

So far in our series, we have seen Daniel as an amazing inspiration who followed hard after God in his time of exile. We have also been encouraged to see King Nebuchadnezzar's journey—from a raging tyrannical king protected by his power and wealth to a man humbled by God. We see Nebuchadnezzar repent from his sins of pride and idolatry, and we see God show him mercy. God gave him grace and allowed him to live out his days as a humble leader who praised God until his death. That's a happy part of the story.

But Chapter 5 is a sad story. Daniel 5 is a message about judgment. Who gets in their car and drives to church on a Sunday because they want to hear a talk about judgment on sin? But if sin has no consequence, if evil has no check, if God's justice never comes, then what good is God, and what benefit is his grace and mercy? If grace is amazing, then it must rescue us from something, and that something is defined in this passage by three words written on a king's wall.

The backdrop of the story is a study of contrast between King Nebuchadnezzar and his successor King Belshazzar. God reveals that there are consequences of non-repentance. We will see God's judgment here. Daniel 5 is also about God's mercy. It's because of God's mercy that we receive warnings about the consequences of unrepentance. And Daniel 5 shows us that God is faithful to care for his people. He is faithful to provide. He is faithful to deal graciously with those who humble themselves and repent. As exiles living in our Babylon, we need to align ourselves with this: Daniel 5 is both a warning and a promise: The Lord will bring His judgment on the unrepentant and His mercy on the humble.

There is a time gap of 30 years between the end of chapter 4 and the beginning of chapter 5. After a long friendship with Daniel, King Nebuchadnezzar has passed on. I think we will see him again in heaven. After some short-term kings, a man named Belshazzar became the new King of Babylon. In verse 2, it says that Belshazzar was Nebuchadnezzar's son; but actually, he wasn't his son. The best translations say that Nebuchadnezzar was Belshazzar's predecessor. You can see that in a footnote in your Bible.

We know the actual date in history this story took place. There are exact historical references in ancient Greek and cuneiform that these events in Daniel 5 took place on October 12, 539 BC. Pretty amazing. So the first thing we see is Belshazzar desecrating the Holy Vessels.

Desecrating the Holy Vessels

King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine with them. While Belshazzar was drinking his wine, he gave orders to bring in the gold and silver goblets that Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken from the temple in Jerusalem, so that the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines might drink from them. So they brought in the gold goblets that had been taken from the temple of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines drank from them. As they drank the wine, they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone. Daniel 5:1-4

So the king threw a lavish party. He probably pulled the party together to unite his heads of state because his empire was in trouble. He knew an attack from the Persians and Medes was coming against their great city of Babylon. Belshazzar's father, Nabonidus, who co-ruled with Belshazzar, had been defeated by the Persians in a battle 50 miles away. Belshazzar probably didn't know yet that his dad had been killed. So the banquet could have been a rally for a military purpose. But I think it was more likely to be some temporary pleasure diversion before they were attacked. A, "Let's feast today for tomorrow we die," situation.

The text says the wine flowed and the king, his wives, his concubines, and his nobles drank deeply. The king ordered that the sacred gold goblets that the Jews had used in their temple worship in Jerusalem be brought out and used as drinking cups at his party. He commits blasphemy as he toasts with the sacred goblets, praising his gods. The king and his party guests partied on...profanity, idolatry, blasphemy...seems to be the theme of the party. Bowing down to false gods, worshiping created things instead of the creator.

You know that Belshazzar knew exactly what those cups symbolized, and by doing what he did, he was thumbing his nose at the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, "Hey, we conquered your people, we enslaved your nation. You are nothing. Our Gods of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone are more powerful than you and your nation." And, it's as if he expects these idols will protect him from what was about to come.

