

## **Babylon's Gala Ball**

### **Daniel 5:1-9**

#### **Introduction**

Most people are familiar with the expression “the handwriting is on the wall”. It has come to mean universally a premonition of danger or the certainty of disaster or imminent judgement.

In this chapter we discover its origins and meaning.

This chapter records the night Babylon fell in a single day. The date October 12, 539 B.C. It is one of the most attested historical events in antiquity. The chapter opens with an elegant ball. A huge feast for Babylon's finest citizens. What is the occasion? The Medes and the Persians have surrounded the city. But the king and its citizens feel certain that the City of Babylon is impregnable; its defenses immune to even the most powerful armies that could come against it. Babylon would care for them. Babylon would protect them. Babylon had made them wealthy and strong and prosperous.

King Belshazzar calls for a party. Not just any party—but a party that mocks the God of Israel and celebrates the gods of Babylon. The drunken, irreverent and blasphemous celebration is suddenly broken up when a mysterious hand appears and writes on the plaster surfaces of the large banquet hall. It is a picture of God's intervention and judgment on the wicked king and his city.

The world celebrates sin and mocks Christ and Christians. The Bible is clear. We will all appear before God in the Day of Judgment. We will all appear—in Christ or apart from Christ. “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil” (2 Corinthians 5:10 ESV).

In the future Babylon will again fall in a single hour (Revelation 18).

#### **The Babylonian Ball (v.1)**

*Daniel 5:1 (NKJV) Belshazzar the king made a great feast for a thousand of his lords, and drank wine in the presence of the thousand.*

In the first four chapters King Nebuchadnezzar ruled Babylon. Now some 20 years have gone by. Nebuchadnezzar is dead. Evil-Merodach succeeded his father but was assassinated after ruling for only two years (562-560 B.C.). His assassin and successor was his brother-in-law Neriglissar or Nergal-Sharezzar—married Nebuchadnezzar's daughter and ruled four years (560-556 B.C.). Interestingly he is mentioned as one of the high ranking officials present when Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem. He was one of the officials placed in charge of looking after the prophet Jeremiah (see Jeremiah 39:3;13). Lebashi-Marduk followed his father and ruled as a kind of puppet king for only two months (May-June 556 B.C.) and was assassinated and succeeded by Nabonidus. Nabonidus ruled the empire some 17 years (556-539 B.C.).

## **Babylon's Gala Ball**

### **Daniel 5:1-9**

Most conservative scholars of Babylon believe that Nabonidus married another daughter of Nebuchadnezzar and that Nabonidus was the father of Belshazzar.

Nabonidus seized the surrounding idols of nearby cities hoping superstitiously they would ward off the threat of the Medo-Persians. Many people see religion as a kind of lucky charm.

Nabonidus was the king of Babylonia and his son Belshazzar was tasked with oversight of the city of Babylon. Nabonidus ruled over the empire from Haran, or Teima in Arabia about 500 miles from Babylon. Historians believe that Nabonidus spent most of the 17 years of his reign in Arabia. In his absence Belshazzar ruled in Babylon. In the chapter he is called the son of Nebuchadnezzar but the word translated son can also mean ancestor (Nebuchadnezzar was his grandfather).

Belshazzar throws a lavish banquet for Babylon's elite. The party featured lots of wine and food. The party takes place while the armies of Persia are parked outside the walls of the city. The banquet served the twin purposes of building the morale of the sequestered citizens and to weaken the resolve of the surrounding armies.

In our culture we don't always see what is obvious. Kings seldom drink or dine with subjects. The wine flows freely. Both king and guests are drunk.

### **Belshazzar's Gall (vv.2-4)**

*2While he tasted the wine, Belshazzar gave the command to bring the gold and silver vessels which his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple which had been in Jerusalem, that the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them.*

In the passage the king drinks the wine and suddenly he has a most blasphemous thought. How much fun would it be to drink the wine from the sacred vessels captured in Jerusalem from the Jewish Temple? What better way to celebrate the superiority of the gods of Babylon over the empty and impotent power of the so called God of the Jewish people.

Belshazzar's grandfather had taken the artifacts from the Jewish Temple (2 Chronicles 36:10) in the final siege of Jerusalem (587-586 B.C.). Almost 50 years (48) the treasures were stored in Babylon. Belshazzar's name means Bel protects the king. His father Nabonidus had distanced himself from Babylon's chief deity Marduk and instead adopted as his chief deity Sin—the moon god and the chief god of Haran—the crescent moon is the symbol of Islam). We have an ancient artifact that archeologists refer to as the Nabonidus Chronicle—from a larger historical archive known as the Babylonian Chronicle. In the story Nabonidus recounts how Sin visited him and told him to rebuild the moon god's temple in Haran (the place Abraham went to when he left Ur of the Chaldees). According the Chronicle—Babylon “acted evil, careless and even sinned against” the divine power of Sin inviting his wrath. In mercy Sin sent Nabonidus away

## Babylon's Gala Ball

### Daniel 5:1-9

from Babylon for ten years. Nabonidus then went to the royal city of Teima—in what is modern Saudi Arabia—and left the crown prince in charge of the city of Babylon.

