Daniel 5 • The handwriting on the wall

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Let's get into some Scripture here tonight. We're in the book of Daniel. We're in the fifth chapter, so open your Bible there, please: Daniel, Chapter 5. All right, let's pray. Heavenly Father, as we dig into the Scriptures tonight we want to hear from You. We want to see You as You are. We want our hearts to be enlivened and enriched. We long to hear Your voice, so we pray that You would speak to us, Lord. Minister grace, minister insight, minister direction: we look for all these things, and we look to You for them. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen.

All right, Daniel, Chapter 5. You'll notice that it begins in verse 1 by saying, *"[1]King Belshazzar made a great feast for a thousand of his lords and drank wine in front of the thousand."* I'm going to have you stop there for a moment because I need to explain what's going on. Up to this point we've been hearing about King Nebuchadnezzar, King Nebuchadnezzar, King Nebuchadnezzar. Well, we've just skipped ahead. In fact, we've skipped about– somewhere between, maybe–thirteen to fifteen years ahead, and already there have been a whole long line of kings that have followed Nebuchadnezzar, and we're going to see that here momentarily.

But you need to understand something about what's happening at the time that this is being given. Babylon is –right now– being besieged by the Medo-Persian army. They are literally outside the walls of Babylon. They've been there for a long time, because a siege of a city can often take a long time. But obviously the King of Babylon, who is now Belshazzar, (and by the way, he's named after his god Bel, and his name means something like "Bel protects the king," or "Bel protects him," or something like that) Belshazzar is partying. He's having a party. He's gotten all of his nobles together. There are about a thousand of them, and they are drinking it up and celebrating their gods. and so forth. Which tells you a little bit about how concerned Belshazzar seemed to be about the siege that was going on outside their city walls.

Now we're told in verse 2 that he was doing more than just partying. It says, *"[2]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 kings and his lords, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them."*

He wants to make a statement here about his dominance, and so he refers back to the dominant work of his forefather Nebuchadnezzar and the things that he took from Jerusalem, from the temple of God. And he says,"I want you to bring those, because we're going to drink wine to our gods using these goblets and vessels and things that were created for the God of Israel." And that's an important thing to remember. They were created for the God of Israel, and he's going to use them now to celebrate and to worship his many gods, Bel being among them.

Now, you might have noticed here that it talks about Nebuchadnezzar as his father. Now you need to understand something about that."Father" in the Bible is often used, and it is used here, to refer to someone's ancestor. This is actually written in Aramaic. But it's the same with Hebrew. When the word "father" appears, it often isn't referring to a direct biological father, but rather to a predecessor, if you will.

Even in the New Testament, we read how the Jews would make reference to "our father Abraham," even though they were many, many, many generations removed from Abraham. In fact, let me show you on the screen how the actual lineage from Nebuchadnezzar on forward looked:

- **Nebuchadnezzar** (ruled 43 years)
- **Evil-Merodach** (ruled 2 years)
- **Neriglassar** (Nergalsharezer in Jeremiah, ruled 4 years)
- **Laborosoarchod** (ruled 9 months)
- **Nabonidus**
- **Belshazzar** (ruled alongside Nabonidus in a co-regency until the time of the Medo-Persian overthrow)

Nebuchadnezzar is the one that we really start with here in the book of Daniel. He certainly wasn't the first king of Babylon, but he ruled a total of 43 years, so he had a fairly long reign. His son, Evil-Merodach, ruled just two years. Then he was actually assassinated after just being on the throne for two years by his brother-in-law, who is the next king we see there, which is Neriglassar. But he's actually referred to as Nergalsharezer back in Jeremiah (those are hard names to pronounce, and I'm sure I'm not doing them correctly), but he ruled for approximately four years, as you see there.

And then here comes the really tough name. Anybody want to try that? Laborosoarchod (that sound anywhere close?) Don't name your kids that if you're in that stage of life. I know some people like to do biblical names. Interestingly enough, this king was a child-king and only was on the throne (and

really technically not on the throne) but was on the throne for like nine months before he was actually killed, believe it or not, by some people who conspired to take over the throne, one of which was Nabonidus, who actually took over the throne. Nabonidus was appointed by those conspirators to be king, and he remained king until the time of the Medo-Persian Empire.

So you might say, "Well now, wait a minute. You told me that Belshazzar was king." Well, yes, Belshazzar was Nabonidus' son, and they had a co-regency. Nabonidus actually traveled away from Babylon, and he left his son Belshazzar in charge of the kingdom. And so they were sharing this co-regency up until the point of the Medo-Persian overthrow. So once again, we have to remember what's going on. King Belshazzar is confidently partying with his nobles, his concubines, his other wives, assuming that there's no possible way that the Medo-Persian army is going to get into the city.

