

Daniel

Chapter Five

- **The Writing on the Wall**

The Writing on the Wall Verses 1-31

This scene takes place in October of 539 B.C. – two decades after Nebuchadnezzar's death (562 B.C.). The Medes-Persians are about to conquer Babylon.

Babylonian History:

- Nebuchadnezzar's son **Evil-Merodach** succeeds him (2 Kings 25:27)
- Evil-Merodach is murdered two years later by his brother-in-law **Nergal-sharezer** or spelled Neriglassar (who married one of Nebuchadnezzar's daughters)
- Nergal-sharezer is succeeded by his young son **Labashi-Marduk** who only reigns two months when he is murdered by **Nabonidus** (who also married one of Nebuchadnezzar's daughters).
- Nabonidus is the last ruler of the Babylonian empire. He spent most of his time away from the kingdom, mostly in Arabia. When he was away – his son **Belshazzar** remained in Babylon and ruled.

Jeremiah 27:6-7

"Now I will hand all your countries over to my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon; I will make even the wild animals subject to him. All nations will serve him and his son and his grandson until the time for his land comes; then many nations and great kings will subjugate him."

Verse 1

"King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine with them."

Belshazzar reigned in Babylon while his father Nabonidus was fighting the Persians. The Persians were surrounding the territory of Babylon. Why on such an important evening would a king decide to throw a party?

Isaiah 23:13

"Let us eat and drink," you say, "for tomorrow we die!"

These people gorged themselves. They drank until they could barely sit or stand. The king set the example of drunkenness, probably up on a platform at the head table in sight of all the guests. (At banquets, it was customary for ancient kings to eat and drink apart from their guests).

Liquor is a temporary prop for weak men. Is this scene a scene of arrogance or fear? The army of the enemy was in full view. Was Belshazzar's feast an act of defiance towards the enemy? Was it an act of building morale among the people? Nebuchadnezzar had

built this city, Babylon, to withstand any siege. It was 15 miles square. Its walls were 300 feet high and wide enough for 4 chariots to travel on. The walls were all constructed of brick. There was enough supply of grain and water to last for years. In fact, a canal channeled off the Euphrates River went right through the city.

Verses 2-3

“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.”

To drunkenness, Belshazzar now added blasphemy. At his worse Nebuchadnezzar never touched the sacred vessels of other gods, certainly not those from the God of Israel, whose young men had become high officials in his government. When Nebuchadnezzar took all the items from the temple in Jerusalem, he had them stored away. For Belshazzar, who grew up in the palace, those vessels were always off limits.

Is this an act of carelessness or stupidity? This was brazen idolatry and defiance of the God whom Nebuchadnezzar called “the King of Heaven” (4:37). An evening full of drunkenness, laughter, shouting, girls dancing - who knows how far things went that evening. But now, Belshazzar goes too far bringing out the Holy vessels of the Most High God and using them in a time of debauchery and probably perversion.

Footnote: This verse says that Nebuchadnezzar was “*his father*”. Neither Hebrew nor Aramaic has a word for grandfather or grandson. The word father can go as far back as to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. A grandfather was never called father’s father – just father.

Verse 4

“As they drank the wine, they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone.”

One could hardly miss the emphasis on wine. Daniel mentions it in all four verses. In this verse he links the drinking with the worship of pagan gods. There really was no such thing as a secular Babylonian feast. Gods were commonly worshipped at feasts. In this case it is the god of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood and stone. To worship and toast all the gods of Babylon might have taken more than one night.

With the temple treasure, they worship the gods of the elements (gold, silver) not the God whose vessel they are!

Verse 5

“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.”

God directly intervenes!

Archeologists believe the section of the room Belshazzar was in was 56 feet wide and 173 feet long. This would have been a throne room in Nebuchadnezzar's palace. When this room was discovered the center part of the long wall was covered with some kind of white plaster!

The lampstand was probably a large chandelier with many candles or torches – the point being that the room would have been well lit for God's PowerPoint presentation!

