

Lessons from Daniel 5

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In this chapter the last Babylonian king appears: Belshazzar. In the past, critics had considered the book of Daniel to be historically unreliable. At that time not a single historian nor other material was known to mention Belshazzar. Then the cylinder of Cyrus and a number of clay tablets appeared and confirmed that Belshazzar had lived. He was co-regent with his father Nabonidus. While Nabonidus stayed outside the city of Babylon, Belshazzar was ruling in Babylon, and it is with Belshazzar that Daniel came in contact. So the book of Daniel is reliable. The Babylonian kings after Nebuchadnezzar were Amel-Marduk (Evil-Merodach), Nergal-Sharezer (Neriglissar), Labashi-Marduk, Nabonidus, and Belshazzar.

I. Discussion of the Chapter

A. The Banquet

vv. 1–4 *Although the Medes and Persians besieged the city, a huge banquet was held at the Babylonian court. What was the problem with the banquet?*

- The attendant guests and court officials got terribly drunk.
- They lost their sense of reality, and the group ignored the impending danger of the siege.
- The party desecrated the holy vessels of the Jerusalem temple (cf. 2 Chron 36:18–21).
Nebuchadnezzar insisted on not blaspheming the God of the Hebrews (Dan 3:29).
- Idols were worshipped.

What are the effects of alcohol?

- It decreases inhibitions—for example, with regard to sexuality—and encourages foul speech and blasphemy.
- The capacity of reaction declines.
- Self-control diminishes.
- One's health suffers. In some cases, permanent damage is done.

Obviously Daniel himself abstained from consuming alcohol (Dan 1:8). The Bible warns us against drinking alcohol (see Prov 23:31–35). But even if people consume alcohol and are intoxicated, they are still responsible for their actions. So was Belshazzar.

“His father Nebuchadnezzar”—In Scripture the term “father” also refers to grandfather, ancestor, and even predecessor. Jesus is called “Son of David,” although many generations had passed between him and David. Nebuchadnezzar was quite likely Belshazzar’s grandfather.

B. The Writing on the Wall

v. 5 Praising the Babylonian gods meant at the same time to blaspheme the God of the Jews. God reacted immediately. Fingers wrote on the wall. However, God does not always react immediately. In some cases the judgment comes later—sometimes only at the final judgment.

Which examples come to mind?

- Immediate judgments: Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5), Achan (Josh 7), and the man collecting wood on the Sabbath (Num 15:32–36)
- Later judgments: David and the consequences of his adultery (2 Sam 12–18), Pilate’s banishment, Moses’ death outside the Promised Land (Deut 34:4)
- Final judgment: the murderers of Jesus (Rev 1:7; 20)

v. 6 *What might Belshazzar have felt and thought when he saw the handwriting on the wall?*

- Horror and fear
- Guilt
- Impotence

He must have been almost paralyzed, and his legs trembled.

vv. 7–8 Belshazzar turned to his astrologers and wise men for an explanation of the phenomenon. He promised the third position in the kingdom to the one able to interpret the writing. (While Pharaoh promised Joseph the second position in the kingdom, Belshazzar was only able to offer the third position. As co-regent with his father he himself was the second ruler.) Again the wise men and magicians proved their inability to interpret divine messages.

v. 9 *Why did Belshazzar become more terrified when the wise men had no interpretation?*

- It may have dawned on him that this was a supernatural event.
- Obviously, he expected some kind of disaster.
- Possibly he feared a god that could harm him.

The other dignitaries and guests were also affected.

C. Daniel is Introduced

vv. 10–12 *The queen or queen mother encouraged Belshazzar and pointed him to Daniel. Why was Daniel not one of the wise men brought to the king earlier? According to Daniel 2:48 he was their chief administrator.*

- It is quite likely that he no longer held that position.
- He may have no longer served at the royal court.
- Nebuchadnezzar's successors pursued different political goals. They may have known about how God revealed Himself to Nebuchadnezzar but rejected God. So they most likely also rejected Daniel. This may have been a reason why under the Medes and Persians Daniel quickly reacquired a high position.

D. Belshazzar and Daniel

v. 13 Again Daniel was being discriminated against. In spite of the high position under his grandfather, Belshazzar addressed him as a prisoner.

vv. 14–16 The king admitted his helplessness and mentioned Daniel's wisdom. Again he promised a reward.

E. Daniel's Speech and Interpretation of the Handwriting

v. 17 *Why did Daniel reject the reward?*

- As a prophet of God he did not work for pay (cf. Micah 3:11–12).
- Belshazzar had blasphemed God.
- Daniel knew about the fall of Babylon. A high office in the Babylonian kingdom could have been dangerous.
- He did not want to become selfish.

vv. 18–23 *Daniel was again very courageous and willing to speak his mind. Of what does he accuse Belshazzar?*

- That he did not learn from Nebuchadnezzar's experience
- That he opposed the true God and Lord who has everything in His hand (vv. 18–19, 21, 23; see also Dan 4)
- That he was proud as Nebuchadnezzar had been

- That he did not use his knowledge in a responsible way

Daniel's talk consisted of a review of Nebuchadnezzar's experience and a rebuke of Belshazzar.

vv. 24–28 *The writing was in Aramaic. Why then did the wise man not understand it?*

Possible answers:

- A few of the words made the meaning of the message unclear.
- The consumption of alcohol may have hindered the people from understanding the message.
- The writing was only readable and/or understandable by receiving divine illumination.

“Weighed and found deficient” is true also today. There is a judgment of God that affects all human beings. Where do I find myself?

F. Daniel's Reward and the Execution of the Judgment

v. 29 The king fulfilled his promise.

v. 30 Belshazzar died the very same night. Babylon fell to the Medes and Persians. Jeremiah's prediction (Jer 51:31–32, 56–58) was beginning to be fulfilled with the events that took place in 539 BC. The Jews were able to return from exile.

One cannot play games with God.

II. Application

- Reasons for the judgment (vv. 20, 22):
 - (1) Humanity's pride. People are opposed to God and separate from Him (see humanism and materialism).
 - (2) The pleasure principle. People live only for pleasure.
 - (3) No willingness to learn. Knowledge that would be available is not being utilized. The Scriptures are accessible to almost all of us but we may ignore them. Jesus wants to live in us, and we may allow Him partial access only. This is unbelief.
- Effects of the judgment (Dan 5):
 - (1) Death of the sinners.
 - (2) Justification of God.
 - (3) Liberation of the people of God.
- How to escape the judgment: Committing one's life in faith to God (John 5:24).

Conclusion

We should not fear God in the negative sense. His goal is to save humanity. On the other hand, we should not feel free to disregard His will. It is unbelief and disobedience that bring about judgment.

10/15