

“GOD’S GRAFFITI.”

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Scripture Texts: Daniel 5:1-12

Introduction.

The book of Daniel is a picture of the ongoing conflict between the kingdom of the world and the kingdom of God. This spiritual conflict is all around us, Satan and his minions are always a threat.

This chapter is meant to contrast the chapters before. The two proud kings could not be more different. Nebuchadnezzar was famous for his military feats and victories, for his architectural accomplishments and making Babylon great. Belshazzar was known for his wild parties.

In the previous chapters God was exceedingly patient with Nebuchadnezzar, long suffering. God displayed much grace in his dealings with him. But with Belshazzar, God dealt with him quickly. He is suddenly cut off.

What Nebuchadnezzar did with the final word from God and what Belshazzar did with the final word from God were completely different. For some the Word is the fragrance of life and for others the same Word is the fragrance of death (II Corinthians 2:14-16).

We don't know how much time passed between chapters four and five, at least twenty years if not more. There are many long periods of silence in Scripture but we should never assume God is not present and working. When God seems silent or absent, He is actually as present and active as ever.

When we think we are on the sidelines, God is very much in the game. In the words of a great English poet, “They also serve who but stand and wait.”

God is sovereign over every period of our personal lives, even and especially in those quiet seasons of preparation or training. The seventy years of Jewish exile is coming to an end. This story like all the others in Daniel is meant to build up the faith of the readers, Jewish exiles, and build up their fear of God.

King Belshazzar of Babylon, vs. 1.

King Belshazzar appears at the beginning of chapter five without introduction. We are given no historical or biographical information. He appears out of nowhere and will disappear at the end of the chapter.

Remember the book of Daniel is not being written to give us a history of Babylon or a chronology of historical events. It's being written to strengthen the faith of Jewish exiles.

Here is what is known about Belshazzar.

Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 BC after reigning 43 years. His son Evil-Merodach followed him for a year or two before being assassinated by a brother-in-law, who took over for four years before being killed by his own son, who himself was killed a month or two later by Nabonidus, who managed to remain king from 555 to 539.

He was known for trying to replace Babylon's chief god, Marduk, with the moon god, Sin. He was very unpopular with all the Babylonian clergy, so he set up residence 500 miles away from Babylon and left his oldest son, Belshazzar, there to rule things in his absence. So Belshazzar was sort of a vice-king or co-king. He would end up being the last king of Babylon. He ruled from 553-539.

This arrangement explains the strange bargain he made when he offered not the second place in the kingdom, but the third place in the kingdom to whomever can interpret the writing on the wall. The offer was to make that person part of a triumvirate with Belshazzar and his father.

In terms of the chronology of Daniel, we jump from the last years of Nebuchadnezzar to the last day of the reign of Belshazzar, some twenty years or so later.

But why is Nebuchadnezzar called his father? Father in Scripture can refer to more distant relatives or ancestors, like a grandfather or great grandfather. The Jews often refer to Abraham as their father.

At the very time of this story, Belshazzar's father, Nabonidus, was leading troops in a battle against the Medes and Persians. Much of the Babylonian empire had fallen, only Babylon itself remained. Babylon is at war, his father is out fighting, and he is in the palace throwing a huge party.

This is sort of one of those "mean while back at the palace" Belshazzar is having a party. It reminds us of another time in Scripture where a story begins "in the spring of the year when kings went to war" while David's generals were leading troops in battle, David was back at his palace doing what he should not have been doing. Sin and death resulted from that story as well.

Consider the hubris of carelessly celebrating a banquet while Babylon was under siege by the Medes and Persians. King Belshazzar felt totally secure. He trusted in his huge fortified walls and superior gates. He trusted his storehouses of food and treasures. But Babylon fell to the Medes and Persians that very night.

Isaiah spoke of it two hundred years earlier in a prophecy.

Isaiah 47:10-11 You felt secure in your wickedness; you said, “No one sees me”;
your wisdom and your knowledge led you astray,
and you said in your heart, “I am, and there is no one besides me.”
11 But evil shall come upon you, ...
and ruin shall come upon you suddenly, of which you know nothing.

Belshazzar is the OT equivalent to the rich fool in Jesus’ parable who thought his life and riches would last a very long time and he had no worries. But Jesus said that very night his soul would be required of him and he would be before God to give an account.

Our culture is doing the same thing, it is impervious to the danger of sin and unrepentance. We are amusing ourselves to death, we live for entertainment and pleasure, for comfort and ease. We refuse to think about eternal things, spiritual realities and the consequences of sinful actions.

Matthew 24:37-39 For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 38 For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, 39 and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.

Belshazzar’s Banquet, vss. 1-4.

What was Belshazzar’s sin that it should invite such an immediate judgment from God? In simplest terms we could say, wine, women and song, or wine, women and worship.

First, he puts on a drunken display in front of at least a thousand of his subjects. At Babylonian feasts the king would sit up on a raised platform on his throne apart from his guests. The wine flowed freely and in huge quantities.

It was a pathetic display of misguided manhood, without restraint, or self-control.

Second, in this condition inhibitions leave and people start doing more and more brazen things. He demands that those holy Jewish vessels be brought in to serve more wine. He loses his sense of what is decent or respectful and does something even Nebuchadnezzar didn’t do.

He knew the vessels had been in the Jewish temple. He knew he was disrespecting those people and their God. These sacred vessels had been carefully dictated by God as to how they were to be made and for what purpose. They had been dedicated, consecrated and set apart for a sacred use.

