

The Book of Daniel⁴⁰

Lesson 7

Daniel Chapter 5

Belshazzar's Feast

536 BC

In the same year of Daniel's vision of the ram and the goat found in chapter 8, Belshazzar calls for a great feast. His mother, Nitrocris and his stepfather, Nabonidus are on their way to the Arabian Peninsula. Instead of crossing the deadly desert, the couple and their entourage plan to travel up the river to Haran and turn south to journey down through Syria, the old Southern Kingdom and then into the Arabian Peninsula. Nitrocris and Nabonidus make it to Haran to spend the night on the evening of Belshazzar's Feast.

Belshazzar's Feast

Daniel ^{5:1} Belshazzar the king held a great feast for a thousand of his nobles, and he was drinking wine in the presence of the thousand. ^{5:2} When Belshazzar tasted the wine, he gave orders to bring the gold and silver vessels which Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken out of the temple which was in Jerusalem, in order that the king and his nobles, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them. ^{5:3} Then they brought the gold vessels that had been taken out of the temple, the house of God which was in Jerusalem; and the king and his nobles, his wives, and his concubines drank from them. ^{5:4} They drank the wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone.

The aristocrats of Belshazzar's empire, 1000 in number, gather with him in the banquet hall of the king's palace.⁴¹ All the wives, including the concubines, accompany their husbands at the feast. The grand banquet hall probably holds as many as 2,500 people that evening. With the first sip of the wine, Belshazzar orders the retrieval of the beautiful Jewish temple vessels from the treasury of Belus, the temple of Nebuchadnezzar's god where he stored the items when he brought them from Jerusalem for safekeeping in 606 BC. The holy vessels of the temple should not be used in an unholy way but Belshazzar failed to understand their importance. We might speculate that as a child, Belshazzar saw the silver and gold vessels and longed to own them and use them for his own pleasure. Belshazzar desecrates the sacred vessels by drinking wine from them and praising his gods of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone - images of fake gods, figments of the world's imagination.

Man's Finger

Daniel ^{5:5} Suddenly the fingers of a man's hand emerged and began writing opposite the lampstand on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace, and the king saw the back of the hand that did the writing.

⁴⁰ All Scriptures in this lesson entitled "The Book of Daniel" are taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE, Copyright (C) 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1988, by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

⁴¹ The event occurs in the King's Palace, Daniel 5:5, in the banquet hall, Daniel 5:10.

Whose finger wrote on the wall? God's? The Lord's? An Angel? No one knows! **Daniel** 5:24 says, "Then the hand was sent from Him, and this inscription was written out." Regardless of whose hand it was, God sent it to write on the wall! Perhaps it belonged to no one at all. Perhaps God just sent a hand to write on the wall. Whatever the case, the finger engraves three words in the plaster on the wall.

King's Face

Daniel 5:6 Then the king's face grew pale, and his thoughts alarmed him; and his hip joints went slack, and his knees began knocking together.

Belshazzar's facial expression changes on the spot. Even though he cannot read the message, he knows he has had an encounter with a powerful being. Greatly and noticeably alarmed, he is gripped by fear. His knees knock and his muscles lose their strength as his joints begin to slacken.

King's Call

Daniel 5:7 The king called aloud to bring in the conjurers, the Chaldeans and the diviners. The king spoke and said to the wise men of Babylon, "Any man who can read this inscription and explain its interpretation to me will be clothed with purple, and *have* a necklace of gold around his neck, and have authority as third *ruler* in the kingdom."

Belshazzar calls for the wise men and promises three gifts to the interpreter of the handwriting, a robe of purple, a gold necklace, and elevation to the position as third authority in the kingdom. However, as before, the wise men of Babylon fail to either read or interpret the writing.

King's Men

Daniel 5:8 Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the inscription or make known its interpretation to the king. 5:9 Then King Belshazzar was greatly alarmed, his face grew *even* paler, and his nobles were perplexed.

Belshazzar grows even more alarmed when his wise men are unsuccessful and the fear shows on his face. The nobles are along for the ride. They do not understand the king's distress. Surely, he knows the events and public record of his grandfather's life, a man who proclaimed Daniel's God as the Most High God. Yet, the Babylonian gods have found their prominence once again in the empire. The nobles have no clue. Like Nebuchadnezzar, they have not put their trust in the Most High God.

