

“The Handwriting on the Wall”

Daniel 5:1-31

March 6, 2016

INTRODUCTION:

By now, the pattern of the stories recorded in Daniel ought to be familiar to us. A king receives a cryptic revelation from God in the form of a dream or handwriting on the wall, and the revelation both frightens and baffles. The wisest people in the kingdom are called in to interpret the revelation but are completely unable to do so. God’s prophet is then called upon, and he interprets the dream or handwriting, which is always about something that is to happen in the future. In the case of our current chapter, the revelation is one of judgment on King Belshazzar.

This account from Daniel 5 is skillfully and artfully told. A mighty king decides to host a huge feast. One thousand nobles from his kingdom are invited to the feast, each one probably bringing with him a small retinue of his own. Also present are all the king’s wives and concubines, which would make for an interesting mix. Wives and concubines were normally kept separate because wives tend to get a little touchy about concubines. After the party has been going for a while, Belshazzar’s inhibitions are somewhat loosened and he orders that the gold and silver goblets from Solomon’s temple be brought in for his guests to drink from. He knew these goblets had been set apart for a holy use in Jerusalem, and he showed no proper respect for this. After they began drinking, a hand appears, with no body attached to it, and writes four words on the plaster wall where everyone can see. The entire episode scares sober the guests and especially their host and brings the feast to a premature end. The language describing Belshazzar’s reaction indicates a loss of his most basic bodily functions. In other words, his pants had to be cleaned after this. All of a sudden, nothing becomes more important than interpreting these words which had appeared in such a supernatural manner. All the specialists in the kingdom are called in to interpret the words, but none are able to do so, even though the reward promised for its accurate interpretation was the highest imaginable. After their failure, the queen, who is probably the queen mother, comes in and recommends Daniel for the task. They call Daniel and he is able to interpret the words, which mean essentially that Belshazzar’s reign and his kingdom will come to a sudden end at the hands of the Medes and Persians.

After all that comes the twist at the end. We read in the last paragraph of the chapter that Belshazzar was slain the same night of the feast, and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom. Think about that for just a moment. If someone other than a Babylonian took over the kingdom after Belshazzar was slain, what does that mean? It means that the Medes and Persians were just outside the city gates on the very night of Belshazzar’s feast. They were

carelessly partying while the destruction of their kingdom was imminent. To use a more up-to-date image, they were travelling first class on the Titanic.

The message of this story and all the other stories of Daniel is the same. Things may seem to God's people to be spinning out of control, but God is still in control of all things. His people can trust him even in the most dangerous of situations. Let me point out a similarity between Daniel's time and our own. It seems that Daniel has been demoted following the death of Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel is now in his 80's, and he no longer occupies the prominent position he held as a younger man at the end of chapter 2. In the eyes of Belshazzar, he's not even among the most important one thousand people in the kingdom. The declining influence of God's people in the Babylonian kingdom was due to the increased wickedness in the kingdom, especially with its king. The situation is not unlike our own here in America. If you have had any doubt about the waning Christian influence in our nation, those doubts are being answered by the two individuals getting the most votes in our presidential primaries. One is a man who claims to be a "great Christian," but who also says he has never asked God for forgiveness because he doesn't need to. He also owns a strip club and gambling casinos, is on his third wife and has admitted to numerous adulterous affairs. The other has made it clear that she intends, if given the opportunity, to appoint justices to the U.S. Supreme Court who will continue to uphold a woman's complete right to abortion. It is clear that we are in a situation not unlike Daniel's, where the Christian faith has lost considerable influence. The clear message of Daniel is that God has not lost control in spite of these things. Let's notice two truths about God revealed in this chapter.

I. God Is Sovereign in Judgment

Our current chapter needs to be read as a companion to the previous chapter. There are numerous similarities between the chapters. We've already noted one of those, the secret messages that come to the kings that only Daniel is able to interpret. Another similarity is that both are kings in Babylon. We actually need to talk about that before moving on. Verse 1 identifies Belshazzar as king, and this was problematic for many years. The problem was that the historical records of the Babylonian kings that have been found list all the kings of Babylon but do not include Belshazzar as one of those. For many years, this was thought to be an error in the Bible's historical record. But when further tablets were found from this era, a man by this name appeared and was identified as the son of Nabonidus. It seems that the situation was that Nabonidus, though still alive at this time, was absent from Babylon. Belshazzar was appointed as coregent with his father. We can see evidence of that in the fact that he offers the interpreter of the handwriting the third place in the kingdom. That was the highest he could offer because he and his father

occupied the first two places. So when the Bible records historical facts we can have confidence in its accuracy.

The most significant similarity between these two chapters is the pride of both Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar. But the similarity ends there, because Nebuchadnezzar repents of his pride while Belshazzar does not. We will see Nebuchadnezzar in heaven, but not Belshazzar. Why the difference? The answer of the Bible is the sovereignty of God in election. Nebuchadnezzar humbled himself and repented only because God gave him the grace to do so, while such divine enabling did not come to Belshazzar. It wasn't that Nebuchadnezzar was fundamentally a better man than Belshazzar. We noted last week how Nebuchadnezzar resisted God's grace for decades. In the case of Belshazzar, God moves immediately to pronounce judgment upon him for his pride.