Does God care about stuff taken from a temple He allowed to be destroyed? Yes, in the sense that Belshazzar is insulting and abusing the name of God, whom he believes to be nothing and will do nothing. He is acting in a manner that says God has no reality or power.

Contempt for God's stuff is really contempt for God Himself. That's the message that is coming through here. This wasn't just a drunken party, it was blasphemy, it was profane.

It might be a bit like someone stealing our communion set and taking down to a bar for everyone to drink from.

Galatians 6:7-8 Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. 8 For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption.

Third, being blinded by riches and power and deaf to the truth, he led his subjects in idolatrous worship of idols, of gods made by human hands out of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood and stone (vs. 4).

They didn't leave any out, they wanted to cover all the bases. Note the irony and folly of using gold and silver vessels to worship idols of gold and silver.

Hosea 8:4 With their silver and gold they made idols for their own destruction.

Wickedness is heaped on wickedness, drinking excesses of wine out of holy consecrated vessels belonging to God, in order to glorify pagan gods. Belshazzar was eating and drinking judgment on himself. This blasphemy was deeper than Nebuchadnezzar's sin of pride.

God's Graffiti, vss. 5-12.

Suddenly the party was crashed and "the king's color changed, and his thoughts alarmed him; his limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together. The king called loudly ..."

What happened to cause such a reaction from the king sitting high and mighty upon his throne?

Four words appear from a disembodied, human hand. Just four words suddenly changed everything. He sobered up real fast, but his fear was not the fear that led to repentance.

All is well until the divine breaks into our world and upsets our world and our conscience is pricked, our peace is disturbed, our bubble is popped and we are awakened from our self-imposed slumber, and we are forced to acknowledge there is more to this life than just us.

The almighty God can do the smallest thing and nothing is ever the same again. The prophet Nathan spoke just four words to King David that shattered his conscience and exposed everything, "You are the man."

Augustine heard a child chanting three words that pricked his conscience and changed the course of his life, "Take and read" and he opened up the Bible to Romans and started reading.

Martin Luther struggling in his study late at night saw just six words in the first chapter of Romans, “the righteous shall live by faith” and the greatest revival since the time of Jesus broke out, we call it the Reformation.

God has a way of interrupting our lives and shaking us out of complacency and bringing us back to reality.

Have you had a handwriting on the wall experience? Have you had just a few words penetrate to the joints and marrow, to the depths of your soul? Has your conscience been pricked and brought you to your knees in repentance or humility or worship?

Is there anything in the Word of God than makes you tremble?

Think about Belshazzar’s spiritual condition. The Word of God comes to him and it is only foolishness to him. He doesn’t recognize the hand of God in his life. Remember Paul’s warning:

I Corinthians 2:14 The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

In times of terror and fear and confusion, people often turn to religion, or some form of it.

Out of his own spiritual poverty he calls for all the king’s horses and all the king’s men. And they are clueless as well, just as spiritually bankrupt. Not only is the king spiritual blind, but he has surrounded himself with spiritual blind people.

The best and smartest and wisest and most trained experts in all of great Babylon had nothing to offer. Even when the king held out a huge financial incentive. He relies on the wisdom of the world but it cannot explain the spiritual realm.

This is why the wisdom of man is so foolish in the face of all creation. They start with no God and then try to explain everything that God created. They actually believe that everything came out of nothing.

The wisest men of our day cannot read God’s Word or figure it out. God has written this book with His own finger and so many can’t figure it out. They have forgotten God and God’s servants, God’s messengers, the Daniels among us.

We get just a few magazines at our house, two of them are Time and World, two opposing worldviews, two completely different explanations of what is going on in our world. Time is secular humanism and doesn’t have a clue what the hand of God is doing in our world. It sees handwriting but offers explanations that have no connection to spiritual realities, in fact it mocks any suggestions that Christians offer.

We don't need more experts, we don't need more TV analysts, we don't need more scientists, we need people who know God, and fear the Lord. Who have you surrounded yourself with, what voices do you listen to, where do you get your wisdom?

Implications and Application.

What a gift is the written Word of God and the eyes to see it and minds to understand it. How many countless sinners through the ages have read what God has written and repented?

How many sinners have read or heard read or heard preached God's Word and cried out, "What must I do to be saved?" "Have mercy on me a sinner, O God."

May the Word of God still burn in our hearts, may it still stir us to holy action and obedience.

Our truth and hope comes from another divine intervention, a Messiah, a Savior, a messenger from heaven to wake us up to the truth of our situation, to the blasphemy of our lives, to the way we are using a holy vessel, our bodies made to be temples of the Holy Spirit.

Do we treat the things of God casually or with little or light respect? Do we think the things of God are no more important than anything else in life we like or enjoy?

God has no less care or concern today for the sacred things, for the things He has named with His name and appointed as means of grace.

Is the way we handle Holy Scripture a reflection of our attitude toward God?

Is the manner in which we come to the table a reflection of our attitude toward our Savior?

Is the manner in which we treat each other a reflection of what we think about the image of God in each of us?

Is the manner in which we treat our bodies a reflection of what we think about our bodies being a temple of the Holy Spirit?

Jesus is God's handwriting on the wall of the world for all to see. May we be Daniels who see and understand. And may we be Daniels who help others to see and understand.