He probably had some reason to believe that the place was impregnable. We've learned through archeological digs that the wall of Babylon was so wide that three chariots could go upon the wall, on the top of the wall, side by side. All right? So it was wide enough to handle three chariots traveling side by side, so he thought it was impregnable. And it might have been so, had it not been for some pretty ingenious invasion tactics by the Medo-Persian king, which we'll talk about as we get to the end of the chapter. I'll tell you how that actually came down. It's really brilliant.

But verse 3 goes on to say: *"[3] 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 notice this) *and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone."*

Now that's something you want to pay attention to, that they praised their pagan gods. What are they praising them for? Well, they're praising them for the dominion over the God of Israel. You have to understand, that is really how Belshazzar is adding insult to injury related to his actions. And so by bringing forth these vessels that were hidden away and had been taken out of the temple in Jerusalem, he's basically saying, "Look at our military superiority over the army of Israel and the God of Israel," because you have to understand: nations back in those days didn't think so much in terms of military superiority. They thought in terms of god-superiority. In other words, "My god can beat up your god. My god is stronger than your god. If your god were stronger than my god, then you wouldn't have been able to be conquered. But since we conquered you, that proves my god is bigger than your god."

So you see what Belshazzar is doing here by bringing out these implements, these vessels, if you will. He's boasting. And we know what happens when people pridefully boast in the Bible. Look what verse 5 goes on to say: *"[5]Immediately the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace, opposite the lampstand…"* Obviously that's given to us to show that, in plain view– it was well-illuminated– God chose to do this right next to the lampstand, right there in the palace. And it says: *"...and the king saw the hand as it wrote."* Can you imagine what that would be like? For one thing, you're already a little bit liquored-up, so emotions are going to be a little bit wacky anyway, and then you see this dismembered hand writing on the wall.

By the way, have you ever heard the proverbial statement that, "Well, the handwriting is on the wall." That's where this comes from, right here from Daniel Chapter 5. And you can imagine what this would cause in terms of the panic in the room. Look what verse 6 says: *"[6]Then the king's color changed*, (and that means he just became deathly pale) *and his thoughts alarmed him; his limbs gave way…"* Now, in the ESV, it says, "his limbs gave way." In the Aramaic, it literally means, "the joints of his hip were loosed." Doesn't that sound delightful? It suggests that he was so scared that he actually fell to the floor. And we're told here at the end of verse 6 that, *"...his knees* (actually) *knocked together."*

So it is a pretty frightening sort of a scene, as you can well imagine. So, *"[7]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.' [8]Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or make known to the king the interpretation."* We haven't been told yet what that writing even is, but we're told that it was beyond all of the wise men and enchanters, and so forth.

So we're told in verse 9: *"[9]Then King Belshazzar was greatly alarmed, and his color changed,* (again. I don't know if you can get more pale) *and* (it says that) *his lords were* (also) *perplexed*." He has a thousand people he's entertaining in the room. He brings in these others who are supposed to have all this wisdom. Nobody knows. *"[10]The queen, (*we're told in verse 10) *because of the words of the king and his lords, came into the banqueting hall,* (apparently she wasn't there) *and the queen declared, 'O king, live forever! Let not your thoughts alarm you or your color change. [11]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, [12]because an excellent spirit, knowledge, and understanding to interpret dreams, explain riddles, and solve problems were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Belteshazzar. Now let Daniel be called, and he will show the interpretation.'"

I want to stop for just a moment here, because the last thing that we essentially read in Chapter 4 had to do with the humbling of King Nebuchadnezzar, after which he made a proclamation to his entire nation that there is one true God, the God who created heaven and earth. And he came to that recognition, and he proclaimed this throughout his kingdom. It hasn't been terribly long since that proclamation was made–maybe, up to fifteen years,-- we don't know exactly how or probably somewhat longer than that, because I'm sure he didn't give it right before he died.

But even so, it hasn't been that long, terribly long. And yet you can see that the way the queen speaks of Daniel really has taken nothing of what Nebuchadnezzar learned, nothing of what Nebuchadnezzar was ultimately shown about Daniel's God being the one true God above all. And that's what Nebuchadnezzar said. And yet they now still refer to him as someone in whom is "the spirit of the gods."

And again, that's a pagan way of talking, but you can see by that, they didn't really learn anything. Verse 13 goes on and says: *"[13]Then Daniel was brought in before the king. The king answered and said to Daniel, 'You are that Daniel, one of the exiles of Judah, whom the king my father brought from Judah. [14]I have heard of you that the spirit of the gods is in you, and that light and understanding and excellent wisdom are found in you. [15]Now the wise men, the enchanters, have been brought in before me to read this writing and make known to me its interpretation, but they could not show the interpretation of the matter.*

"'[16]But I have heard that you can give interpretations and solve problems. Now if you can read the writing and make known to me its interpretation, you shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around your neck and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom.'"

