

The Final Fling of a Frightened King.....

SERIES: DANIEL: LIVING BY FAITH IN A FAITHLESS WORLD

Like many of you, I have found this to be an amazing week. Tuesday afternoon I listened as the news reports trickled in of how the election was going. I fully expected to know who our next President would be early that evening. When it became clear that things were tight I braced myself for a long evening. When the networks finally announced a winner I told Lynn that I was going to sleep and asked her to wake me when the two candidates made their respective speeches. As you probably guessed, she never woke me. Who could have imagined that this thing would stretch out into days and even weeks? Who would have thought that this election would throw us into a significant constitutional crisis? As Americans, we're used to reading about these kinds of things happening in Latin America or Eastern Europe, but now it's here! I hope you're praying for this country. I hope you're pleading with God that what is just and right will prevail in this election and that the people of our nation will unite to accept that. I hope you're asking God to place a man in the White House who fears him.

I don't think it's a mistake that in our ongoing study of the book of Daniel we come this morning to chapter 5. Those of you who have been around here for awhile understand that I don't preach politics. We don't endorse a candidate from this pulpit. We understand that God's people are politically diverse, yet share a much greater spiritual unity in Christ. We belong to his kingdom and it's not a democracy. No one had to vote him into office. There are no recounts or run offs when it comes to who gets to rule the universe. Jesus Christ is not subject to our political analysis. He is the one and only King of Kings. And yet we live in this world and we care about our country. In this vein, I believe that Daniel 5 has something to say to us this morning about our nation, about our perspective on what is happening, and about our response as men and women of the King.

Daniel 5 contains a most amazing story, commonly called, "Belshazzar's Feast." I have called it, "The Final Fling of a Frightened King." This story has fascinated people down through the ages. In 1635 it was the subject on one of Rembrandt's best known paintings. From this story we have inherited two well-known sayings. When we say, "The writing is on the wall," or "Your days are numbered," we are using phrases that originate with this story. This morning I want to start by reading the entire story from the NIV. When I am finished reading I will make five observations about God's dealings with nations and kings and the perspective which God's people must have. Listen carefully as I read,

"Belshazzar the king held a great feast for a thousand of his nobles, and he was drinking wine in the presence of the thousand. When Belshazzar tasted the wine, he gave orders to bring the gold and silver vessels which Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken out of the temple which was in Jerusalem, in order that the king and his nobles, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them. Then they brought the gold vessels that had been taken out of

the temple, the house of God which was in Jerusalem; and the king and his nobles, his wives, and his concubines drank from them. They drank the wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone. Suddenly the fingers of a man's hand emerged and began writing opposite the lampstand on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace, and the king saw the back of the hand that did the writing. Then the king's face grew pale, and his thoughts alarmed him; and his hip joints went slack, and his knees began knocking together. The king called aloud to bring in the conjurers, the Chaldeans and the diviners. The king spoke and said to the wise men of Babylon, 'Any man who can read this inscription and explain its interpretation to me will be clothed with purple, and have a necklace of gold around his neck, and have authority as third ruler in the kingdom.' Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the inscription or make known its interpretation to the king. Then King Belshazzar was greatly alarmed, his face grew even paler, and his nobles were perplexed. The queen entered the banquet hall because of the words of the king and his nobles; the queen spoke and said, 'O king, live forever! Do not let your thoughts alarm you or your face be pale. There is a man in your kingdom in whom is a spirit of the holy gods; and in the days of your father, illumination, insight, and wisdom like the wisdom of the gods were found in him. And King Nebuchadnezzar, your father, your father the king, appointed him chief of the magicians, conjurers, Chaldeans, and diviners. This was because an extraordinary spirit, knowledge and insight, interpretation of dreams, explanation of enigmas, and solving of difficult problems were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Belshazzar. Let Daniel now be summoned, and he will declare the interpretation.' Then Daniel was brought in before the king. The king spoke and said to Daniel, 'Are you that Daniel who is one of the exiles from Judah, whom my father the king brought from Judah? Now I have heard about you that a spirit of the gods is in you, and that illumination, insight, and extraordinary wisdom have been found in you. Just now the wise men and the conjurers were brought in before me that they might read this inscription and make its interpretation known to me, but they could not declare the interpretation of the message. But I personally have heard about you, that you are able to give interpretations and solve difficult problems. Now if you are able to read the inscription and make its interpretation known to me, you will be clothed with purple and wear a necklace of gold around your neck, and

