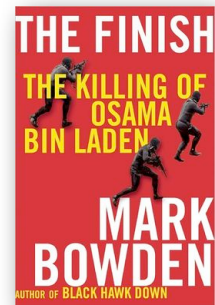


Daniel 5 - Divine Graffiti

January 13, 2012

Good morning! I am Pastor Kurt. I want to say a special “Hello” to those connecting through the Internet. This morning, we are back in our study of the book of Daniel. Today, we are in chapter five. Take your Bible and turn there. If you didn’t bring a Bible, open a pew Bible to page 742.

On Sept. 11, 2001, the United States was attacked. Planes flew into the World Trade Centers and the Pentagon. It was a bold act of war unlike anything our nation had seen since Pearl Harbor. In the days that followed, the identity of our opponent and the organization we were fighting against became clear. The name was Osama Bin Laden. He led a terrorist group named Al-Qaeda. Many would say that from that moment his identity was discovered, the writing was on the wall about his future. It was only a matter of time until he and the terrorist group he led were destroyed. In a recently released book, The Finish: The Killing of Osama Bin Laden, Mark Bowden details how the search for Bin Laden began with a single false name and ended 10 years later with his body sinking in the sea.



Daniel chapter five has a similar storyline to that book. It is the story of the hunting down and finishing off of another evil dictator named Belshazzar. It was not the CIA doing the hunting, it was God. It didn’t take God 10 years to get the job done. It took him less than 60 minutes.

Daniel chapter five is the story of what happened when Belshazzar crossed the line. God decided to finish him off. We are looking at the story in three parts: A great beer bash, God as a great party crasher, and the great finish.

A great beer bash

King Belshazzar made a great feast for a thousand of his lords and drank wine in front of the thousand. Belshazzar, when he tasted the wine, commanded that the vessels of gold and of silver that Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken out of the temple in Jerusalem be brought, that the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them. Then they brought in the golden vessels that had been taken out of the temple, the house of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines drank from them. They drank wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone. Daniel 5:1–4 (ESV)

Who was Belshazzar?

The first question we have is, “Who was Belshazzar?” That is a good question. In the last chapter, we were dealing with Nebuchadnezzar. Who is the new guy? Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 B.C. His son, Evil-Merodach, reigned in his place for two years. His brother in law, Neriglissar, murdered him and ruled for the next four years. He was followed by a king named Labashi-Marduk, who only ruled only two months. After him came Nabonidus. He ruled Babylon for 17 years. He obtained power because he married Nebuchadnezzar’s daughter. He was the final ruler of the Babylonian empire.

This brings us to an interesting part of the story. For years, Daniel 5 was used by liberal scholars as an example of why you cannot trust the Bible. The historical record is clear. Nabonidus was the last king of Babylon. Daniel 5 says it was Belshazzar. The Bible was assumed to be wrong. Many people had their faith in God’s Word undermined because of this obvious discrepancy.

Then in 1854, an archaeologist named, J.G. Taylor was digging around in Iraq. He found several small clay cylinders. The inscriptions on the cylinders explained the relationship between Belshazzar and Nabonidus. Belshazzar was Nabonidus' firstborn son. Belshazzar was not a name created as a piece of fantasy; he was a real piece of history.



In 1882, another archaeologist named T.G. Pinches made an archeological discovery. It was a tablet called, The Nabonidus Chronicles. It described Nabonidus' reign. Nabonidus tried to replace worship of Marduk, the chief deity of Babylon, with another deity called Sin. As a result, Nabonidus fell out of favor with the priests and the people. To save his hide, he left town and lived for 10 years at an oasis in the Arabian desert called Tema. In his absence, he left his son, Belshazzar, in charge of the city. That explains why Belshazzar was in charge in this chapter. For practical purposes, he was the king.



This also explains why Belshazzar offered anyone who could translate the writing on the wall the position of third highest in the kingdom. Why only third? Nabonidus was still number one. Belshazzar was number two. The highest position he could offer was three. The Bible was right after all!

My friends, you will often hear people tell you archaeology proves the Bible wrong. That isn't the truth. The more we discover in archaeology, the more we discover the Bible is right after all. We can trust it.

Why did Belshazzar throw the party?

A party doesn't sound unusual. People throw parties all the time. When I examined this party, it sounded extreme, even for a party animal like Belshazzar. First, he had a thousand of his lords in attendance. This was a state dinner. Instead of wearing a tux, the attendees were drinking themselves under the table. This was one heck of a beer bash.

