

Series Daniel

Scripture Daniel chapter 5

The overall theme of the Book of Daniel is the sovereignty of God over the affairs of mankind. The experiences of King Nebuchadnezzar illustrate that theme. During his years on the throne, he had several significant encounters with the Most High God of Heaven. Toward the end of his reign he finally personally acknowledged that Yahweh had been behind his successes. He confessed his faith in the Most High God and made known his desire that all “the peoples, nations, and men of every language” would read about his personal testimony. His experiences had convinced him that the omnipotent eternal God in heaven was Sovereign over the entire universe and that all people, including kings, were under His authority.

A brief history lesson is in order before we get into chapter 5. Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 BC, after 43 years on the throne. He was succeeded by his son Amel-Marduk, but after two years, this son was assassinated by his brother-in-law, his sister’s husband! Neriglissar became king in 560 BC and died four years later. His son Labashi-Marduk succeeded him, but this man was murdered after only nine months on the throne at the hands of several noblemen, including Nabonidus, who was married to another daughter of Nebuchadnezzar. The revolt led to the appointment of Nabonidus to be king. Get the picture here? Two of Nebuchadnezzar’s daughters were married to men who murdered in order to ascend to the throne. Nice folks.

Nabonidus was the king from 556 until 539 BC. However, he spent most of his time on military campaigns or in a far-away city to the south (*Tema, or Teman, Teima on the border of North Arabia and southern Edom, near the gulf of Aqaba*) and left the administration of Babylonia to his eldest son, Belshazzar. Chapter 5 concerns Belshazzar.

Read Daniel 5:1-31

Belshazzar became co-regent of the empire just eight or nine years after the death of his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar, and he served in that position for about 14 years, until the fall of Babylon in 539 BC.

No one knows the specific reason for the major event known as “Belshazzar’s Feast,” but all the leaders of government, society, and the armed forces were there, along with the king’s wives and concubines — more than 1000 people.

At some point during the banquet, it was time for the offering of toasts to the gods of Babylon. Belshazzar commanded that the gold and silver goblets, which had been taken from the temple in Jerusalem, be brought in for use by his guests. According to Daniel 1:2, Nebuchadnezzar had placed the vessels in the temple of the Babylonian god Marduk 47 years previously. These vessels had been dedicated to Yahweh in the time of Solomon. The use of objects previously used in the worship of Yahweh would be Belshazzar’s way of calling attention to the superiority of the gods of Babylonia. The use of these sacred vessels in the praise of the gods of the Babylonians was, therefore, a desecration of their intended use and an offense to God.

The banquet was interrupted in a dramatic way when the fingers of a hand appeared and began writing on the palace wall. For Belshazzar, and undoubtedly for everyone present, it was a frightening event. Verse 6 explains how the king displayed his shock and fear. He sent for the wise men, but they could not unravel the message, in spite of great inducements — the offer of royal garments, a gold chain, and a top position in the government.

The writing was in Aramaic, a language which was known at the time in Babylon. However, the wise men could not read the writing, and, as a result, the king became even more terrified. I’m sure that everyone in the banquet hall shared his fear and dismay.

The queen mother had a good suggestion: call Daniel. *(Most historians assume that she was Nitocris, the daughter of Nebuchadnezzar, and the wife of Nabonidus.)* She said that Daniel had “insight and intelligence and wisdom” *(verse 11)* and “a keen mind and knowledge and understanding, and also the ability to interpret dreams, explain riddles, and solve difficult problems” *(verse 12)*.

At this point in time, Daniel had been in Babylon more than 66 years and he was more than 80 years old. However, Belshazzar apparently did not know Daniel personally. He had only “heard that the spirit of the gods was in him” and that “he was able to give interpretations and to solve difficult problems.” Perhaps this information was what the king had just learned from his mother.

Belshazzar's opening question in verse 13 was interesting. "Are you THE Daniel who was one of the exiles brought from Judah?" Belshazzar knew that the temple in Jerusalem was source of the sacred vessels which were being used in the banquet. Ironically, this meant that Daniel was a worshiper of the God that Belshazzar had been dishonoring and who might prove to be superior to the wise men of Babylon.

Daniel was willing and able to read the writing and tell the king the meaning. Before he gave the interpretation, Daniel explained the reason for the handwriting. Verses 18 through 22 have the words of a very bold and stern prophet. Daniel reminded the king of the experience of his grandfather, Nebuchadnezzar. Belshazzar should have recalled what Nebuchadnezzar learned about humility and respect for Yahweh (*verse 22*). Nebuchadnezzar was proof that even the most powerful kings cannot pit their strength against the power of the Almighty God. He had written in his testimony that everyone's life depended on the Most High in heaven, the One who was completely sovereign over the kingdoms of men.

Daniel also pointed out that Belshazzar was guilty of blasphemy by using the temple vessels as common dishes and by honoring gods who were nothing more than objects made of material substances. Daniel's words strongly imply that Belshazzar knew what he was doing in calling for the sacred vessels of God, and that he had deliberately done so. Daniel pointed out that the king had set himself up against the Lord of heaven (*verse 23*).

The application of Daniel's admonition was in verses 22-23. He knew that Belshazzar knew the full story of Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel wanted Belshazzar to know that he was responsible to the same God as his predecessor. Daniel said that Belshazzar had not honored "the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways" and, "Therefore God had sent the hand that wrote the inscription."