you will have authority as the third ruler in the kingdom.’ Then Daniel answered and said before the king, ‘Keep your gifts for yourself, or give your rewards to someone else; however, I will read the inscription to the king and make the interpretation known to him. O king, the Most High God granted sovereignty, grandeur, glory, and majesty to Nebuchadnezzar your father. And because of the grandeur He bestowed on him, all the peoples, nations, and men of every language feared and trembled before him; whomever he wished he killed, and whomever he wished he spared alive; and whomever he wished he elevated, and whomever he wished he humbled. But when his heart was lifted up and his spirit became so proud that he behaved arrogantly, he was deposed from his royal throne, and his glory was taken away from him. He was also driven away from mankind, and his heart was made like that of beasts, and his dwelling place was with the wild donkeys. He was given grass to eat like cattle, and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, until he recognized that the Most High God is ruler over the realm of mankind, and that he sets over it whomever He wishes. Yet you, his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, even though you knew all this, but you have exalted yourself against the Lord of heaven; and they have brought the vessels of His house before you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines have been drinking wine from them; and you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which do not see, hear or understand. But the God in whose hand are your life-breath and your ways, you have not glorified. Then the hand was sent from Him, and this inscription was written out. Now this is the inscription that was written out: “MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN.” This is the interpretation of the message: “MENE”- God has numbered your kingdom and put an end to it. “TEKEL” - you have been weighed on the scales and found deficient. “PERES” - your kingdom has been divided and given over to the Medes and Persians.’ Then Belshazzar gave orders, and they clothed Daniel with purple and put a necklace of gold around his neck, and issued a proclamation concerning him that he now had authority as the third ruler in the kingdom. That same night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was slain. So Darius the Mede received the kingdom at about the age of sixty-two.”

FIVE OBSERVATIONS

1. **Things change:** The first observation is that things change. Remember how chapter 4 ended with King Nebuchadnezzar humbled before God, praising God, exalting God, recognizing that he is the sovereign ruler of the world. This had to be very encouraging for Daniel and the Jews living in Babylon. We can imagine that Nebuchadnezzar began to operate with a different attitude and policy toward the Jews of his kingdom. All of a sudden, this little persecuted minority whose heroes had been thrown into the fiery furnace for not bowing down to an idol were on the most favored nation list. Things were looking up for God’s people.

But then we come to chapter 5. King Nebuchadnezzar

is dead. History records that he died in 562 BC. Following his death the power of Babylon declined rapidly. For the next few years the throne changed hands several times in quick succession. Eventually, a noble named Nabonidus took the throne and established a measure of political stability. Nabonidus himself was an strange guy. He spent a good deal of his time living away from Babylon, excavating buried shrines in the Arabian desert. This is where Belshazzar comes in. Nabonidus was Belshazzar’s father. This may seem confusing because the text seems to say that Nebuchadnezzar was his father, but the word for “father” in this chapter can also mean “predecessor.” Today we speak of our “Founding Fathers” in the same way. Officially, Belshazzar was not king of Babylon, but with his father, Nabonidus, off on vacation most of the time he was the acting king of Babylon. This is also why in v. 16 Belshazzar offers to make Daniel the “third highest” ruler in the kingdom. Why would he say that? Because Belshazzar himself was the second ruler, and his father, Nabonidus, was first.