I realize that some have problems with the doctrine of election, but we must recognize that the Bible teaches it repeatedly. It is part of God being God. One of the most common objections to this idea of God choosing some and not others is that it is unfair because it doesn't give some people a chance. But the Bible teaches that everyone has enough knowledge of God so as to be rendered without excuse for rejecting that. We can see that with Belshazzar. After recounting the history of God's work in Nebuchadnezzar's life, Daniel says to Belshazzar, You **“have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this, but you have lifted up yourself against the Lord of heaven”** (v. 22). The Bible teaches that everyone has enough revelation from God so as to be without excuse for rejecting God. You may be thinking, but what about those who have no knowledge of the Bible? Even in that situation, two revelations are given to everyone. The first is a knowledge of God placed within the heart of every human being. I heard this week of a young child who grew up in the atheist regime of Soviet communism asking his mother, “Mommy, does God know that we don't believe in him?” The second revelation available to all is that of nature, the world God has created.

So God is sovereign, even over the kings of the most powerful nations of the world. For some, he mercifully leads them to humble repentance, as in the case of Nebuchadnezzar. For others, he sovereignly judges them, as in the case of Belshazzar. In both cases, God is in control. Is God going to use the increasing ungodliness of our nation to bring people to repentance or to bring judgment upon our land? I do not know. That is God's business and not ours. Our business is to trust God and not give way to fear, to serve him and to declare to all we can the good news of the gospel.

II. God Provides His People with All that Is Necessary

Christians in America today may be like Daniel, experiencing declining influence and loss of status in a nation that is itself in decline. But the blessings of God upon us more than make up for any suffering that may come our way as a result of this. Let me point out just two of these blessings that we see in this passage.

Like Daniel, Christians know something of the future because God has chosen to reveal it to us. We don't know the details of the future. We don't know who will win this year's election, or what will happen to our nation in the coming decade. But we do know that the kingdom of this world will pass away and the kingdom of God will remain forever. America will one day pass into oblivion, just like every great nation and kingdom before us. It may happen next year or next century. We love our country, and we are right to be sad as we experience the moral, spiritual and eventually political decline of our nation. But we have been blessed to become citizens of another kingdom that will never end. By God's grace, our future is a bright one.

J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy is about a group of Hobbits who go from their home in what is called The Shire to another world far away. While there, they have some amazing adventures in fighting against mysterious and magical forces of evil. After a long and victorious struggle, they return to the Shire and find it a different place, not because it has changed but because they have changed. We learn that Hobbit maps stop at the boundary of the Shire. They don't acknowledge any world outside their own. But the Hobbit adventurers knew of the reality of this other world and this knowledge changed them. That's the same way it is for us as Christians. We know that there is a world outside our own, and we know that it is the real world because it is permanent.

Belshazzar's map ended at the border of the Shire. All he knew was his own kingdom and nothing of the future one that Daniel knew of, a kingdom that allowed Daniel to decline Belshazzar's offer of being third in command. Knowing that we have a future in God's kingdom changes the way we look at the kingdom of this world. For one thing, it makes us willing to suffer loss here and now for the sake of the future. Suppose you were given a choice to trade places with either Nebuchadnezzar or Belshazzar. You could trade places with Nebuchadnezzar in the fields eating grass and being unprotected from the elements, or with Belshazzar drinking and feasting with all the most powerful and influential people in the kingdom. If all you have is that snapshot of their lives, we would all choose Belshazzar. But if you have the film version instead of the snapshot, you can run the film forward and see what happens after Nebuchadnezzar's difficulties and Belshazzar's feast, everything changes. As Christians, we have the film version, and we know how this all ends. It ends with only one kingdom standing, and it is the kingdom to which we belong by God's grace, the kingdom of God.

The second thing God provides for his people is confidence for the day of judgment. As we read of the judgment upon Belshazzar, it should cause our knees to knock as well. When the hand appeared writing his judgment upon the wall, he panicked. He was willing to give anything he had to know the meaning of what was written. It was not a good message for him. Your days are numbered; you have been weighed, you have been found wanting and you will lose everything. It happened sooner than he anticipated. That very night, Belshazzar lost his kingdom and his life because he refused to humble himself and repent.

If we know that God is a God of judgment, how can we avoid not melting in fear at the prospect of being weighed in the balance? All of us would be found wanting. Did you know that Daniel's name means "God is my judge"? How can someone know that God is his judge and not melt in fear? When the hand appeared writing on the wall, Belshazzar was getting only a small glimpse of God's judgment. Yet even that was enough to panic this mighty king. If the day of judgment is real, and it is, and if we all will stand before this holy God, then how can we have confidence? We can have confidence on the day of judgment because of what God has done for us through Jesus. He took the punishment due to the proud, the idolater and the sacrilegious. All who humble themselves and repent and believe are washed clean of their sins, with the result that they can stand in the presence of a holy God with complete confidence.

CONCLUSION:

Let me close with an application. Remember that God is in control, and that means we are not. God knows whether the decline in our nation that we are seeing is going to lead to a time of spiritual renewal or to a further hardening and drifting from the Lord. That is not our responsibility. What is our responsibility? We are to be faithful, like Daniel was faithful. What does that faithfulness look like? God calls us to do two things. We tell people the truth. Let them know where you stand, that you are a follower of Jesus. Then seek to do good to whomever God brings into your realm—your neighbors, your coworkers, your family and friend. That is what Daniel did and what God calls us to do as well. Remember too that Daniel survived the fall of Babylon, and we will survive the decline of our own nation because we have citizenship in a kingdom that will never fail. We live *in* America, but we live *for* the kingdom of God. We still love our nation and grieve its decline. We still want our nation to be a great nation, great in humility, generosity, justice, godliness and moral uprightness. But we live for God's kingdom, working for that kingdom and rejoicing in both the kingdom and the King.