Verse 6

“His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his knees knocked together and his legs gave way.”

It is said that shock produces sobriety. No more dreams or visions – this is a dramatic event. This adds the details to the common phrase ...

“I saw the handwriting on the wall”

Daniel gives us a vivid description of the king's emotional and physical fear. Suddenly the raucous laughter and drunken shouting stopped. God had invaded their feast. The king had a front row seat to God's message – he saw it so clearly that *“his knees knocked together and his legs gave way.”*

Verse 7

“The king called out for the enchanters, astrologers and diviners to be brought and 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.”

Much had changed in Babylon over the last twenty-five years, however people still responded to the king's commands and requests. Here the king offers generous rewards. The challenge he makes is twofold, read the writing and tell me what it means (the first two steps of inductive Bible study).

The rewards were symbols of royalty and power. A purple robe (purple symbolizes power and royalty for the Babylonians, Medes, Persians and Greeks). A gold chain, a symbol of high ranking in the Babylonian government. Why the third highest position in the kingdom? His father, Nabonidus was number one, the real King. Belshazzar was in the second position (which only the king could name) so the best and highest he, Belshazzar could offer was the third position. In the hour of crisis, he offered the highest position he could.

Verses 8-9

“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.”

What a surprise, the king’s men failed once again (the third time) at understanding what the God of Heaven was saying.

Why couldn’t these wise men or the king himself read the writing on the wall? It is believed even though the words were written in Aramaic, they were written vertically not horizontally. The words may have been understood but they would not have made any sense.

Verse 10

“The queen, hearing the voices of the king and his nobles, came into the banquet hall. "O king, live forever!" she said. "Don't be alarmed! Don't look so pale!"

Enter the queen. Who is she? Belshazzar’s wife and concubines were already at the banquet. This was probably a daughter of Nebuchadnezzar, possibly the wife of Nabonidus. Nitocris would fit such a description. It is clear this woman had unusual authority and esteem because she enters the banquet hall on her own initiative. The king did not summon her.

Verse 11

“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. King Nebuchadnezzar your father—your father the king, I say—appointed him chief of the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners.”

She remembers Daniel. Remember this is twenty plus years after the reign of Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel was in retirement; he was Nebuchadnezzar’s guy anyhow. When new leadership took over, they replaced Nebuchadnezzar’s men with their own. As any believer should, even in retirement Daniel served God.

Verse 12

“This man Daniel, whom the king called Belteshazzar, 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.”

The queen had complete confidence that Daniel would be able to read the writing and tell the king what it said.

Verses 13-14

“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.”

Was Daniel unknown to Belshazzar? Probably not, but the king probably never gave any thought to the God Daniel worshiped or the gifts God gave Daniel. By this time, Daniel would have been in his eighties.

Verses 15-16

“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.”

Belshazzar repeats his three-fold reward to Daniel.

Verse 17

“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.”

Daniel spurns the king’s reward. With this action Daniel was setting the stage for what he was about to say. No one now could question his motives.

This scene is much like Elisha’s refusal of Naaman’s gifts.

2 Kings 5:15-16

“Then Naaman and all his attendants went back to the man of God. He stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel. Please accept now a gift from your servant." The prophet answered, "As surely as the LORD lives, whom I serve, I will not accept a thing." And even though Naaman urged him, he refused.”

Verses 18-19

“O king, the Most High God gave your father Nebuchadnezzar sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendor. Because of the high position he gave him, all the peoples and nations and men 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.”

Obviously, Daniel knew Nebuchadnezzar quite well. Over the years I am sure Daniel came to really enjoy working with this man. After rejecting the Kings offer of reward, this evening in laymen terms Daniel tells this king that he is no King Nebuchadnezzar.

Daniel also sets this king straight on who the Most High God is. Contrasting the power of an earthly king, Daniel explains that no earthly power can compare with the Heavenly power. Any position or favor granted to an earthly king comes from the Heavenly King!

Isn't it fun to see this night of crazy partying ended with a sermon!