What’s crucial to see in all of this is that by the time Belshazzar came around the positive influence of Nebuchadnezzar was virtually washed away. As we look at this opening scene in ch. 5 we can see the kind of man that Belshazzar was. There are a few things to notice about this. This was a drunken orgy that would have been considered a scandalous breach of protocol even by the people of his day. Back then you just didn’t invite your harem to an official event like this. Not only that, but what Nebuchadnezzar had treated with respect, Belshazzar treated with contempt. He ordered for the sacred vessels from the Jerusalem Temple be brought out to party with. This was clearly a repudiation of Nebuchadnezzar’s sympathies for the Most High God of the Jews. More importantly, it was a deliberate act of spitting in the eye of the God. This was blasphemy, and blasphemy quickly expressed itself in idolatry as with goblets raised high they praised the gods of gold and silver and bronze and wood and stone.

Things had changed. We can imagine God’s people feeling betrayed and bummed out by this change. It’s a reminder to us as followers of Christ living in America that when it comes to presidents, senators, congressmen and governors things change. We can expect that. Sometimes the change seems good; sometimes the change seems bad. Someone has said, “The world changes so fast that you couldn’t stay wrong all the time even if you tried.” That’s how we feel as followers of Christ. Sometimes the cultural climate is such that we feel as if we’re right; sometimes we feel wrong. One way or the other, things change.

2. **God is in charge of the change:** The second observation I make about this story is that God is in charge of the change. You may recall from chapter 4 that one single phrase was repeated four times: “**The Most high is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and sets over them anyone he wishes.**” This was the lesson that King Nebuchadnezzar had to learn the hard way as God humbled him and made him like a beast. It’s this same lesson that is repeated here in v. 21 for Belshazzar, “**The Most High is sovereign over the Kingdoms of men and sets over them whomever he wishes.**”

I’m sure it’s not a mistake we are studying this chapter in this critical time in our nation’s history. As a final count is reached in Florida in the next few days, as the courts determine whether or not to do anything about allegations of an unfair election, as one President exits the White House and another enters in the next couple of months, there is one thing we must know - God is in charge of the change. We may or may not like the change, but

either way, God is in charge. You say, "Why then does God allow evil men to rule? How could he allow the Belshazzars of history to find their way to the top?" Let's be honest; many have felt that about what's gone on in the White House the last few years, but God is still in charge, and he uses even godless rulers to accomplish his purposes.

I should note that what we have here in chapter 5 is the last hurrah of the entire Babylonian empire. That very night the Persians would raid the city and a new king would be on a new throne. This Persian dynasty would be friendly toward the Jews and their king would allow God's people to return to Jerusalem. Things would soon be looking up for God's people. But after that the Greeks would come along and their king would mow down the city of Jerusalem and set up a pig on the altar of God. Things change; sometimes we like the change, sometimes we don't, but God is in charge.

This is a reminder to us not to get overly excited when the change seems good, or to get too bummed out when the change seems bad. I'm concerned about people who claim to know Christ as King and yet mope around or even worse panic because their man isn't in the White House. The fact is, we don't trust in change, we trust in God. We don't trust in a political agenda, we trust in God. We don't trust in a man, we trust in God. If we trust in God, if God is really in charge, why mope around, and why panic? This is especially true for us as Americans. Does this really affect our ability to witness and serve God? Does this really affect our ability to be kind to our neighbor? Does this really affect our freedom to worship? You say, it could lead to that, and perhaps it could, but is it not a product of luxury that we are so concerned about some of these things? I'm not saying it doesn't matter; I'm just saying let's put it in perspective. Think about other parts of the world where the stakes are so much higher. The church in Somalia or Pakistan would surely be surprised we are so concerned about matters that are of such little impact to body and soul. It is a product of luxury that what we call a problem is actually a problem. But God is in charge in those countries, just as he is here. But let's be honest, it must be harder for them to believe that than it is for us.

3. God's servants must always be ready: This leads to my third observation - God's servant must be ready for action. Here is where Daniel comes in.

Daniel was ready no matter what. I want you to notice a couple of things about Daniel at this point. First, Daniel had been on the shelf for some time. Remember during Nebuchadnezzar's reign Daniel held a position of great prominence; he was the second in command and he was chief of the wise men. But here we see that Belshazzar has forgotten all about Daniel, or perhaps purposefully ignored him, and it's only when the Queen mother brings him up that Daniel comes on the scene. Most scholars believe that Daniel is around 80 years old by this time. It had been 23 years since Nebuchadnezzar had died. Who knows how long Daniel had been shelved. What did Daniel do during this time? Did he retire and buy a cabin on the lake? One thing we know he did was pray. Chapter 6 says that Daniel kept a discipline of praying three times a day. Daniel was on the shelf but he didn't waste his time watching TV and playing video games.