And I love Daniel's response: *"[17]Then Daniel answered and said before the king, 'Let your gifts be for yourself, and give your rewards to another….'"* What he isn't telling him right at this point is, "You're not going to have time to make good on this stuff really, anyway," because he kind of knows. He says,

"'...Nevertheless, I will read the writing to the king and make known to him the interpretation.'"

In other words, "You don't need to pay me. I'll give it to you." *"'[18] O king,* (verse 18) *the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father kingship and greatness and glory and majesty. [19]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. [20]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. [21]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.'"*

What is Daniel doing by this reminder? He's bringing back to his remembrance all of these things that transpired concerning Nebuchadnezzar, and he's essentially saying, "You learned nothing. You learned nothing." Verse 22: *"'[22]And you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this, [23]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. [24]Then from his presence the hand was sent, and this writing was inscribed. [25]And this is the writing that was inscribed: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, and PARSIN.'"*

Now, I want you to know as we get into this interpretation of these words, each word in this, (and you'll see there's one word that's repeated at the beginning) but each word stands for a sentence or a statement, its own statement, all right? And so Daniel goes on to interpret what these mean: *"'[26]This is the interpretation of the matter* (and he begins with the first word): *MENE..."*

And now it's interesting to note that this word *mene* is actually an Aramaic word that sounds very similar to the word, "numbered." And that's why Daniel goes on to say, *"...God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end."*

Then, in verse 27, he mentions the second word, which is *"TEKEL...."* Again, it's an Aramaic word that is similar in pronunciation, similar in sound, to the

word, “weighed.” And that's why Daniel says, *“...you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting.”*

And then verse 28, “PERES…” It's interesting, this word not only sounds like the Aramaic for divided, but it has a similar sound to the word, “Persian.” And he goes on to explain that that means, *“...your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.’”*

We’re told in verse 29, *“[29]Then Belshazzar gave the command, and Daniel was clothed with purple, a chain of gold was put around his neck, and a proclamation was made about him, that he should be the third ruler in the kingdom.* (But Daniel didn't care, because in verse 30 we're told:) *[30]That very night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was killed. [31]And Darius, the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old.”* So, interesting. Whatever promises that Belshazzar made weren't very long-lasting because he didn't have the ability to make good on them.

But incidentally, there's something I want to share with you about this King Darius the Mede. That is believed by many Bible scholars to be his royal name as given by the Medes. But they believe that he also had another royal name that had more of a Persian origin, and that was the name Cyrus. But there's another reason that we believe that there is a possibility that Darius and Cyrus are the same person. And the reason we believe that is because we actually know of historical writings.

There was an ancient Greek historian by the name of Herodotus, and he actually wrote in some great detail. In fact, Herodotus incidentally is considered to be the father of historians because he was one of the very first. He wrote about the actual fall of Babylon when the Medo-Persian army came and defeated it. And what he tells about is that the reason that the king of the Medo-Persian army was successful in approaching the city and literally falling upon it suddenly was because he realized there was a weakness to the city. And here's what it was. The Euphrates River ran through the city of Babylon.

Now, that was actually a good thing for the Babylonians. When you have water running through your city, that means you have access, easy access, to water all the time. And if an army comes against you, you've got that water source that's in your city, and it's going to be much more difficult for somebody to starve you out, as it were.

But Cyrus (or Darius) realized at some point that if he kept the Babylonians busy thinking elsewhere, he could actually work with his men to divert the

Euphrates. And that's exactly what he did. He diverted the Euphrates to an artificial marsh that he kind of created. And since it flowed into the city under the walls of the city, by diverting it, eventually it became so shallow that his men could wade into the Euphrates and go under the wall of Babylon and take the city by surprise. And that's one of the things that this historian Herodotus tells us, that the city fell suddenly and without a battle.

So here we have this account in Daniel where they're partying it up, saying, "Yeah, this is never …we're safe. You know this guy's never going to get into the city." That night, the king died. That night the Medo-Persian army invaded, came in and took the city without a fight. What's really interesting about this is that we see various prophecies in the Bible that speak of the fall of Babylon.

Now, Jeremiah was one such prophet who actually, (this is interesting) Jeremiah was alive when Jerusalem fell. He actually saw Jerusalem fall to the Babylonians. But do you know that God gave Jeremiah a prophecy about the fall of Babylon before Jerusalem fell? Let me put it up on the screen for you. It's in Jeremiah Chapter 51, and it goes like this:

Jeremiah 51;8,11(ESV)
Suddenly Babylon has fallen and been broken. Wail for her! Take balm for her pain; perhaps she may be healed. Sharpen the arrows! Take up the shields! The LORD has stirred up the spirit of the kings of the Medes, because his purpose concerning Babylon is to destroy it, for that is the vengeance of the LORD, the vengeance for his temple.

