

Daniel Reads The Writing On The Wall

Daniel 5:18-31

Introduction

The chapter began with a gala Babylonian ball—the king invited a thousand guests to toast to the non-existent deities who were thought to insure their safety from the Medo-Persian armies. The wicked king then ordered the sacred vessels taken from the Jewish Temple and to be used to toast the gods of Babylon. A hand appeared from another dimension and wrote a message on the palace wall. The frightened king called the chief priests, astrologers, magicians and Chaldeans to read the words and discern the message. He offers lavish gifts for the one who is able to interpret the message.

No one was able interpret the mysterious words (vv.7-9). The queen mother recommends Belshazzar call on Daniel (vv.10-12). The king once again offers rich rewards for the Jewish captive if he can interpret the writing (vv.13-16). Daniel declines the king’s rewards but still offers to read the writing on the wall (v.17).

We know that Daniel was a great student of the scroll of Jeremiah. Whatever meager possessions he took with him must have included this most lengthy scroll. Daniel was able to discern the captivity of the Jews would last 70 years (Jeremiah 25:8-13). It was from the scroll of Jeremiah that Daniel knew—in advance, exactly what would happen to Babylon and its king. Nations are not rewarded or punished in the next life. Punishment or reward belong only to those beings made by God. The punishment and reward of nations unfold here on this earth. The punishment and fall of Babylon was described by Jeremiah in chapters 50-51. When Jeremiah wrote his book the Medes dominated the Persians and Jeremiah’s prophecy predicted the following:

1. Babylon would be attacked from the north (1:3,9,41) by “the kings of the Medes” (51:11,28).
2. Babylon would fall with plenty (abundance—well provisioned; 51:26).
3. Babylon would trust its massive walls, towers and high gates (51:53,58).
4. The city would be taken by a clever strategy; “it would be caught in a snare”.
5. The successful strategy would be linked to the city’s water supply. Specifically, God would dry up her fountain (51:36).
6. The scheme would be connected with the flow of the Euphrates through Babylon. The passages (ferries) would be taken by surprise, and the reeds would be set on fire (51:32).
7. At the critical time, a feast would be in progress at which all of the nobles and notables would be in attendance.

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8. The drunkenness of these people would lead to their slaughter (51:57).*

* This information is quoted and adapted in John Phillips *Exploring The Book of Daniel* p.84; with his citation coming from Charles Boutflower; *In And Around the Book of Daniel—London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; 1923; p.24.*

Daniel believed in predictive prophecy. What is notable about the citations is that Daniel will receive supernatural insight and clearly has knowledge and understanding of Jeremiah's prophecy. Daniel believed God. Daniel believed in predictive prophecy and took the prophecies at face value. **Daniel staked his life that the prophecies of Jeremiah must come to pass. Babylon must fall.**

We are told that Nero played his harp while Rome burned. Belshazzar feasted the very night Babylon fell.

Daniel's Rebuke (vv.18-23)

Daniel 5:18–23 (NKJV) 18 O king, the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father a kingdom and majesty, glory and honor.

In these verses Daniel will contrast and compare the reign of Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar. Daniel begins by reminding the king of the lessons learned by his grandfather; lessons that Belshazzar chose to ignore. He begins by testifying to the sovereignty of God.

Once again Daniel refers to the true and living God as *El Elyon*; God Most High.

Daniel makes clear that God is above and beyond all the false deities in the Babylonian pantheon. Daniel affirms the supremacy and superiority of God. It was God who made Nebuchadnezzar great. It was God who allowed Nebuchadnezzar both kingdom and majesty and glory and honor. Daniel reminds the king that God is sovereign over kings and kingdoms. Daniel has already affirmed that God removes kings and sets up kings (Daniel 2:21). The Psalmist wrote; *“It is God who executes judgment, putting down one and lifting up another” (Psalm 75:7).*

The Sovereignty of God means even the most powerful human rulers are controlled by God. In the book of Ezra we are told “So the Jewish leaders continued in their work, and they were greatly encouraged by the preaching of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah (son of Iddo). The Temple was finally finished, as had been commanded by God and decreed by Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes, the kings of Persia” (Ezra 6:14 TLB). Ezra makes clear the rebuilding of the Temple was first commanded by God and then by kings—who were His instruments.