Verses 20-21

“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 cattle; and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, until he acknowledged that the Most High God is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and sets over them anyone he wishes.”

In preparation for identifying the sins of Belshazzar, Daniel reviews the sins of Nebuchadnezzar, *“his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride.”* Whenever God gives us gifts or privilege, we are responsible how we handle those gifts. We are to handle them in a righteous manner. Daniel ends this opening moment with this king by repeating the themes of this book.

*“The Most High **God is sovereign** over the kingdoms of men and sets over them anyone he wishes.”*

Verse 22

“But you his son, O Belshazzar, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this.”

The sermon is about sin.

Sin requires repentance and receives God's forgiveness.

Belshazzar is not being punished for his grandfather's sin; he is being held accountable for his own sin, and because of his position all of Babylon will pay with him.

Verse 23

“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 honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways.”

The prophets accused the king of pride, idolatry, desecration and drunkenness.

Remember this sermon is being heard in public. Imagine the thoughts in the room when Daniel said, *“you did not honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways.”*

Verse 24

“Therefore he sent the hand that wrote the inscription.”

By now several hours have probably passed since the writing first appeared on the wall.

- There was the initial attempt to read it
 - The calling of the wizards
 - The entrance of the queen
- The calling and arrival of Daniel

You can believe that no one has left this party during all these transitions. Talk about tension, anticipation, fear...

Daniel reveals that the hand that wrote this is the hand of the God Most High. The same God Belshazzar and his guest were mocking by desecrating His holy vessels.

Now for the revealing ...

Verse 25

“This is the inscription that was written: *Mene , Mene , Tekel , Parsin*”

The Aramaic language has no vowels.

It also would have appeared right to left, so what would have been seen was something like -

NSRP LKT NM NM

The correct meaning of this message could only come by divine revelation to God’s prophet.

Verses 26-28

“This 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.”

NUMBER, NUMBER, WEIGHTED, DIVIDED

Daniel says *MENE* is translated number and is repeated twice. Meaning God had numbered the days of the Babylonian empire.

He says *TEKEL* – Babylon has been weighed on God’s scale and has been found wanting. God had placed righteousness on one side of the scale and when Babylon was weighed the scales did not even out.

PARSIN – interpreted as divided. The Babylon Empire is to be divided and given to the Medes-Persians.

If you remember Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the statue. Now it is time for the head of gold to be removed and time for the chest and arms to take control. God will continue to overturn kingdoms and Christ returns.

Verse 29

“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.”

Daniel now accepts the king's reward – what would be the point in making a scene? The value of these rewards (third highest ruler) is about to expire.

Verses 30-31

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

Daniel ends this section with a historical observation and a biographical note.

The Babylonian empire ended that very night, October 16, 539. The Medes-Persians diverted the waters of the Euphrates away from the city, lifted the gate and entered the city without a battle. Belshazzar is slain and Babylon is annexed to Persia.

Isaiah 13:17-22

“See, I will stir up against them the Medes, who do not care for silver and have no delight in gold. ¹⁸ Their bows will strike down the young men; they will have no mercy on infants nor will they look with compassion on children. ¹⁹ Babylon, the jewel of kingdoms, the glory of the Babylonians' pride, will be overthrown by God like Sodom and Gomorrah. ²⁰ She will never be inhabited or lived in through all generations; no Arab will pitch his tent there, no shepherd will rest his flocks there. ²¹ But desert creatures will lie there, jackals will fill her houses; there the owls will dwell, and there the wild goats will leap about. ²² Hyenas will howl in her strongholds, jackals in her luxurious palaces. Her time is at hand, and her days will not be prolonged.”