Writing on the Wall

Suddenly the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall, near the lampstand in the royal palace. The king watched the hand as it wrote. His face turned pale and he

was so frightened that his legs became weak and his knees were knocking. vv. 5-6

I appreciate the writer's play on words here. A plastered Belshazzar watched a detached hand write on a plastered wall. It says the hand wrote near the lampstand, so this whole scene was lit up to be seen by the crowd. It says Belshazzar turned pale. His legs gave way. Literally, the knots of his loins were loosened from the hip sockets, his knees knocked.

The king summoned the enchanters, astrologers and diviners. Then he said to these wise men of Babylon, "Whoever reads this writing and tells me what it means will be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed around his neck, and he will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom." v. 7

We have seen this movie before. Every time something mysterious was going on, the Babylonian kings called in the enchanters, astrologers, diviners to tell them what was going on. And every time, they failed. Remember back in chapter 2, when Nebuchadnezzar told the enchanters, astrologers, and diviners if they mess up the interpretation of his dream; he would have them killed? Why would anyone choose a career as an enchanter, astrologer, or diviner in ancient Babylon? It gives new meaning to the term dead-end job.

So Belshazzar sweetened the offer. The winner of the "what did God write on the wall contest" would receive the reward of becoming the third highest ruler in the kingdom. Historians tell us that Belshazzar and his father, Nabonidus, were co-regents running Babylon, and the winner would be the next in line.

Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or tell the king what it meant. So King Belshazzar became even more terrified and his face grew more pale. His nobles were baffled." The queen, hearing the voices of the king and his nobles, came into the banquet hall. "May the king live forever!" she said. "Don't be alarmed! Don't look so pale! vv. 8-11

So the queen was not one of Belshazzar's wives; they were already at the party. Most likely, this was a queen mum, maybe Belshazzar's mother, but we don't know for sure. Most historians believe the queen was actually Nebuchadnezzar's wife. A wise and respected matriarch who still could exert her influence. She says to Belshazzar, the king, "Hey, don't look so pale!" That is just funny to me. Like, "Stop having brown eyes!" Then she says,

There is a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods in him. In the time of your father he was found to have insight and intelligence and wisdom like that of the gods. Your father, King Nebuchadnezzar, appointed him chief of the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners. He did this because Daniel, whom the king called Beltshazzar, was found to have a keen mind and knowledge and understanding, and also the ability to interpret dreams, explain riddles and solve

difficult problems. Call for Daniel, and he will tell you what the writing means." vv. 11-12

So we are about to see for the third time Daniel interceding and succeeding where the Babylonian wise men failed. So think about this, Daniel is an old man, probably 80 years old, and still living in exile. Daniel never does go home. That is a reason Daniel is the perfect example to us of living in exile. He spent his entire life in exile, and God used him over and over. He didn't pine away his days dreaming and scheming about the end of his exile. He stayed faithful and attentive to God while in exile. He bloomed where he was planted.

So Daniel was brought before the king, and the king said to him, "Are you Daniel, one of the exiles my father the king brought from Judah? I have heard that the spirit of the gods is in you and that you have insight, intelligence and outstanding wisdom. The wise men and enchanters were brought before me to read this writing and tell me what it means, but they could not explain it. Now I have heard that you are able to give interpretations and to solve difficult problems. If you can read this writing and tell me what it means, you will be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed around your neck, and you will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom." Then Daniel answered the king, "You may keep your gifts for yourself and give your rewards to someone else. Nevertheless, I will read the writing for the king and tell him what it means. vv. 13-17

Daniel didn't want the purple cloth or the gold chain or the high rank. He said he would interpret the writing on the wall free of charge. Why? Apparently, Daniel didn't want to receive a reward from a leader he didn't respect. He didn't want to work for Belshazzar. He worked for God. He was commissioned by God to pronounce judgment on the king and his kingdom. We know Daniel had a fondness for Nebuchadnezzar, and we are about to see why Daniel didn't respect Belshazzar. First, Daniel reminds Belshazzar of Nebuchadnezzar's faith story.