As I studied, I learned something else was unusual. Belshazzar invited his wives and concubines to drink along with the lords. In that culture, you would invite your wives to a state dinner, but you didn't invite them to a beer bash. You didn't try to get them drunk in public. It was also highly unusual for a king to invite his concubines. Who were the concubines? Concubines were not wives. They were women the king saw that were highly attractive, so he took them for sexual purposes. They were considered the sexual experts. They had the goods and they knew how to use them. The picture we have is a state dinner turned into a beer bash with drunk, sexually-orientated women all over the place. This is the kind of party we tell our children never to be part of. Nothing good was happening.

What makes this even more interesting is a little more history. Less than four months before, and only 50 miles away, the Medo-Persian army decisively defeated the Babylonian army. The Medo-Persian army then mopped up all

remaining resistance and surrounded the city of Babylon. As this party was transpiring, the Medo-Persian army was camped outside the city gates. In addition, Babylon no longer had an army to defend them.

This also explains why Belshazzar had no problem getting a thousand of his lords to attend the party. Everybody fled to Babylon for safety after their cities were conquered.

If I was Belshazzar, I wouldn't be throwing a party. I would be preparing for war. That isn't what he did. He thought he had everything under control.

Why was he so confident he didn't have to worry?

Let me describe the fortifications of Babylon. The walls in certain portions were more than 300 feet high. The outer wall was 40 feet thick. Even if the Medo-Persian army broke through that 40-foot thick wall, there was a second inner wall. On top of the walls were numerous defense towers that the Babylonians used to pick off the enemy like ducks in a shooting gallery. Babylon boasted of having a food supply that would last 20 years during a siege. The walls of the city were built through the Euphrates river so the Babylonians had an unlimited supply of water. The city was considered impregnable. This explains Belshazzar's arrogance and why he was partying on the inside of the city while an army was camped outside the city.

Why did Belshazzar drink from the temple cups?

Another question perplexed me. Why did Belshazzar go into basement storage and pull out the drinking vessels from the temple in Jerusalem? Why not

go with paper cups? This was highly unusual for him to even know about these cups and then to go out of his way to use them. I think I have an answer.

If you look at when this chapter transpires, you discover Daniel was not in mid-life. If he was 16 when taken to Babylon, he was approximately 82 years old when this took place. If you chart this out, you discover Belshazzar was a teenager during Nebuchadnezzar's rule. He watched Daniel's prophecy to the king. He watched Nebuchadnezzar lose his mind and eat grass like a cow for seven periods of time. Belshazzar knew about Daniel, the God of Israel and his control of history. I think he also knew about Daniel chapter eight. Daniel 8 took place before Daniel 5. Daniel 8 took place in the third year of Belshazzar's reign. In that chapter, God said Babylon would fall to the Medo-Persian army. At this point the Medo-Persian empire had conquered the armies of Babylon and was camped outside of Babylon's gates. Belshazzar knew what the God of Israel said about the end of Babylon by the Medo-Persian army. Belshazzar got the cups for his drinking party to intentionally defy God. Using the drinking cups from the temple in Jerusalem was his way to intentionally flip God off. He was mocking God, telling him that nobody would ever conquer his city or remove him from power. That was why he got the drinking cups out of storage to use for his beer-drinking, orgy party. That was why he used the cups to praise the gods of wood, gold, silver and stone.

Talk about an idiot. God's word through Daniel was consistently fulfilled with razor-sharp precision in the past. What made Belshazzar think he could avoid it in the future? This guy was insane!

In chapter four, we saw God's incredible mercy to Nebuchadnezzar, the hard-hearted, proud king. In chapter five, with Belshazzar, we don't see God's mercy, we see God's wrath against Belshazzar's pride. Folks, God is great in his mercy, but he is also great in his wrath. God doesn't always choose to extend his mercy all the time to everyone.

...I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. Exodus 33:19 (NIV)

That is what makes his mercy so great. Nobody deserves it. It doesn't happen all the time. God showed mercy to Nebuchadnezzar and hunted him down to bring him to himself. Belshazzar didn't get that mercy. He just got cut off.

God is a great party crasher.

