



## **Sunday, 5 February 2023**

### **The Writing on The Wall – Daniel chapter 5.**

So on Sunday mornings we're now in the middle of looking at the OT book of Daniel, and this morning we're going to be looking at Daniel Chapter 5. It will be good if you had sight of a Bible, and you'll find Daniel Ch 5 on page 889 in the church Bible. While you're finding it, a reminder to the background to the book of Daniel. We'll look at the background to chapter five some more later.

The book of Daniel is set in the time the exile of the majority of God's people to Babylonia (today part of modern Iraq) during the years 605BC to 537BC. God warned His people time and again that if they didn't live as they should, there were consequences. They didn't, and this was the consequence - and it included the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and the Temple. And if you want to know how they felt about this go read Psalm 137, immortalised in the Bonnie M song of some years back based on it. "By the rivers of B..."

But this exile didn't take place in one hit. There were different phases to it, God still hoping His people would see sense and stop rebelling against Him. But in the first wave of exiles, in the year 605BC, the higher strata of Jewish society were removed from Jerusalem to Babylon by the then Ruler of this top superpower of the middle-eastern world - King Nebuchadnezzar. And amongst these exiles was the young man Daniel. So the first six chapters of this book is about experiences during this Jewish exile, and is set in Babylon

Now while these first six chapters are roughly chronological, one of the frustrations of reading Bible history is that it leaves out a lot of detail we'd like to know. Which means that as we start chapter 5 we are immediately introduced, without warning, to a king we don't know and at a time we're not expecting. The year is 539BC. In fact from reliable archaeological evidence outside the Bible we know it's October 539BC, and Daniel is now in his eighties. But before we go further with the background, let's read the story.

It's a longish chapter, but we need to read it all, so, sit back and enjoy:

*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.*

*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.*



*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."*

*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! 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."*

*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.*

*"Your Majesty, the Most High God gave your father Nebuchadnezzar sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendour. 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.*

*"But you, Belshazzar, his son, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this. 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 honour 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.”*

*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.*

*That very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain, and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom, at the age of sixty-two.*

And the first thing I need to say about what we’ve just read is that there are some things in this Bible passage that aren’t true. Yes, I did say that. Although... it’s more probable it’s our understanding that’s deficient not the author’s intent in the writing.

We started off by reading that Belshazzar was Nebuchadnezzar son - but he most defiantly wasn’t - although there is a possibility that he might have been one of his grandsons through a daughter. So what do we then make of the Bible repeatedly saying that Nebuchadnezzar was Belshazzar father.

Many years ago I visited Zambia, and one of our hosts took me to her family home and walked me around a room introducing me to her relatives. So she said, “This is my mother”, and I politely shook hands with her. But as we moved around the room and came to another elderly lady, she said, “This is my mother”.

I realised quickly that for ‘mother’ I should understand older revered lady. So... if we take ‘father’ to mean ‘revered predecessor’ in this chapter, we’re probably on the right track. In fact King Nebuchadnezzar was four kings back at this point in Babylonian history, although most of those that followed him reigned for a relatively short time, and two I think were assassinated.

And then we’re introduced to Belshazzar as ‘king’ - but he wasn’t. Although, perhaps that might be a moot point, because he was acting as co-regent with his father, King Nabonidus. For some years King Nabonidus had been away fighting in Arabia, so he had formally signed over kingly stand-in responsibilities to his eldest son. And you’ll actually find indisputable evidence of that fact on a cylinder in our British Museum. So imagine for a moment if our late Queen had gone off to live in Australia for a year. She might well have done something similar with our now, genuinely King Charles, to cover the time of her absence. You get the picture.



And just to show how accurate the Bible can be (in spite of what you might think I've been saying at this point) the reason that Daniel could only be offered the *third* highest position in the kingdom was that Belshazzar himself was the second in line in the kingdom while his father was still top man.

But enough of the background, let's get to the text. And you'll perhaps not be surprised I'm going to be focussing on the three main characters in this narrative. King Belshazzar, Daniel, and the LORD God Himself. And we'll start where the passage starts, with King Belshazzar and his behaviour.

And right at the beginning we're thrown into the middle of a massive knees-up. Only - something we're *not* told is that this party is being held in a city under siege. Babylon is currently surrounded by the Mede and Persian armies, and in a very short while a new foreign king will ride into Babylon and the Babylonian empire will cease to exist. So was it overconfidence in the very strong structural defences and massive store of supplies held in Babylon that made Belshazzar so overconfident as to throw a glitzy party with so powerful an army at his gates? We're not told, but it may start to paint in detail about the man's character.