The other thing I want you to notice about Daniel is that when called upon he was ready. He comes before the King. The king treats him like a nobody. There are several

subtle jabs at Daniel coming from the king's mouth in vv. 13-16. But Daniel is ready. Daniel is not intimidated by this man. When Daniel begins his speech in v. 17 it's clear he knows who's in charge. Notice his integrity. He tells the king to keep his gifts and rewards; give them to someone else. This is a man who won't be bought. Notice his directness. He gives the king a little history lesson about King Nebuchadnezzar which I will come back to in a minute, and then in v. 23 he points the finger and says, **"But you, Belshazzar, have not humbled yourself...you have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven...you have had the goblets from the temple brought to you...you praised the gods of silver and gold."** Daniel is direct. He is the prophet here. He's poking his long, bony finger in Belshazzar's chest. He's direct. He's specific. He's not speaking in generalities. He's not saying "we," he's saying "you." I'm not suggesting at all that we should go around pointing our finger in condemnation as Daniel did. The thing I want you to see is that Daniel was ready.

A week ago Friday one of our elders, John Brandon, was the featured speaker at the San Francisco Prayer Breakfast. This was quite an honor. Even more so when the day before the breakfast he got an e-mail saying that Willie Brown would be there and he was bringing a guest by the name of Bill Clinton. This was shaping up to be quite a morning, especially considering the title of the message John had planned to give was, "Telling the Truth." Bill Clinton didn't show, but Willie Brown did. When John finished Willie Brown came up to the podium and asked John, "Did you pick that topic because you knew I'd be here?" John was a truth teller that morning. He was ready. He was ready with or without Bill Clinton or Willie Brown.

Paul told Timothy to "Preach the word, in season and out of season." We must be ready, in season and out of season. There are times when we will find ourselves in a situation that can be described as "out of season." The nation or the culture or the neighborhood or the schools is not conducive to the message of Christ. What do we do in those situations? We do what Daniel did. We pray. We keep showing up. We keep sowing the word. We don't lose heart. So whatever the environment, whether we have 300 seats and 400 people, or 600 seats and 60 people, whether we have a Republican or a Democrat in the White House, the task never changes. We are to watch and work and pray with the same energy with which we watch and work and pray when the message is in season. Keep in mind that God's word teaches us that as time goes on we can actually expect things to get worse. Paul said, **"There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of selves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy...lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God..."** (2 Tim. 3:1-4). Does that sound familiar? That's the environment we can expect to minister in as we get closer and closer to the end.

4. God deals with people based on the light he's given them: Here is the fourth observation I make from this passage: God deals with people according to the light he has given them. One of the things we immediately notice about this story as we compare it to the one proceeding it is that God seemed a lot nicer to king Nebuchadnezzar than he was to king Belshazzar. God gave Nebuchadnezzar a warning and a chance to repent. After Nebuchadnezzar learned his lesson and humbled himself he was restored to his throne. If you look at this story closely you will find that it's clear Belshazzar had no such opportunity to repent. The writing on the wall didn't include a proviso that if he humbled himself God will let him off the hook. It simply said, "You have been weighed and found wanting and your days are numbered."

Why is that? The answer to that question is found in something Daniel says to him in v. 22, **“But you, his son, O Belshazzar, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this.”** Did you catch that? Those words, “though you knew all this” are the key to God’s dealings with Belshazzar. God deals with us according to the light that we have. Belshazzar knew better. He had seen what happened to Nebuchadnezzar, but he chose to ignore it.