The king of Babylon put these vessels in a royal treasury. It was the offering of a defeated god to his own god. No king—however great—had the right to use what properly belonged to the gods. This was an outrage even by pagan standards or measures.

We are not told what prompted the king's blasphemous outrage. What was he thinking? Was he thinking that he would prove to the people his confidence in the gods of Babylon? What did this king really think of Yahweh or Jehovah? Was He a minor god of a disgraced and defeated people? These vessels were in the possession of his god!

We might think of this verse as **drunks drinking from the wrong cups. Why is the author of our text so interested in drinking? Because it will serve as the vehicle to explain the blasphemy that is about to take place. Why would this king dare to insult God?**

*3Then they brought the gold vessels that had been taken from the temple of the house of God which had been in Jerusalem; and the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines drank from them.*

*4They drank wine, and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze and iron, wood and stone.*

The passage pounds home the presence of wine and blasphemy and idolatry as a lethal cocktail for judgment.

What does it mean that they brought the gold vessels taken from the temple of the house of God which had been in Jerusalem? These were holy vessels. Sacred objects. They had managed to survive the melting pots that helped create the golden image on the plain of Dura. The king intended to have his guests drink from the sacred objects to prove that the God of Israel was a vanquished God and the gods of Babylon were powerful and sufficient to ward off any danger from outside enemies.

*They drank wine* (from the sacred golden vessels of Solomon's Temple) *and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze and iron, wood and stone* (v.4). The king, the Lords and the ladies raised the sacred vessels and made toasts and shouted praises to the deities of Babylon. **But these gods aren't real. They were made of precious metals, carved images of wood and stone. Idolatry is an attempt to make God in our image.**

How do we know if something is an idol? It can be built or manufactured or fabricated by human imagination and human ingenuity and human creativity.

Idolatry reduces God to something or someone who can be controlled or manipulated.

Idolatry worships the creature rather than the Creator.

Idolatry is in part a willful rejection of the true God.

## **Babylon's Gala Ball**

### **Daniel 5:1-9**

The picture painted in the passage is one of irreverent drunkenness and blasphemy and idolatry. The Bible repeatedly warns against drunkenness. Why? Alcohol can dull the senses, reduce reason; remove inhibitions and impair judgment. Or should I say invite judgment from God?

The writer of Proverbs warns (23:20-21); *“Do not mix with winebibbers, Or with gluttonous eaters of meat; For the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty, And drowsiness will clothe a man with rags.*

The word winebibber though archaic is quite picturesque. It is the picture of a person nursing their drink—because it is the source of comfort and relief. Later in the same chapter of Proverbs are these warnings (vv.29-35); *“Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has contentions? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes? Those who linger long at the wine, Those who go in search of mixed wine. Do not look on the wine when it is red, When it sparkles in the cup, When it swirls around smoothly; At the last it bites like a serpent, And stings like a viper. Your eyes will see strange things, And your heart will utter perverse things. Yes you will be like who lies down in the midst of the sea, Or like one who lies at the top of the mast, saying; They have struck me, but I was not hurt; They have beaten me, but I did not feel it. When shall I awake, that I may seek another drink?”* This is a case study of a drunk. *“I like the way it tastes.” “I like the way it makes me feel”.*

Paul warned the Roman Christians (Romans 13:13-14); *“Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in licentiousness and lewdness, not in strife and envy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts.”*

The Bible gives strong warnings against blasphemy. Jesus said; *“Assuredly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they may utter; (29) “but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is subject to eternal condemnation”—(30) because they said, “He has an unclean spirit.”*

What is blasphemy? At the heart it is a rejection of God.

### **The Handwriting On The Wall (vv.5-6)**

*Daniel 5:5–6 (NKJV) 5In the same hour the fingers of a man's hand appeared and wrote opposite the lampstand on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace; and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote.*

*6Then the king's countenance changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his hips were loosened and his knees knocked against each other.*

## **Babylon's Gala Ball**

### **Daniel 5:1-9**

The king's drunken blasphemy prompts a supernatural manifestation in the palace. A hand appears and begins to write opposite the lampstand on the plaster of the wall. The king sees the hand with his own eyes (v.5).

John Phillips writes; "The guests noted the frightened face of the king. They they, too, saw the ghostly hand. Soon, everyone was staring in terror at the whitened wall, and the writing hand moved on. Words appeared on the wall in its wake, and that sight only increased the spreading horror and fear because the words made no sense. Then suddenly and silently, the ghostly hand was gone, swallowed up in the night" (*Exploring The Book Of Daniel*; p.87).

The king's face said it all (v.6). The verse describes a person shaken to the bone—terrified.

