

Daniel 5

The Handwriting Is On the Wall

Last week we reviewed Daniel 4 which was the personal testimony of the great Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar. At the peak of his reign God humbled him for seven years by dramatically removing his authority along with his reason. When God graciously restored his sanity, Neb. was humble and committed himself to believe in and follow the one true God, the God of Israel. Neb. died a few years later in 562 BC. In chapter 5 of Daniel, the text picks up the story about 30 years later. Nebuchadnezzar's son Nabonidas rules the kingdom but he has been defeated by the Medes and Persians. Their huge army has converged on the city of Babylon and lays siege to it. The grandson of Neb. is Belshazzar, and he is ruling the city. He believes the city is impregnable with its high walls and towers. They have plenty of food stored up in Babylon, and the river running right through it. They were so over confident that Belshazzar threw a big party in the palace which turned into a drunken orgy.

They were so arrogant that they sent for the gold and silver cups that had been taken out of the Temple in Jerusalem before they destroyed it. These were the same cups that Solomon had dedicated to the Lord to be used in the Temple by the priests to honor God. Now Belshazzar would desecrate them in a drunken orgy while praising and worshipping false gods. Even though Neb. had left his testimony in the state records, the new generation did not know God or honor Him as God as Neb. had done. They were not only defying the enemy outside the wall, but also they defied the God in heaven by taking the cups from the Temple and using them to celebrate their pagan gods in Babylon. Daniel said it well in 5:23, "you have exalted yourself against the Lord of heaven...you have praised the gods of silver and gold...but the God in whose hand is your life, you have not glorified."

Oddity at the Orgy

While the idolatrous and evil King Belshazzar and his drunken guests "drank the wine and praised the gods of gold and silver", suddenly the fingers of a man's hand appeared and began writing on the wall in the palace's banquet room. How scary was this? The king's face became pale and his hip joints went slack and his knees buckled. Did he have a reason to fear? Actually, yes, we will find out that he was within hours of death and hell.

What exactly does it mean that "the handwriting is on the wall"? We could exhaust all the clichés to explain it ---It's all she wrote, the party's over, the die is cast, the enemy is at the gate, turn out the lights, the fat lady has sung, kiss it goodbye, a foregone conclusion, it's a done deal, the moment of truth, impending doom, enough is enough, his days are numbered, and what goes around comes around. The handwriting signified that God's patience with the Chaldeans of Babylon was over. God had patiently warned them through the writings of Nebuchadnezzar and the prophet Daniel, yet this generation had ignored it. Their evil had "piled up" and it was God's appointed time of judgment. God had raised up the Persians to conquer Babylon. They thought the city was impregnable, but several different historians give the same account of how the Persians took Babylon. They built a new channel for the Euphrates River diverting it around the city. Their army then walked in under the wall in the middle of the night surprising the Babylonians who were all drunk---quite a bad ending to the party !

Daniel's Contribution to the Party

The scary hand had written a message on the wall that terrified the king and his guests, so they asked all their experts what it meant, but none of the "conjurers or diviners" could figure it out. Therefore, they sent for the guy who had accurately interpreted all the dreams and visions of Nebuchadnezzar years before, Daniel. The king offered Daniel all kinds of clothes, jewelry, wealth, and authority as the number three man in the kingdom if he could accurately interpret the message. I love what Daniel told him, "Keep your gifts for yourself, they mean nothing to me, however, I will read the inscription...and make the interpretation known". Daniel proceeded to give a recap of how God had warned them through what He did to the great King Nebuchadnezzar. They should have learned, "Yet you, his son have not humbled your heart, even though you knew all this, but you have exalted yourself against the Lord of heaven".

Daniel read out loud the inscription on the wall, "MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN".

The meaning was that God had numbered their days and put an end to their kingdom, they had been weighed and found wanting, so their kingdom had been divided and given to the Medes and the Persians. The well known historians Herodotus and Xenophon both independently wrote that in October, 539 BC, that the Medes and Persians entered the city and easily took it.

You Know It's Going to Be a Bad Day When

You may have heard some of the jokes about how you know when its going to be a bad day: The 60 Minutes news team is at your office, you have a hole-in-one but you are playing alone, you buy a tube of super glue and the label falls off, you invest in a pumpkin farm and they call off Halloween, your teenager asks to wear your clothes to school on Nerd Day, and the songbird outside your window turns out to be a vulture. On his worst day ever, Belshazzar made a series of bad calls: he threw a wild party when a powerful enemy surrounded the city, he brought in the holy vessels from the Temple and desecrated them, and he consulted first with idol worshipping diviners and wizards. He sowed the wind, and now he would reap the whirlwind. He found out the hard way that there is only one God, and He is both our Redeemer and our Judge. For his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar He is his Redeemer, but for Belshazzar, God was solely his Judge.

It should make us all stop and reflect, and make sure which one God will be for us. Choose this day whether God will be your Judge or your Redeemer before it is too late, and the handwriting is on the wall.

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