You've probably heard the saying, "Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die". Well, this guy was fulfilling it.

But none of us knows what the future holds. God has told a few people what their future is and when they'll die - but very very few. Which is why Psalm 39 prays "Show me, Lord, my life's end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is", and Psalm 90 asks God to, "Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom." But I suspect most of us are like me, not giving it too much thought. A big regret in my life is all the wasted time, years if totted, that I wish now I could reclaim... but I can't. Most of you listening to me are much younger than me, so please take note.

Because sometimes life is far shorter than we anticipate. Four young boys fell through an ice-covered lake and died just before Christmas. That sort of incident should underline the uncertainty of life if nothing else does. For me personally - I came face to face with this brevity of life while still at school.

I went to school at Queensmead just down the road, and in those days you could leave school at 15. So a boy in my class named Frank did just that, and left at Christmas. But between Christmas and Easter, around this time of the year, he ploughed his motorbike into the back of a stationary lorry in the fog out on the A40 by Northolt airport - and died. So not for nothing does the Bible tell us to number our days. And whether you live just 15 years like Frank, or 102 like my aunt, it all goes very quickly, just like other verses in Psalm 90 tell us. And Jesus told a parable about a rich man and the beggar who sat at his gate to make that same point - and also about consequences. But King Belshazzar obviously hadn't got that memo - not yet anyway.

Of course the flow of alcohol undoubtedly didn't help as our story unfolds. The text almost shouts at us that everybody was getting well lubricated (although they quickly sobered up, but more about that later). And I don't think I need to say too much about how the consumption of alcohol affects judgement - and it's consequences - in society



today. Consequences again.

So King Balshazzar throws past protocol out the window, and called for the religious artefacts taken a long time back from the now destroyed temple in Jerusalem to be brought to his party and used like ordinary drinking vessels. One commentator has said that superstition alone would normally have guarded a man from putting such sacred vessels to common use. So just maybe that's another indication of the effects of intoxication

OK, King Nebuchadnezzar had taken these items from Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem and put them into a temple dedicated to the idol Bel who was worshipped in Babylon. But two things about that. In his eyes, it could well have been his way of preserving the fact that they were sacred objects. But secondly, it was all part of God's plan anyway to keep them safe to be taken back to Jerusalem after the seventy years of exile were completed. But now they're brought into Balshazzar's shindig, *and* they start to praise Babylon's idols with them.

But I've a question for you. It's an open question for you to take away and ponder. And it's this. What does *our* society do that might be considered a desecration of things previously considered holy? Or even perhaps - we do? Consider that a bit of homework - and I'll move on!

Paul wrote in Galatians Ch.6, "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows". Balshazzar was about to find that out - and in his case - direct from God Himself - and while still living on earth.

We've read the Bible account so I don't need to go through the next part blow by blow. And the Bible lets us know just how Balshazzar was feeling about seeing a hand writing words on his wall. Knees knocking together is very descriptive. But he still thinks he's in control, as he effectively gets out his wallet to buy what can't be bought. And then the Queen (who's probably the older Queen mother) remembers Daniel and his reputation.

As we've read the book of Daniel, we're aware that Daniel was brought to Babylon from Judah as a very young man and ended up being trained to serve King Nebuchadnezzar. But that must have been in the order of sixty plus years before this event. We also know that he rose to prominence in Nebuchadnezzar's administration. But that administration was five kings back and it appears he's now no longer in his previous active role. Yet when the chips are down, and there's a need for someone with God given wisdom and insight, they call for the octogenarian Daniel.

So I've another question for you. And it's probably well served by recalling the Salvation Army saying: "No discharge from this army". So are you in for being a Christian disciple - that's a follower of Jesus - for the long haul? And a second related question. What sort of reputation are you building up as a follower of Jesus, year in and year out, year by year, so that when the chips are down in later life, who you are is someone who's still recognisably ready and able to serve even into later life? Even 80 plus. Well, Daniel was. And we'll see next week it didn't even end here.





We'll gloss over the fact that Daniel wasn't interested in the inducements that Balshazzar held out to him. He'll just speak truth to power, *because* it's the truth. Another question. Do you pray for wisdom for those with influential roles in the governing structures of today's world? We need to you know.

And the first thing that Daniel does, before telling this current ruler what he wants to know, is give him a detailed history lesson from the life of Nebuchadnezzar. He lays out God's dealing with King Nebuchadnezzar. But Daniel's purpose isn't to inform him but to remind, because he ends up telling King Balshazzar, *you knew all this*, but you ignored it. The conclusion Daniel tells him in my sort of modern paraphrase, is, "You've screwed up!".