Immediately the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace, opposite the lampstand. And the king saw the hand as it wrote. Then the king's color changed, and his thoughts alarmed him; his limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together. The king called loudly to bring in the enchanters, the Chaldeans, and the astrologers. The king declared to the wise men of Babylon, "Whoever reads this writing, and shows me its interpretation, shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around his neck and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom." Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or make known to the king the interpretation. Then King Belshazzar was greatly alarmed, and his color changed, and his lords were perplexed. The queen, because of the words of the king and his lords, came into the banqueting hall, and the queen declared, "O king, live forever! Let not your thoughts alarm you or your color change. There is a man in your kingdom in whom is the spirit of the holy gods. In the days of your father, light and understanding and wisdom like the wisdom of the gods were found in him, and King Nebuchadnezzar, your father—your father the king—made him chief of the magicians, enchanters, Chaldeans, and astrologers, because an excellent spirit, knowledge, and understanding to interpret dreams, explain riddles, and solve problems were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Beltshazzar. Now let Daniel be called, and he will show the interpretation." Daniel 5:5–12 (ESV)

One thing interesting in the Aramaic is when the fingers of the hand wrote on the wall they didn't use a pen. The word means inscribed. This means inscribed like you would a grave stone. The word translated as *father* in English can mean *ancestor* in Aramaic. Nebuchadnezzar was not Belshazzar's direct father. He was his ancestor. The same is true for the word queen. It could be translated as the queen mother. The point is, she was around for a while. She told Belshazzar to talk to Daniel. She reminded him that Daniel had a reputation for solving all kinds of perplexing issues and interpreting dreams.

What happened next was Daniel let Belshazzar have it right between the eyes. Daniel's point was that Belshazzar should have known better than to try and defy the one true living God.

Then Daniel answered and said before the king, "Let your gifts be for yourself, and give your rewards to another. Nevertheless, I will read the writing to the king and make known to him the interpretation. O king, the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father kingship and greatness and glory and majesty. And because of the greatness that he gave him, all peoples, nations, and languages trembled and feared before him. Whom he would, he killed, and whom he would, he kept alive; whom he would, he raised up, and whom he would, he humbled. But when his heart was lifted up and his spirit was hardened so that he dealt proudly, he was brought down from his kingly throne, and his glory was taken from him. He was driven from among the children of mankind, and his mind was made like that of a beast, and his dwelling was with the wild donkeys. He was fed grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, until he knew that the Most High God rules the kingdom of mankind and sets over it whom he will. And you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this, but you have lifted up yourself against the Lord of heaven. And the vessels of his house have been brought in before you, and you and your lords, your wives, and your concubines have drunk wine from them. And you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which do not see or hear or know, but the God in whose hand is your breath, and whose are all your ways, you have not honored." Daniel 5:17–23 (ESV)

Daniel pointed out one of the great lessons of Nebuchadnezzar. God gave him everything he had. When his heart was proud, God humbled him and turned his mind into a beast. Belshazzar grew up watching that take place.

And you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this, but you have lifted up yourself against the Lord of heaven... Daniel 5:22–23 (ESV)

While Belshazzar knew the family history, he didn't learn the family lesson. He intentionally rebelled against God.

Intentional rebellion against God is a scary thing.

And that servant who knew his master's will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating. But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating. Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more. Luke 12:47–48 (ESV)

My friends, intentional rebellion against God is a scary thing. I talk to people all the time who know God's will but intentionally rebel against him, just like Belshazzar. People who know divorce is not God's will --- they know their Bibles. They intentionally choose to do their own thing. That is a Belshazzar spot. It is a scary place to be. Teenagers growing up in a Christian home who have experienced God's work in their life but intentionally rebel against God, flip God off and sleep with their girlfriends. That is an unrepentant Belshazzar spot where you should know better than to try and defy God. Living with a boyfriend or girlfriend before marriage is the way our society approaches relationships. When you know better and do it anyway, that is a Belshazzar spot. It is a scary place. Tithing is another issue. Many of us know what God says about honoring God with our resources. We are like fat pigs fed butter when it comes to Bible

knowledge. When it comes to tithing, we tell ourselves we can't afford it. God may be gracious, but sometimes he draws the line, just like he did for Belshazzar.

Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. Galatians 6:7 (ESV)

What did the writing mean?

“Then from his presence the hand was sent, and this writing was inscribed. And this is the writing that was inscribed: Mene, Mene, Tekel, and Parsin. This is the interpretation of the matter: Mene, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; Tekel, you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting; Peres, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.” Daniel 5:24–28 (ESV)

The words written on the wall were not in a foreign language. They were Aramaic. That was the language of Babylon. It was in Babylon where the Jews learned to speak Aramaic. There is nothing weird about it. Everybody in the room could read them. If you translate them they read, *numbered, numbered, weighed, divided.*

The problem was not reading the words, it was understanding the meaning of the words. That is what Daniel gave that nobody could provide.

- **Mene** --- God had numbered the days of Belshazzar's reign and brought them to an end. The picture is of a countdown clock and the end of the Babylonian empire was almost upon them. It was written twice for emphasis. The end was very close.
- **Tekel** --- This is a weight or a unit of money. Sometimes in the Bible you read about a shekel as a unit of money. It is the same word. God put Belshazzar in

the balance as a ruler, and he came up short. God decided his days were over with. This was the end of the line.