Queen's Suggestion

Daniel 5:10 The queen entered the banquet hall because of the words of the king and his nobles; the queen spoke and said, "O king, live forever! Do not let your thoughts alarm you or your face be pale. 5:11 "There is a man in your kingdom in whom is a spirit of the holy gods; and in the days of your father, illumination, insight, and wisdom like the wisdom of the gods were found in him. And King Nebuchadnezzar, your father, your father the king, appointed him chief of the magicians, conjurers, Chaldeans, *and* diviners. 5:12 "This was because an extraordinary spirit, knowledge and insight, interpretation of dreams, explanation of enigmas, and solving of difficult problems were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Belteshazzar. Let Daniel now be summoned, and he will declare the interpretation."

The queen enters the hall and advises the king, bringing to remembrance the wisest

man in the empire, Daniel. She has not forgotten Nebuchadnezzar's Daniel. She has not forgotten the past and the power of the true God of Daniel. She remembers Daniel's extraordinary spirit, knowledge, and insight. He can handle the enigmas, dreams and difficult problems. She tells Belshazzar to "summon him! He can handle this too."

The queen refers to Nebuchadnezzar as Belshazzar's "father." Actually, Nebuchadnezzar is the grandfather of Belshazzar. In those days, grandfathers and male ancestors many generations back were referred to as father. The same occurs today when Jews refer to their father Abraham.

Daniel's Arrival

Daniel ^{5:13} Then Daniel was brought in before the king. The king spoke and said to Daniel, "Are you that Daniel who is one of the exiles from Judah, whom my father the king brought from Judah?" ^{5:14} "Now I have heard about you that a spirit of the gods is in you, and that illumination, insight, and extraordinary wisdom have been found in you." ^{5:15} "Just now the wise men *and* the conjurers were brought in before me that they might read this inscription and make its interpretation known to me, but they could not declare the interpretation of the message." ^{5:16} "But I personally have heard about you, that you are able to give interpretations and solve difficult problems. Now if you are able to read the inscription and make its interpretation known to me, you will be clothed with purple and *wear* a necklace of gold around your neck, and you will have authority as the third *ruler* in the kingdom."

Where has Belshazzar been all his life? Why does he ask, "Are you that Daniel ...?" Surely the king knew Daniel, but for some reason he had not sought Daniel's counsel. Young Belshazzar had no need for Daniel in the past. Perhaps he thought Daniel was outdated and old. Perhaps he thought Daniel might cramp his style of living. Perhaps he thought he knew it all and did not need Daniel. Daniel had quietly waited in the kingdom, no longer second-in-command, until he was called upon. God held him there for a purpose.

Just as with the other wise men, Belshazzar offers Daniel the threefold gift. He cannot offer him the second place in the kingdom because it is not his to give. Belshazzar was the stepson of Nabonidus by Nitocris, who was the daughter of Nebuchadnezzar and the widow of Nergal-sharezer. Together Nabonidus and Belshazzar co-reign as kings in Babylon. They are in the first and second positions of authority and that is why he can offer only the third position to Daniel. On this day, Nabonidus has travelled towards Arabia and left Belshazzar in control according to a Babylonian ancient inscription. From the standpoint of Babylonian history, Belshazzar has not been a particularly important person except that he had participated in the decisions and events leading to the fall of the Babylonian Empire.

Daniel's Response

Daniel ^{5:17} Then Daniel answered and said before the king, "Keep your gifts for yourself, or give your rewards to someone else; however, I will read the inscription to the king and make the interpretation known to him." ^{5:18} "O king, the Most High God granted sovereignty, grandeur, glory, and majesty to Nebuchadnezzar your father." ^{5:19} "And because of the grandeur which He bestowed on him, all the peoples, nations, and *men of every* language feared and trembled before him; whomever he wished he killed, and whomever he

wished he spared alive; and whomever he wished he elevated, and whomever he wished he humbled. ^{5:20} "But when his heart was lifted up and his spirit became so proud that he behaved arrogantly, he was deposed from his royal throne, and *his* glory was taken away from him. ^{5:21} "He was also driven away from mankind, and his heart was made like *that of* beasts, and his dwelling place was with the wild donkeys. He was given grass to eat like cattle, and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, until he recognized that the Most High God is ruler over the realm of mankind, and *that* He sets over it whomever He wishes.

Daniel does not desire the gifts. The gifts do not seem to impress Daniel. He can make the interpretation known because of his relationship with God, not for pay or reward.

Before revealing the interpretation, Daniel wants Belshazzar to remember the testimony of his grandfather. He wants him to remember that God elevates whom he wishes and removes whom he wishes. When his grandfather was proud, God made him like an animal for seven years. Yet, Belshazzar has not learned from his grandfather's mistakes.

Daniel's Answer

Daniel ^{5:22} "Yet you, his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, even though you knew all this, ^{5:23} but you have exalted yourself against the Lord of heaven; and they have brought the vessels of His house before you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines have been drinking wine from them; and you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which do not see, hear or understand. But the God in whose hand are your life-breath and your ways, you have not glorified.