And then he comes to the writing on the wall. Mene, Mene, Tekel, Parsin (Incidentally, our text has a slightly different last word when Daniel interprets it, but that's just a matter singular and plural.)

Now you need to know why those who were initially asked what the writing meant couldn't give an answer. Whether they recognised the words, I'm not sure, but a dictionary definition *wasn't* what was being asked of them anyway - it was the words' significance. The words themselves were plain ordinary words. They were current words about weights or measuring.

If God were to write the same message up on the wall over there is morning I can tell you what we would see. Numbered, Numbered, Weighed, Divided. So in fact Daniel wasn't called in to give King Balshazzar the literal meaning of the words, because it wasn't what the words literally meant that was the problem, but what *God meant* by writing them up for King Balshazzar to read on the plastered wall of his banqueting hall.

But for a moment let me take a slight detour from our story to answer a question that might have crossed your mind. If Balshazzar's astrologers and other mystics couldn't work out the riddle of these four words, why should Daniel be able to? Well that's because Daniel, and we also, serve a living God who communicates things we are not expecting. Let me tell you a brief story to illustrate.

Many years ago in the days when I owned a minibus, I took a group of young people from this church up to a rough end of Gateshead to work with an evangelist friend on a mission. One evening we were running a youth coffee bar in a church hall, when Derek shouted out, "Everybody to the that side of the hall - now!" - pointing away from where he was standing. We dutifully did so, obviously a bit puzzled - until a brick came through a window on the side he'd just sent us away from. How did Derek know he needed to say that? I'll leave you to work that out - and we're go back to sixth century BC Babylon.

And I'll remind you what these words' meaning was. "God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end. You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting. Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians." And if you want a short form of the interpretation Daniel's telling him, then, "your time's up", will probably do. I'll come back to this in a moment, but there's something else I want to draw your attention to first.

Because I want to point out to you something about this major event in middle-eastern



history from God's perspective. And to do this I need to go back to 593BC, that fifty-four years before it happened, and to take you to Jerusalem, where the prophet Jeremiah is laying out for the inhabitants of Judah what God is about to do to them because of their failure to honour and obey Him. But he don't just give prophecies for the people of Israel. He also give them about Babylon. And he says this in the book of Jeremiah Ch.51. The whole chapter's a prophecy against Babylon, but here's a taster.

In verse 11 he says "The Lord has stirred up the kings of the Medes, because his purpose is to destroy Babylon. The Lord will take vengeance, vengeance for his temple." (At this point the Temple's still standing by the way.)

In verse 28 he again mentions the Medes, and follows on in verse 52 by saying - "days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will punish her idols". These are of course the idols Balshazzar and his guests were toasting.

And finally in verse 56 he says, "A destroyer will come against Babylon; her warriors will be captured, and their bows will be broken. For the Lord is a God of retribution; he will repay in full."

And I repeat, *all this* was prescribed fifty-four years before it happened, *even* specifying that it would be the kingdom of the Medes who would come against Babylon and conquer it - pronouncing this while the undisputed world power of the region was still Babylonian. People talk about the Sovereignty of God. You want an illustration of it. I've just given it to you.

And something else we haven't read, but a postscript to it. The Medes, after conquering the Babylonian empire, tended to free up nationals from the various countries the Babylonians had conquered and allowed them to return to their home turfs - which meant that the Jewish exiles were able to go back to Israel and rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple - just as God had also said would happen.

I'm drawing to a close, but I did say I'd go back the writing on the wall and its message to King Balshazzar. For him, it was a message of judgement - full stop. Daniel points out to him he *should* have taken warning from King Nebuchadnezzar's experience of God and what *he'd* learnt about Him. But Belshazzar hadn't. But that wasn't God's last time of writing up a message.

He wrote up another one some one and a half millennium later, not on a wall this time, but on a wooden cross. He wrote it in blood, and he used Roman nails to do it. And it wasn't just a message of judgement, but of both mercy and judgement. And I can best summarise it by reading to you three verses from John's Gospel chapter three:

*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.*

God may not have taken us by surprise by writing on a wall, but He has blessed us by



leaving the record of His message for us, all of us, to inwardly digest, down the past twenty centuries. And we don't even have to search for someone to interpret it for us. The meaning of Jesus death and resurrection have been written down plain and clear for us to take in and respond to. But we still need to make that choice. Because... like the other stuff I've mentioned this morning... there *are* consequences.

*Granville Richards*