- **Upharsin** --- This word is tricky because it carries a double meaning. It can mean divided, and it can mean Persia. Daniel told Belshazzar that it meant both. Babylon would be divided between the Medes and the Persians. If you remember, those were the armies camped outside the city gates as Daniel was speaking.

You would think this would bring Belshazzar to some form of repentance. It didn't. Belshazzar did make Daniel the third highest ruler in the kingdom. He gave him a purple robe and gold chains around his neck so he looked like Mr. T. Then, as far as we know, Belshazzar went back to partying. He was probably still using the drinking cups from the temple in Jerusalem. This is a good reminder about why he came up lacking in God's balances.

The great finish

How did it end for Babylon? Xenophon, the Greek writer, told us how the city was destroyed. The Medes and Persians knew the walls of Babylon were impenetrable. They devised another strategy. The walls of the city went through the Euphrates River. They didn't go to the bottom of the river because the river needed to continue flowing. Far upstream, the Medes and Persians were moving tons of dirt. They planned to divert the Euphrates and run it dry. That was the night they accomplished it. During the night, the commandos of the Medes and Persians went under the walls on the drained river bed. They immediately

attacked the guards of the city gates and opened the gates for the rest of their army.

History tells us that during the party, Belshazzar heard the commotion at the gates so he unlocked his palace gates to send people to investigate. Wrong move. When he unlocked the palace gates, the Medes and the Persians had their special forces waiting to storm the palace. They went straight to the party room to find a drunk Belshazzar holding a sword to defend himself. Let's just say, it wasn't much of a fight. Oct. 12, 539 B.C., the city was taken. Only hours after Daniel told him what would happen, the most powerful empire up to that point in world history fell without a fight, just like God said. The lesson is that it doesn't matter how extensive or sophisticated a nation's defenses are. No nation is able to stand when God says it is time to fall.

Lessons

In the time that remains, I want us to look at some lessons we can take from this story.

God is large and in charge --- This lesson comes screaming at us from the text. God told the Babylonians they would fall. In Isaiah 47:5-11, God told them they would fall suddenly, and they wouldn't even see it coming. That is exactly what happened. God is large and in charge of world history and our history. This should be incredibly comforting, yet many Christians rebel against the idea that God is in charge of everything and he ordains what happens in our lives. Here is what you need to remember. *The sovereignty of God is never a threat to the people of God.* It is always the source of our hope. No matter what we are going

through, God loves his people. We can trust him. We may not understand what God is doing but he promises to use everything for our ultimate good and his glory. You know who the sovereignty of God is a threat to? It is a threat to those who, like Belshazzar, persist in their sin and rebellion. God's wrath is being stored up. He will bring justice in the end. If this morning, you are persisting in sin and rebellion, realize God, many times, gives us time to repent. That window of opportunity doesn't last forever. Belshazzar had a big window of opportunity for repentance but there came a point when he crossed an unseen line and the opportunity to repent was taken away. Don't let that be you.

God's wrath is just as real as his mercy. In chapter four, we saw a picture of God's incredible mercy to a hard-hearted, proud arrogant ruler named Nebuchadnezzar. God even disciplined him with a form of insanity that left him sleeping outside and eating grass like a cow to humble him. All of that discipline was God's mercy to humble his heart and turn it toward God. In chapter five, Belshazzar is just as arrogant. God doesn't show him mercy. He just cuts him off. This is an incredible warning. God is under no obligation to extend his mercy. He has every right to just say, "You're done." Sometimes he does that. Many times he is patient as he waits for us to repent. If today, you are hard-heartedly persisting in sin, especially when you know better, learn from Belshazzar. God will not be mocked. On the other hand, this is what makes God's mercy so great. It is an underserved gift that not everyone receives. If God has been merciful to you so you can see your sin, see the truth about Jesus,

repent of it and trust Christ, that was an act of his mercy. Just as real as God's mercy is his wrath.

Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. This is super important. In our culture, God is not feared. He is treated more like a house pet. We keep him around for our enjoyment. We don't take sin seriously. We don't believe sin will be judged. Belshazzar had no fear of God even though he saw his power in Nebuchadnezzar's life. That is stupidity. When you turn to the book of Proverbs, you find that wisdom begins with a healthy fear of God.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. Proverbs 9:10 (ESV)

Develop a healthy fear of God. He is real. He is actively involved in our lives. Sin will be judged. God will not be mocked. He also loves you so much he sent his own son to die for you.



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