After saying all that, Daniel then translated and interpreted the four words on the wall. "MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN." The words on the wall were nouns, representing units of weight or money. If we put the words into English, we might translate "mene" as "pound" and "tekel" as "ounce," or "dollar and penny." A "mina" was a fairly large sum of money, approximately 50 times a "tekel" (*same as Hebrew "shekel"*).

The word “parsin” (*also pronounceable as “pharsin”*) is a plural form of the word “peres” (*or “pheres”*) which means “half.” In the context, it could be either half a mina or half a shekel. If we think in terms of US words, the writing would be “pound, pound, ounce, and half an ounce,” or “dollar, dollar, cent, and half a cent.”

The next bit of information you need to know is that the Aramaic language had only consonants, no written vowels. The same is true of the Persian and Arabic languages today. In these languages, the meanings of words change depending on where vowels are pronounced (*vowels are sounded but not written*). Daniel took these nouns and interpreted them as verbs. This was possible based on the way he verbalized the vowels. By pronouncing the words as verbs, the words could then be translated “numbered,” “weighed,” and “divided.” As a result, Daniel could say, “God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end,” and “You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting,” and “Your kingdom is divided.”

The fourth word was the trickiest and most interesting. There was a third way to interpret it. As I said, the word “parsin” (*or “pharsin”*) is a plural form of the word “peres” (*“pheres”*). but they are spelled the same way in Aramaic. In its singular form, the word “peres” means “the Persian people.” That is why Daniel could announce that Belshazzar’s “kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.”

Now, just for fun, let me explain this to you based on my knowledge of the Persian language. The Aramaic, Arabic, and Persian languages have something very important in common. Words are read right to left. An additional complication is that Jewish scholars think the letters were written vertically, forming an acrostic. If so, the writing on the wall probably looked like this: (Remember, no vowels)

P	T	M	M
R	K	N	N
S	L		

- M Even today, a person in Iran can go to the bazaar and ask for
 “Yek man bereng” (literally, “One large measure of rice.”)
 N
- T A form of the word “tekel” is still used in
 the Persian/Arabic languages. The “Mestqual” is a little
 K weight, used when buying spices, or weighing gold. It
 would be like requesting a “gram” of tea or saffron
 L or some such substance.
- P As I said, there are two possible meanings, depending on
 the vowel placement. PhaRSin would mean “divided,” but
 R PheReS would mean “Persian.” Even today, one group of
 Persian people are called Parses, one area of Iran is named
 S Fars, and the language is Farsi.

Daniel’s interpretation spelled doom for Belshazzar and the Babylonian empire. Many kings would have reacted with anger for saying such words of condemnation, and had the speaker executed on the spot. However, Belshazzar did the honorable thing and fulfilled his promise. Daniel was made the third highest ruler in the land. That was the highest possible level that Belshazzar could offer. Remember that Nabonidus was officially the king and that Belshazzar was the co-regent. Daniel became the third in line to the throne.

In its rise to power, the Babylonian empire had conquered Jerusalem, taken its inhabitants into captivity, looted its beautiful temple, and completely destroyed the city. How ironic then, that the last official act in the empire was the honoring of one of those captives who by divine revelation predicted the downfall of Babylon. Just another example that God has the last word in every situation.

Even as the banquet was in progress, the Medo-Persian soldiers were moving into the city. In spite of the incredible defenses of the city of Babylon, the army of the Medes and Persians took the city without “firing a shot,” so to speak. Before I explain how they did it, I need to give you a little background on the rising empire of the Medes and Persians.

In the 550s BC, a man named Cyrus took over the control of both the Medo and Persian domains and combined them. Together the Medes and the Persians successfully gained control over territories east and north of the Euphrates River. Cyrus then set his sights on Babylon. On October 10, 539 BC, his army seized the city of Sippar, just a few miles north of Babylon. There was no battle because the Babylonian king, Nabonidus, abandoned the city with his army and fled. This gave the Persians an open road to the capital Babylon. They immediately advanced and surrounded the city.

The Babylonians did not seem to be worried about the situation. They considered their city to be impregnable. There was a double wall surrounding the city. The outer wall was more than 300 feet high in some places. The river Euphrates ran through the city supplying it with water. There were enough gardens and orchards within the city to provide food for the population. The city was prepared for a siege that could last for years. The city had, in fact, successfully withstood military assaults for a thousand years. For the leaders of Babylonia, it was party time.

The Persian military leaders devised a unique plan. The upstream waters of the Euphrates River were diverted into an ancient dry lake, and, under cover of darkness, the Persian troops waded in shallow water under the walls, thus bypassing the city's defenses. The date commonly given for the capture of Babylon is 12 October 539 BC.

Verse 30 reports that Belshazzar was slain that night, and verse 31 indicates that the governance of Babylon was entrusted to Darius the Mede. What is not reported in the Scripture is that Daniel would have been the ranking official to hand over the Babylonian empire to the leader of the new regime.

I think you will agree that there are many interesting things we can glean from the stories in Daniel. But what "take-a-ways" are for us? I have two thoughts:

First, we need to learn from those who have gone before us. Belshazzar should have learned from the experiences of his grandfather. The same sovereign Most High God is over us, just as He was over individuals in former years. You have heard the expression, "If we don't learn from the past, we are due to repeat the mistakes of the past." The Bible is filled with examples of attitudes and behaviors both good and bad. We must not assume that God expects less of us than He expected of others, or that we will be treated differently than He treated others.

Secondly, we need to be concerned about the testimonies we leave behind for others. What will our children and grandchildren remember about us? I hope we want to be known as people who honor and follow our Lord Jesus Christ. If we have yielded our lives to the Most High God, then we should want everyone to know about it.