"Your Majesty, the Most High God gave your father Nebuchadnezzar sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendor. Because of the high position he gave him, all the nations and peoples of every language dreaded and feared him. Those the king wanted to put to death, he put to death; those he wanted to spare, he spared; those he wanted to promote, he promoted; and those he wanted to humble, he humbled. But when his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory. He was driven away from people and given the mind of an animal; he lived with the wild donkeys and ate grass like the ox; and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, until he acknowledged that the Most High God is sovereign over all

kingdoms on earth and sets over them anyone he wishes. vv. 18-21

So that's Nebuchadnezzar's faith story. He repented of his pride, and Daniel's God became his God. Now, in verse 22, Daniel gives Belshazzar his stinging rebuke.

"But you, Belshazzar, his son, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this" (v. 22). Here is the troubling thing Daniel saw in Belshazzar. Belshazzar had knowledge of God because he knew all that happened in Nebuchadnezzar's life. Although he was young, he would have still seen changes in Nebuchadnezzar's life. Daniel continues his rebuke.

Instead, you have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven. You had the goblets from his temple brought to you, and you and your nobles, your wives, and your concubines drank wine from them. You praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or understand. But you did not honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways. Therefore he sent the hand that wrote the inscription. "This is the inscription that was written: mene, mene, tekel, parsin "Here is what these words mean: Mene: God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end. Tekel: You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting. Peres: Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians." vv. 23-28

Three nouns are treated as passive verbs. Numbered, weighed, and divided. The writing on the wall says judgment. God said, "I, the Lord your God, put you in power, and now I am about to take you out. I have weighed your life on the scales, and unlike Nebuchadnezzar, you are a lightweight, and I found you lacking. And so I am going to take your kingdom and divide it between the Medes and the Persians." That's it. I wonder how pale he is now.

Rewarding and Punishing

Then at Belshazzar's command, Daniel was clothed in purple, a gold chain was placed around his neck, and he was proclaimed the third highest ruler in the kingdom" (v. 29). Daniel is still given the purple shirt, the gold chain, and the new rank. Within a few hours, it will all mean nothing. It seems like Daniel takes it graciously from a disgraced king who is about to die.

"That very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain, and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom, at the age of sixty-two" (v. 30). That very night, October 12, 539 BC, Belshazzar is captured and killed by the Mede and Persian invading armies. The party is over. God brings down another earthly kingdom. And Darius, at age 62, took over the kingdom. A little encouragement for those of us over 60; we can still be players. Historian Herodotus (Her-o-DOT-us) describes the assault on the massive and defensible city of Babylon. The city was surrounded by walls as high as 350 feet and over 80 feet wide. And there were 27 miles of wall

around the city. One would think there would be no chance that Darius and his army could breach its defenses.

The great Euphrates river ran under the walls and through the city and created a large protective moat around the outside of the city. The city had remained safe and self-sustaining so far, even after it had been under siege for over two years. But the Medes and Persians figured out that they could go upstream and divert the river enough to lower the water level that flowed under the wall and into the city. The lowered water level allowed them room to wade under the walls and take over the city. That's how they invaded that night.

We see the judgment of God plain and clear here. But we also see God's mercy in this story. The Persian-Mede empire's rise to power led to the Decree of Cyrus you can read about in Ezra 1:1-4. The Decree of Cyrus meant that after 70 years in exile, God directed Cyrus to provide a way for the people to return from exile to the land God had given them. God had put them in a 70-year time out, and that time out was about to end. They will go back and rebuild Jerusalem, rebuild their great temple, and then put an impressive wall around it. Another sign that God is moving and working out his plan for his people in exile.

God's people in exile will not be abandoned. We have that promise. And Daniel's God, who is also our God, is more powerful than any of the false gods we face while in exile in our Babylon. Be encouraged this morning. God is in control. God is on the move. The Lord will bring His righteous judgment on the unrepentant and His mercy on the humble.

Real-life lessons from the Writing on the wall

Security built on human achievement won't last.