Sovereignty is a word that we use to describe God's authority, control and power. In the book of Job (36:26) “Behold, God is great, and we do not know Him” or God is so great we cannot begin

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to know him—no one can begin to understand eternity. Since nothing and no one compare's to God we are obligated to listen. God's sovereignty is absolute. God is not required to explain anything to us. In Job 38 we learn just how foolish it is to criticize or complain. The Lord calls on Job to prepare himself like a man; and says "I will question you , and you shall answer Me."

People often tell me that when they meet God they will have several questions for Him. When you meet God—He will question you—you will not question Him. One of the most difficult things to grasp is that God's sovereignty and God's sovereign love extends to every part of the believer's life. No wonder Paul could write with confidence; "For I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from his love. Death can't. Life can't. The angel's won't and the powers of hell itself cannot keep God's love away. Our fears for today, our worries about tomorrow; or where we are—high above the sky, or in the deepest ocean—nothing will ever be able to separate us from the love of God demonstrated by our Lord Jesus Christ who died for us (Romans 8:38-39 TLB).

19And because of the majesty that He gave him, all peoples, nations, and languages trembled and feared before him. Whomever he wished, he executed; whomever he wished, he kept alive; whomever he wished, he set up; and whomever he wished, he put down.

What is Daniel saying? God blessed Nebuchadnezzar—and that blessing caused people to fear him and tremble before him. With a single word he could keep people alive or put them to death.

20But when his heart was lifted up, and his spirit was hardened in pride, he was deposed from his kingly throne, and they took his glory from him.

The supernatural Being who gave the king blessing was also able to take it away! Even kings face danger when they are consumed with pride and arrogance.

Bill Cosby was America's Dad and darling. He will spend the next several years in prison.

21Then he was driven from the sons of men, his heart was made like the beasts, and his dwelling was with the wild donkeys. They fed him with grass like oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till he knew that the Most High God rules in the kingdom of men, and appoints over it whomever He chooses.

The king knew the tale of his grandfather's vanity, insanity, confession and restoration. The God Most High was patient and long-suffering with Nebuchadnezzar. But God's patience and long-suffering should never be seen as weakness or indifference to our sin. King Solomon wrote of the tragedies and misgivings of his deep dive into sin. "Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil" (Eccl. 8:11). In modern terms; "I got away with it. I never got caught. Does God really care about

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what I do? The Lord was patient with Nebuchadnezzar and gave him a whole year before executing judgment. Belshazzar ignored his grandfather's testimony (chapter 4).

22 "But you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, although you knew all this.

Have your parents and grandparents been honest about their failings? Did they beg with you and plead with you not to repeat their sins?

23 And you have lifted yourself up against the Lord of heaven. They have brought the vessels of His house 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, bronze and iron, wood and stone, which do not see or hear or know; and the God who holds your breath in His hand and owns all your ways, you have not glorified.

In the Bible Babylon is the birthplace of idolatry. It seems to have reached its zenith during the reign of Nimrod and his wife Semiramis (more about this). Like a religious cancer it spread throughout the world—manifesting in ancient Assyria, Egypt, The Indus Valley (Hinduism); and then spread its various manifestations in the Greek and Roman religions. Vestiges still cling in certain Roman Catholic and Eastern strains of Catholicism.

The Bible seems to indicate there will be a worldwide revival of idolatry in the last days; energized by evil spirit beings bent on deception.

Daniel's rebuke includes accusations of pride, blasphemy, idolatry, and what I am going to call a persistent willful negligence of the truth (vv. 22-23).

Daniel's Revelation (vv.24-28)

24 Then the fingers of the hand were sent from Him, and this writing was written.

25 "And this is the inscription that was written: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN

The message was in a known language but perhaps with foreign script or what we might call a strange font. It may also have been in the form of an anagram with the letters jumbled until Daniel separated the letters and made clear the meaning of the message.

The first word is repeated for emphasis. This is the shortest prophecy in the Bible. Jonah's prophecy for the people of Nineveh were a mere eight words in the English language; "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown" (Jonah 3:4).

