the holy gods". In other words, 'this is the man you need. A man in contact with the other world this hand has come from.' And if you and I are to find answers to life and meaning, we all need someone like that, don't we? Not

[1] DR Davis 70.

someone telling us to calm down! But someone who knows what they're talking about, someone in contact with this other world, someone who has been the other side of death and come back, who knows what lies beyond. And only Jesus can be that someone, because he's the only one who has passed through death, the unknown that we fear, and come back to show us the way.

But look how the queen describes Daniel: v12 'Daniel, whom the king called Belteshazzar.' So, after 60 or more years of exposure to Babylonian culture, Daniel's is still Daniel. His identity as a child of God and a member of God's people has not been smothered.

But why wasn't he there when all the other wise men got called? Because he wasn't skiing in the Alps, was he? And why does the queen mother have to remind the king of his existence? Has he retired? Maybe, but given he's back in service in chapter 6, maybe not. Or maybe this man who had faithfully served Nebuchadnezzar had been sidelined or even dismissed by the kings who followed.

Whatever it was, the fact that Daniel was overlooked tells you that you can be a person of integrity, you can spend your life working for the welfare of the city and seeking to serve God in your generation, and still end up being sidelined, or ignored, or despised by civil leaders and the cultural elite. And if Daniel's life tells you that – so too does Jesus: that faithfulness and obedience are not the same as popularity and success.

After all, did you notice the difference in the way the queen talks of Daniel and the way the king does? The queen talks of Daniel in glowing terms, but the king subtly puts him down, and in v13, he calls him 'one of the exiles of Judah', one of those losers. And whilst the queen knows Daniel can help, the king questions it, v16, 'now if you can'… if you are able, which I doubt, then make this writing known to me. And the king's attitude tells us two things. Firstly, as you seek to live out your faith in a changing world, don't be surprised if you face put downs for being a Christian. You're only experiencing what God's people have always experienced. But secondly, Belshazzar doubts a Jewish loser can help him. And yet, that is exactly how God helps us. It's through the seeming defeat of the cross, as Jesus, a seeming loser, is hung up in disgrace, that God stoops down to help us. The seeming foolishness and weakness of God always humbles our pride.

But then look Belshazzar offers Daniel for an answer? Verse 16, "You shall be clothed with purple and have a gold chain around your neck and shall be third ruler in the kingdom." And purple was the royal colour, so to be able to wear it was a mark of royal favour. It told everyone else, 'I'm in the in-crowd.' To wear a gold chain said you had rank, you had status. And to be third in the kingdom was to be next to the king and his father. So Belshazzar thinks he can buy Daniel. And the hard truth is that sometimes seemingly good people can be bought, can't

they? Sometimes, to be in the in-crowd, or to get status, or power does appeal, and the danger is we compromise to get them.

And so standing in that banquet hall are two very different men. One young, one old. One drunk. One sober. One with power. One sidelined. But which of these two are you impressed by? Who do you want to be like? How do you want to end your days? And if it's Daniel, and you want your faith to endure like his, then recognize the temptations of fame or power or acceptance, and resist them.

Because look how Daniel responds to the king's offer: with withering brevity: v17, "Let your gifts be for yourself, and give your rewards to another." So here was a man prepared to accept the pressure and responsibility of high office – but he is not prepared to be bought. He is not prepared to be enriched by a man who places no value on that which is of supreme value. Because when you know that God is there, sometimes the only right answer is 'no' and there are places you refuse to go, and money you refuse to take.

And before he interprets the writing on the wall, Daniel reminds Belshazzar of Nebuchadnezzar's story. And then Daniel gives it to him straight: Verse 22, "And you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this." So, it wasn't that Belshazzar didn't know the story, it was that he didn't care.

And so in v24 Daniel says "then from his presence" the presence of this God whom Belshazzar has treated with contempt "the hand was sent." And the words it wrote were *Mene, Mene, Tekel, Parsin*, in Aramaic consonants. And by default those words would have been read as nouns, which would have given a sequence of decreasing weights: mina, mina, shekel, half-shekel. So, imagine you're at that banquet and this hand starts writing the words tonne, tonne, kilogram, gram. Or pound, pound, shilling, pence; Or dollar, dollar, dime, cent. What would you think? You know it's got something to do with values, but value of what?

So Belshazzar has come face to face with the fact that there is another realm that cares about values; that there is a source of ultimate values. And that realm, this other kingdom, has broken into his world. No wonder he is scared.