Belshazzar has brought the wrath of the Lord of Heaven on himself by desecrating the vessels of the Holy Temple. Daniel reminds Belshazzar that God is behind every breath he has ever taken. Even though God owns his breath and his ways, Belshazzar has not brought glory to God. Because of his behavior, God has sent the hand to write the inscription.

Daniel's Interpretation

Daniel ^{5:24} "Then the hand was sent from Him, and this inscription was written out. ^{5:25} "Now this is the inscription that was written out: ' MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN.' ^{5:26} "This is the interpretation of the message: 'MENE'-- God has numbered your kingdom and put an end to it. ^{5:27} "'TEKEL'-- you have been weighed on the scales and found deficient. ^{5:28} "'PERES'-- your kingdom has been divided and given over to the Medes and Persians."

Only one man has ever lived who can interpret the inscription "MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN." Daniel alone holds that position. Belshazzar and his wise men could not understand it although they could read the words because they were in the Chaldean language. All three are coins but all three are weights also. In the market people could buy a minas of meat. Fifty shekels would be placed on the scale and the meat would be weighed in the opposing scale. It took 50 shekels to equal a mina. A shekel weighed about half an ounce; thus, a mina contained about 25 ounces. Therefore, a mina of meat weighed about 25 ounces. The 50 shekels paid for the meat. A upharsin was equal to "half a shekel," or a "divided shekel." They understand the words, but they do not understand the meaning.

Daniel understands the meaning, MENE – God has numbered the days of the kingdom by weighing out the count in full just as 50 shekels would be weighed out for a mina. MENE, MENE equals 100 shekels. TEKEL – God has weighed Belshazzar's acts against the shekels of his refusal to worship Him. UPHARSIN – the "half shekel" or "divided shekel" means Belshazzar's kingdom will be divided up and given to the Medes and the Persians.

Belshazzar's kingdom has been reviewed by God and found wanting. Belshazzar has personally been found deficient. By weighing all the acts of Belshazzar's past, it is found that he has not met the challenge. He has not recognized God. He has lived a life without the God of his father. The days of Belshazzar's kingdom are over. The kingdom will be divided between the Medes and the Persians.

Belshazzar's Response

Daniel ^{5:29} Then Belshazzar gave orders, and they clothed Daniel with purple and *put* a necklace of gold around his neck, and issued a proclamation concerning him that he *now* had authority as the third *ruler* in the kingdom.

Belshazzar keeps his promise and gives the gifts to Daniel. The proclamation means nothing for the empire will end before the party in the banquet hall of the palace ends.

Belshazzar's Death

Daniel ^{5:30} That same night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was slain.

That night, Belshazzar loses his life at the hands of God's new ruler. When God says it is over, it's over. Sadly, no evidence shows that Belshazzar turned from his iniquities.

In 536 BC, the Neo-Babylonian Empire falls to Cyrus the Great, king of Persia, with an unprecedented military engagement known as the Battle of Opis. The famed walls of Babylon were indeed impenetrable. The only way into the city was through one of its many gates or through the Euphrates which ebbed beneath its thick walls. Even if someone could hold his breath to reach them, metal gates at the river's inflow and outflow prevented underwater intruders. Cyrus' general, Darius, devised a plan to use the Euphrates as the mode of entry to the city, ordering large camps of troops at each point and instructing them to wait for the signal. Darius' troops diverted the Euphrates River upstream, causing the Euphrates to drop to about 20 inches deep. The soldiers marched in mass to the metal gates in the river at the walls and lifted them enough to get a few men into the city to raise the gates from inside. The Medo-Persian Army conquered the outlying areas of the city's interior while a majority of Babylonians at the city were oblivious to the breach. Herodotus elaborates on the event in his book.⁴²

Darius' Age

Daniel ^{5:31} So Darius the Mede received the kingdom at about the age of sixty-two.

Darius takes the empire for the Medes and the Persians at age 62. The old king of

⁴² [The Histories by Herodotus](#)' Complete English translation by George Rawlinson

the Medes made his way into the kingdom that night. The day had started with a feast in the banquet hall of the king's palace. By the end of the day, the king is dead and the kingdom is in Darius' hands. Darius' brief reign lasts from BC 538– 536. He will die later in the year of his victory for Cyrus over Belshazzar, but before he dies, he will have to meet Daniel, grow fond of him, throw him in the lion's den, and turn to Daniel's God as Lord Most High. During his time of growing fond of Daniel, Daniel will receive a copy of Jeremiah's prophecies recorded by Baruch, and he will study them in detail to discover just how long the exile will last. On to Daniel chapter 9.