The mysterious message was only four words; a dozen letters.

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26This is the interpretation of each word. Mene: God has numbered your kingdom, and finished it;

27Tekel: You have been weighed in the balances, and found wanting;

28Peres: Your kingdom has been divided, and given to the Medes and Persians.”

Daniel's rebuke is followed by Daniel's revelation. The mysterious hand and fingers were sent by God.

The message is short and consequential. The kingdom of Babylon will be given over to the Medes and the Persians and that Belshazzar will soon die.

“Without memory, there is no culture. Without memory, there would be no civilization, no society, no future.”

Elie Wiesel

The Bible teaches that the rise and fall of civilizations lie in God's hands. We would like to think that the depth and breath and height and glory of a kingdom is based on man's ingenuity, man's brilliance, wealth or power or might.

What is the cycle of civilization?

Babylon had its moment. The Medes and the Persians would have their moment. The Greeks and the Romans would have their moment. We will have our moment. But it will soon end and join the sands of the civilizations that have gone before us.

*There is a line by us unseen
That crosses every path—
The hidden boundary between
God's patience and His wrath.
Indeed, the doomed one's path below
May bloom as Eden bloomed;
He did not, does not, will not know,
Or feel that he is doomed.*

Daniel's Robing (vv.29-31)

29Then Belshazzar gave the command, and they clothed Daniel with purple and put a chain of gold around his neck, and made a proclamation concerning him that he should be the third ruler in the kingdom.

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30That very night Belshazzar, king of the Chaldeans, was slain.

31And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old.

The king's last command would have little consequence. He commands that Daniel be clothed in purple, a chain of gold be placed around his neck and that he be made third ruler in a kingdom that was destined to die. It was in effect the king's last gesture of defiance. In what way? The king summoned his servants, the king's keeper of the wardrobe; the king's keeper of the gold; the king's keeper of the record books. In a few hours there would be no throne or gold or power—it would belong to another.

That very night Darius the Mede enters Babylon, kills Belshazzar and will begin rule in the city. The drunken king had no idea that during his gala ball—the Medes and Persians were diverting the Euphrates river and the enemy army was marching into the city in the muddy riverbed.

Who is this person mentioned in verse 31? Scholars include as possible candidates Gubaru, the governor under Cyrus the king of Persia; or Darius may be another name (or title) for Cyrus himself; or he may have been Cambyses, son of Cyrus, who served as ruler of Babylon (see Charles Ryie's note in his study Bible).

The most important thing is not the identity of this person but rather the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy. The fall of Babylon would be swift and sure—and with relatively little blood shed. Indeed some of the population did not realize until it was too late that the Medes and Persians had breached the city and that their king was dead and that there was a new king. Not all the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah concerning Babylon were fulfilled. Some are remain to be fulfilled at a future date (Isaiah 13-14; Jeremiah 50-51).

The future Antichrist will have three capitals; Rome will be the political capitol; Jerusalem with a rebuilt temple and his image inside will serve as religious capitol and Babylon will provide the commercial and financial sources that will fuel his global empire. The story of that future Babylon is chronicled in the book of Revelation. It will be all that Isaiah and Jeremiah predicted.

But these verses (30-31) have another and equally profound significance. It is more than simply a date marker that divides to impressive kingdoms. The book of Genesis records the prophecy. Noah passed over his second son Ham, in silence because of his misbehavior. He prophetically cursed Ham's son—Canaan—because he would be the father of the perverse and wicked nations that filled and defiled God's promised land. He blessed his youngest son Shem—from whom would come the Semitic peoples; particularly Abraham and then Issac and then Jacob and most certainly the Lord Jesus Christ. Finally he blessed his oldest son Japheth; and passed on to him a promised expansion, enlargement, political dominion and a prominent place in the tents of Shem.

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Satan was committed to making sure that Noah turned out to be a false prophet. The first great empires were Hametic and Semitic—the Egyptians were from the seed of Ham and the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires were both Semitic. But with the death of Belshazzar—the world empires would pass to the children of Japheth—were it has remained to this day and will remain until the kingdoms of this world will be revived by a future Antichrist; who will revive the Old Roman hegemony and be swept away by the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Conclusion