The writing on the wall of real life says, "Look at what we call human achievement: power, prestige, peer approval, wealth, wisdom, amazing potential, and accomplishments." None of these will secure us a right relationship with God. There is no wall built so high with human achievement that it will keep God's judgment away. If God were writing on our wall, he would say, "The only security you have comes through repentance and through faith in what Christ did on the cross for you." That is our security in this life.

Unrepented attitudes and actions invite trouble.

The writing on the wall of real life tells us to examine ourselves. Maybe you grew up around faith as Belshazzar did, but it never penetrated your heart. Maybe you have head knowledge about God but no heart conviction. Your sin just doesn't convict you.

Our daughters grew up around their parent's faith. But our faith couldn't save them. They had to discover faith for themselves. They had to have their own personal crisis of belief that would lead them to their own personal repentance. God promises mercy to those who repent.

After reading Daniel 5, none of us should think that we can live in a continual state of unrepentance and avoid consequences. In fact, God can orchestrate consequences just to get our attention. When I think of the ways God gets our attention, it can look different for each of us. God can be the disruptor and blow up those great plans we are making. God puts wise people in our lives to get our attention. And many of us know that God uses life disappointments, trauma, and loss to get our attention. God can change any heart. God can heal the deepest wounds. No one is beyond the reach of God's mercy.

I'd like to close by giving you some words of love that God writes on your wall. God's warnings to us are proof of his love for us. If God didn't care, he wouldn't warn. Even though Daniel 5 is about a pagan king, Daniel writes for the children of God. These words are inspiring for us to read, and they lead to the ultimate place where God demonstrated his love. The cross of Jesus is our ultimate warning.

Mene, Tekel, Peres is not just handwriting against Belshazzar; it is the handwriting of God for us. By His hand, God warns us of our sin. On the cross of Jesus, we see God's handwriting in its boldest and brightest strokes. The warning is written with the blood of Jesus. But the glory of that blood is that it does more than warn us; his blood blots out any handwriting against us and writes over it all—mercy.

The blood of Christ spells out a warning to all who are seeking God. The blood of Christ says to us, "Turn back to Christ. Turn back from the sin that leads to your harm and destruction." And the blood of Christ says to us, "Come." The words written in the blood say, "Come and be covered and cleansed by a God who loves you more than you will ever know." And the blood of Christ says to us, "Open your heart so that my cleansing blood can flow into every dark corner of your heart. Come and receive forgiveness, comfort, and the strength of presence in your life today."

Lieutenant Colonel Brian Birdwell, in *Preaching Today*, recounted his experience of being in the section of the Pentagon that was struck by the 9/11 attackers. The hallway where he was walking was immediately engulfed in flame as an 80-ton aircraft traveling at 520 miles per hour struck the building. The force of the impact knocked him off his feet, and he temporarily lost consciousness. He awoke surrounded by fire and without orientation. He said that he knew he was facing a gruesome death and wanted to run but did not know which direction to run. The wrong choice would send him deeper into the flames, but he had to make a choice. So he ducked his head and ran, screaming, "Jesus, I am coming to see you." Whether he headed toward life or death, he

still knew that he was heading in the right direction. It turned out to be the right direction for a longer life here on earth.

We don't have to wonder what direction to run. The Lord has shown us the consequences of sin and the mercy of his Son, Jesus, so that we can run toward him. Today we have seen the reality of the judgment of God, but I want to make clear the reason: God shows consequences so that we will not experience them. Judgment doesn't need to be our destiny. Whatever is in your life right now, whatever the evil is you have allowed right now, there is a direction to run.

The writing on the wall says, "Run to the Savior." He will receive you and hold you and help you. He says, "Since I love you enough to warn you, then you know that I love you enough to receive you. Humble yourself, and I will lift you up. Come to me."

Turn from your sin and run to Him. What is one first step you can take to run toward Jesus this week?

Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. Psalm 139:23-24

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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