Henry Ford famously said; "Thinking is the hardest work there is which is probably the reason so few engage in it."

Have you ever heard of the DT's (delirium tremens)? It is a phenomena experienced by alcoholics who are suddenly deprived of the alcohol. The hand from heaven—has sobered the king and his guests.

Moments earlier the king's lips were full of praise for the gods of Babylon; scorn for the God of Israel and now the king is shaking like a proverbial leaf. But note what else the text says;

*"... his thoughts troubled him."* Had the king gone too far? Had he offended the God of the Jews? His conscience was overwhelmed. The king had ordered the holy objects be used for unholy purposes.

### **The King's Fall (vv.7-9)**

*7The king cried aloud to bring in the astrologers, the Chaldeans, and the soothsayers. The king spoke, saying to the wise men of Babylon, "Whoever reads this writing, and tells me its interpretation, shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around his neck; and he shall be the third ruler in the kingdom."*

What does the frightened king do? He calls for the astrologers, the Chaldeans and the soothsayers. The king goes to the same tired sources that had failed king Nebuchadnezzar in the past.

The king of Babylon offers temporary rewards.

The frightened king has a desperate need to know what it all means.

*8Now all the king's wise men came, but they could not read the writing, or make known to the king its interpretation.*

## **Babylon's Gala Ball**

### **Daniel 5:1-9**

“The blindness of these ‘wise men’ went deeper than their inability to *interpret* the message; they could not even *read* it” (see John Philips p.88).

Why were the wise men unable to read the writing or make known the interpretation?

The Apostle Paul offers this (1Corinthians 2:14); “*But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.*”

Who is the natural man? The unsaved individual. Jude 19 uses the same natural man—but is translated sensual man and explains it as an individual bereft of the Spirit of God.

Paul argues that the Christian should be able to grasp spiritual things (Romans 8:9); “*But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His.*”

*9Then King Belshazzar was greatly troubled, his countenance was changed, and his lords were astonished.*

Why was the king greatly troubled? His advisors could offer him no insight into the identity of the mysterious hand or the meaning of the writing on the wall.

Think about what is happening in the text. The city is surrounded by a foreign army. The king was confident that the gods of Babylon would insure its safety and security. The king either knew about his grandfather's testimony and ignored it—or was completely ignorant of Babylon's recent history. **Daniel tells us exactly what the king did and didn't know (v.22).**

The king has no idea that the God of Heaven is about to transfer the head of gold to the impressive chest of silver. Babylon will fall in a single night. The king's countenance changes. What does it all mean? Where can the king go to get accurate information about the sign, the signature, and its meaning? There is someone there who remembers a man. A man who counseled his grandfather. A man who had a reputation of understanding the supernatural.

Belshazzar had all but forgotten his grandfather's advisor Daniel.

What does blasphemy and idolatry have in common? Rejection of God.

What does blasphemy and idolatry and rejection of God bring?

Judgment.

### **Conclusion**

Fast forward to the mysterious book of Revelation. In chapters 17 and 18 John describes a future Babylon; home to the apostate church and a global system of commerce. The religious system collapses and it marks the beginning of the end of the Antichrist's kingdom. It's comforting to read Revelation 17:17; “For God has put it into their hearts to fulfill his purpose, to be of one

## **Babylon's Gala Ball**

### **Daniel 5:1-9**

mind, and to give their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled" (NKJV). Chapter has four different voices; the voice of judgment (vv.1-3); and the voice of separation (vv. 4-8); and the voice of mourning (vv.9-19); and the voice of rejoicing (vv.20-24).

An angel announces that Babylon must fall. Babylon is fallen, is fallen, suggests judgment on religious or spiritual Babylon and commercial Babylon. The great city (v.10); the center of the economic world will finally get what it deserves. It will become a habitation for demons. John sees a future Babylon influencing the nations the way wine influences those who are drunk. The city makes them rich. It is the only thing that matters to the future citizens of Babylon. Some of God's people are in the city and God says he wants them to come out for two reasons; (1) the city will be destroyed and he wants to save them. (2) the city is satanic and he doesn't want them to be defiled by it. So he cries; "Come out!" This has always been God's call. Leave the place that's destined for judgment. Salvation has always included separation from the world; and attaching your self to Jesus and the things that belong to Jesus. The world glorifies itself; but the saint seeks to glorify God (v.7). In chapter 18 we are invited to stare at Babylon; we see a queen in all her pride (v.7); "I sit a queen. . .and shall see no sorrow!" But one day she exchanges her joys for sorrow and her riches for famine. There is a lesson for God's people today; do not share in other people's sins. There are two groups that lament the fall of Babylon; the kings of the earth (vv.9-10) and the merchants of the earth (vv.11-19). People sell their souls for wealth and privilege and safety and security. Luxury becomes poverty. Babylon is judged in one day (v.8) and one hour (vv.10;19).