But that was just the surface meaning. And Daniel saw deeper. And by adding different vowels to the consonants these nouns became verbs: *Numbered, numbered, weighed, divided*. As Daniel says in v26-28: "God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end… you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting… your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians."

So, were these words to do with values? Yes, they were an evaluation of Belshazzar the man. The man who did what so many tragically do today, and valued God at zero, was now weighed and valued by God, and found wanting.

And that is a devastating critique. You see, imagine Belshazzar physically in the scales of judgment. And then put all his power, all his wealth, all his women, all his drinking or sexual prowess, in the scales with him. Can they shift those scales in his favour? No.

And Daniel wants his first readers and you and me to remember, that when we see those opposed to God and godliness seemingly winning the day, and we're tempted to take what they offer, that one day there will be a reckoning.

But instead of imaging others in those scales, what about you? What will shift those in your favour? What are you hoping will shift them? As Paul says in Romans 3:23, 'for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God'. We have all been weighed in the scales and found wanting. But what follows Romans 3:23? Answer: Romans 3:24! 'and [we] are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.'

You see, why do you think John Newton, the former slave trader, wrote the words of the hymn Amazing Grace? Because he discovered that grace is amazing. And it's amazing because Jesus saves us from being weighed and found wanting. Because Jesus, the only one who has been weighed and found *not* wanting, takes all our sin and failure upon himself, and puts all his righteousness upon us, and the scales move in our favour.

But what does Belshazzar do in response? He carries on regardless and promotes Daniel. And so now there are two rulers of Babylon present in the room, and they have almost identical names, Belshazzar and Belteshazzar, but their values and world-views are poles apart. One of them has rejected God and is about to pay the ultimate price. The other had made the decision, years before, to refuse to bend the knee or to taste the king's food. And he would risk everything rather than compromise – because God who is there is his supreme value. And as these two men stand there it's as if this scene represents the final outcome of the two paths they've chosen. One, the sham of power and plenty and with it, a moral emptiness, and it's all about to fall apart; and the other integrity and faithfulness.

And by the next day, this banquet hall would be eerily empty, as the city was conquered by the Medes and Persians and Belshazzar was killed. The cost of rejecting God is always disastrous. But the outcome for those who trust him is very different.

The Finger that Writes

This is not the first, or the last time that the divine hand writes, is it? There were the 10 commandments, engraved by the finger of God on two tablets of stone. But then you get to the New Testament, and in John 8, a woman has been caught in adultery and the religious leaders haul her before Jesus, to condemn her. And

is response Jesus does two things: first he says to the men that he who is without sin can throw the first stone at her, and then he kneels down and starts to write in the dirt. What was he writing? Because as he writes, her accusers begin to drift away – beginning with the oldest. So what did the finger of God write that day in the sand? Well, in Jeremiah 17:13 the Lord says that he will write in the dust of the earth those who have turned away from him. So as these men accuse this women, as they appeal to the Law of Moses – written by the finger of God, listing her sin and moral failures, what if Jesus began to list out their names, and against each name list their sins and their moral failures, writing them in the dust of the earth? Because, if that was you or me, it wouldn't make pleasant reading, would it? And it wouldn't take long before you think, I'm not sure I want to hang around here. So, just like Belshazzar, they thought they had nothing to fear, until Jesus began to write. And before him none of us can stand. The writing's on the wall for all of us.

But whilst these men can't get away from Jesus, and his writing finger, quickly enough, the woman stays. Don't you think that's remarkable? She is no less guilty, and probably feels no less guilty than the men. So, why didn't she escape whilst she could? Why did she stay? Because she knew that though his gaze penetrated every layer of her heart, to be with Jesus was to be safe.

And in place of condemnation he offers her grace and the chance to repent. And when you know you need Jesus' grace, and you receive it, and you repent, the finger of God continues to write – not on tablets of stone, not on Babylonian walls, not in Jerusalem's sand – but on your heart, as Paul says in 2 Cor 3:3 – as the Spirit writes the letter of Christ, on repentant and believing hearts.

And here in chapter 5 we see Belshazzar drinking the cup to his doom. But Jesus, drank the cup to rescue us from ours. The cup of God's wrath, that was ours to drink. And though he now reigns in the highest place, his hands still bear the mark of the nails. So the hands of God don't write or speak condemnation over you any longer, they speak grace and forgiveness and acceptance and welcome. And it's in his hands, in his presence, that you're safe.

And because of Jesus, we get to take part in a much better feast than Belshazzar's. We can come to the King's table, and break bread and drink wine in remembrance of the one who died for our sin, not for his own, to rescue us from the scales, and in hope of the greatest feast yet to come.