"[8]Suddenly Babylon has fallen (Did you notice that? That word "suddenly". It's like in a moment, suddenly, Babylon has fallen) *and been broken. Wail for her! Take balm for her pain; perhaps she may be healed… [11]Sharpen the arrows! Take up the shields! The LORD has stirred the spirit of the kings of the Medes, because his purpose concerning Babylon is to destroy it, for that is the vengeance of the LORD, the vengeance for his temple."*

Because the Babylonian army would come into the city and destroy not only Jerusalem, but also the temple of God, God took vengeance and prophesied that He would bring down Babylon in a very sudden moment. Now, we're going to go back in time a little bit farther to a prophecy that was given by Isaiah, and this was about 200 years before all of these things in Daniel took place. Let me show you. Isaiah 45 goes like this:

Isaiah 45:1-3 (ESV)
Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have

grasped, to subdue nations before him and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him, that gates may not be closed. "I will go before you and level the exalted places, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron. I will give you the treasures of darkness and the hoards in secret places, that you may know that it is I, the LORD, the God of Israel, who call you by your name."

"[1]Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, (by the way, Cyrus hadn't been born yet, but He's talking to him) *whose right hand have I grasped, to subdue nations before him and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him, that gates may not be closed, "[2]I will go before you and level the exalted places, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron. [3]I will give you the treasures of darkness and the hoards in secret places, that you may know that it is I, the Lord,* (Yahweh) *the God of Israel, who call you by your name.'"*(And not only do I call you by name, I call you by name about 200 years before you will actually do these things.)

So these are pretty incredible prophecies related to this thing that we are reading right here in Daniel Chapter 5. Once again, one of the main themes of the chapter is just like it was in the last chapter, and that is the pride of the human heart and how God brings down a man's pride when he brings it up against the Lord. But it is just fascinating to see and to know historically (this is one of the cool things I love about studying the Bible) that not only does history, the writings of historians, bear out the things that the Bible says, but also the archeological evidence that we end up finding.

And by the way, I should probably tell you that for many years there was the belief that the Bible was wrong because it did not mention anything in historical documents about a King Belshazzar, who the Bible talks about here in Daniel Chapter 5. It did mention, historical documents did mention Nabonidus, his father.

And so there were many and we knew that Nabonidus remained on the throne up until the overthrow of the Medo-Persian Empire. So that was the cause for many people to say, "Well, the Bible's obviously wrong. We know Nabonidus was on the throne. We've never even heard of this Belshazzar." Well, it only was a matter of time until they unearthed more archeological information, deeper, went deeper, into these sorts of things and found out that Belshazzar was in fact the son of Nabonidus. And in fact they had a co-regency during the final days of the Babylonian Empire.

So, I want to encourage you with that, that there are still some things that archeology hasn't figured out, and that liberal scholars love to use to poke fun or to say things about the Bible that, “Well, it's not true because, we've never ever found this.” The fact of the matter is we haven't found it yet, perhaps, but eventually these things happen and give us great insights into the things of the Word.

So Daniel Chapter 5. Great. Great chapter. We're going to actually stop there for tonight, because we're going to take the next chapter by itself for obvious reasons.

Daniel Chapter 6 is a wonderful chapter that is probably most well-known among all of the stories that come out of the book of Daniel, which is Daniel and the Lion’s Den. And we're going to do that next time. So I'm ending quite a bit early tonight, but this is going to give you guys more of an opportunity to do some fellowshipping tonight.

So let's pray. Father, we thank You so much for giving us time tonight to go through this chapter in the book of Daniel, and if there's one thing, Lord, that we come away with, it's the knowledge and understanding that all of time and history is known and understood perfectly by You and known before it is going to take place, and You speak of these things and prophesy about them before they happen.

Because we know that just as Daniel testified in this chapter, You are the God who rules over the kingdoms of men, and You give them to whomever You choose. And Lord, we need to remember that today here in the United States and concerning all of the other nations of the world, that You are the Lord who raises up and takes down, and we thank You, Father God, for Your great sovereignty. Even when it is challenging for us to understand in terms of world events, we continue to trust in You. Lord, we choose to put our faith in You and to trust You for the things that You are doing to bring about the purpose of Your will, because we know, Lord God, that You have a plan. A redemptive plan for mankind, and we know that plan is moving forward and cannot be thwarted or blocked by any man or woman.

We thank You for that, Father, and we praise You as the one true Holy God. Thank You, Father, for the Word and for speaking to us tonight. We ask You to bless our time of fellowship this evening as we minister one to another, in Jesus’ name we pray, amen. Amen. God bless!