I’m the youngest of two children. I’m the little brother. Any little brothers or sisters here? I remember growing up and watching my big brother live his life. He made the majors in Little League two years before I did. I watched him. He had two years of high school before I did. I watched him. I took mental notes of what he did and the choices he made. He experienced college before I did. He got married one year to the day before I did. I watched. I studied his choices. When he made a bad choice I saw some of the consequences. Every once in a while he would say to me, “Don’t make the same mistake I did. Don’t do this or that.” I don’t envy those of you who are the oldest. But here’s the point: he had an excuse while I didn’t. I had light and that light made me more accountable for my actions.

Let me ask you: what kind of light has God given you? Were you raised in a Christian home? Did you have Godly parents? That’s light. Or did you have the painful privilege of watching a mom or dad suffer the consequences of their bad choices? That’s another kind of light. Don’t push it away. Every single one of us has access to this book, don’t we? That’s light. What are you doing with that light? Most of you will hear several thousand sermons in your lifetime. What are you doing with that light?

It’s a scary thing when God gives a person light and they push it away. God takes that seriously. Let me broaden this out. What about our nation? What kind of light have we been given as a nation? What kind of examples do we have throughout history of nations that have abandoned moral truth rooted in the conviction that we’re accountable to our Creator? People who study history tell us that nations go through stages characterized by a rise and a fall. Do you know what stage always comes right before the fall? It’s the stage where prosperity abounds but moral degeneracy abounds right along side of it. When a country is prosperous yet immoral, the writing is on the wall.

In the movie, *Indecent Proposal*, a rich man offers a woman and her husband one million dollars if they will let him sleep with her. They accept. In a TV survey on the Oprah Winfrey show, 52% of callers said they would do the same. In a related survey, one in four Americans said that for 10 million dollars they would abandon their entire family. For the same amount of money, 23% said they would become a prostitute for a week, and 7% would even kill a stranger. The scary thing is that as a nation we’re choosing to ignore the light that we have.

It’s interesting in this story that moral degeneracy leads to blasphemy as Belshazzar starts messing with the sacred vessels from God’s Temple. We say, “What’s the big deal? God sure is uptight about dish ware!” But, you see, these were things that God had set apart as holy. They represented God’s holiness. Blasphemy is when we take something God

has called a holy and we throw it back in his face. How could we do this today? What is holy today? God’s word is holy. You don’t mess with God’s word. Marriage is holy. You don’t mess with marriage. Communion is a holy thing. Paul said there were people in Corinth who messed with Communion and God judged them right on the spot. Human life is holy. You don’t mess with human life in whatever form it takes. We know that. We have that light. Woe to us who don’t act on the light we have. Do you know what God does as a result of that? He takes the light away.

5. God’s judgment is sure: This leads to my last observation: God’s judgment is sure. The writing on the wall said, “God has numbered your days. You have been weighed on the scales and you don’t cut it. Your kingdom is being divided and given to the Medes and Persians.” The Scripture says that very night Belshazzar was slain and the great Babylonian empire was over. I hope we all believe that God is still dealing with nations and empires. He deals with us as individuals, but don’t forget he also deals with nations. There are times in a nation’s history when sin abounds and God doesn’t seem to do anything and we think, “Well, that’s just not the way he works.” But in times like these the judgment of God accumulates, like waters rising behind a dam, and the time will come, often at the moment of a nations’ greatest arrogance, when that dam will break. I don’t know when that time will come for America. I don’t know if the outcome of this election will make one bit of difference. But I believe that as a nation we’re walking on some very thin ice and the day could soon come when the writing is on the wall for us.

CONCLUSION

Let me give you some good news though. When God judges, he always has a remnant of people he preserves. Who are these people? In a way, they are people very much like Belshazzar. We are very much like him. Every single one of us have been weighed on the scales and found wanting. What a foolish thing to think that any of us could stand before God and have his scale come down on the side of our righteousness. For every single one of us the scale crashes down on the side of our sin. But here is what God has done. In his mercy and love, he has sent his Son who is perfectly righteous. On the cross, his Son removed our sin from the scale. And then on the other side of the scale he placed his own righteous character. The scale that had crashed down on the side of sin now swings back and you are no longer found wanting, you are now found as righteous as Jesus was. This is how we escape the judgment of God. All we have to do to be a part of the righteous remnant is trust him as Lord and Savior.

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