Isaiah 21:1-10

An oracle concerning the Desert by the Sea: Like whirlwinds sweeping through the southland, an invader comes from the desert, from a land of terror. ² A dire vision has been shown to me: The traitor betrays, the looter takes loot. Elam, attack! Media, lay siege! I will bring to an end all the groaning she caused. ³ At this my body is racked with pain, pangs seize me, like those of a woman in labor; I am staggered by what I hear, I am bewildered by what I see. ⁴ My heart falters, fear makes me tremble; the twilight I longed for has become a horror to me. ⁵ They set the tables, they spread the rugs, they eat, they drink! Get up, you officers, oil the shields! ⁶ This is what the Lord says to me: "Go, post a lookout and have him report what he sees. ⁷ When he sees chariots with teams of horses, riders on donkeys or riders on camels, let him be alert, fully alert." ⁸ And the lookout shouted, "Day after day, my lord, I stand on the watchtower; every night I stay at my post. ⁹ Look, here comes a man in a chariot with a team of horses. And he gives back the

answer: 'Babylon has fallen, has fallen! All the images of its gods lie shattered on the ground!' " ¹⁰ O my people, crushed on the threshing floor, I tell you what I have heard from the LORD Almighty, from the God of Israel. "

Jeremiah 51:33-58

"This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: "The Daughter of Babylon is like a threshing floor at the time it is trampled; the time to harvest her will soon come." ³⁴

"Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon has devoured us, he has thrown us into confusion, he has made us an empty jar. Like a serpent he has swallowed us and filled his stomach with our delicacies, and then has spewed us out. ³⁵ May the violence done to our flesh be upon

Babylon," say the inhabitants of Zion. "May our blood be on those who live in Babylonia," says Jerusalem. ³⁶ Therefore, this is what the LORD says: "See, I will defend your cause and avenge you; I will dry up her sea and make her springs dry. ³⁷ Babylon

will be a heap of ruins, a haunt of jackals, an object of horror and scorn, a place where no one lives. ³⁸ Her people all roar like young lions, they growl like lion cubs. ³⁹ But

while they are aroused, I will set out a feast for them and make them drunk, so that they shout with laughter— then sleep forever and not awake," declares the LORD. ⁴⁰ "I will

bring them down like lambs to the slaughter, like rams and goats. ⁴¹ "How Sheshach will be captured, the boast of the whole earth seized! What a horror Babylon will be among the nations! ⁴² The sea will rise over Babylon; its roaring waves will cover her. ⁴³ Her

towns will be desolate, a dry and desert land, a land where no one lives, through which no man travels. ⁴⁴ I will punish Bel in Babylon and make him spew out what he has

swallowed. The nations will no longer stream to him. And the wall of Babylon will fall. ⁴⁵ "Come out of her, my people! Run for your lives! Run from the fierce anger of the LORD.

⁴⁶ Do not lose heart or be afraid when rumors are heard in the land; one rumor comes this year, another the next, rumors of violence in the land and of ruler against ruler. ⁴⁷

For the time will surely come when I will punish the idols of Babylon; her whole land will be disgraced and her slain will all lie fallen within her. ⁴⁸ Then heaven and earth and all

that is in them will shout for joy over Babylon, for out of the north destroyers will attack her," declares the LORD. ⁴⁹ "Babylon must fall because of Israel's slain, just as the slain in all the earth have fallen because of Babylon. ⁵⁰ You who have escaped the sword, leave

and do not linger! Remember the LORD in a distant land, and think on Jerusalem." ⁵¹

"We are disgraced, for we have been insulted and shame covers our faces, because foreigners have entered the holy places of the LORD's house." ⁵² "But days are coming,"

declares the LORD, "when I will punish her idols, and throughout her land the wounded will groan. ⁵³ Even if Babylon reaches the sky and fortifies her lofty stronghold, I will

send destroyers against her," declares the LORD. ⁵⁴ "The sound of a cry comes from Babylon, the sound of great destruction from the land of the Babylonians. ⁵⁵ The LORD

will destroy Babylon; he will silence her noisy din. Waves of enemies will rage like great waters; the roar of their voices will resound. ⁵⁶ 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. ⁵⁷ I will make her officials and wise men drunk, her

governors, officers and warriors as well; they will sleep forever and not awake," declares the King, whose name is the LORD Almighty. ⁵⁸ This is what the LORD Almighty says:

"Babylon's thick wall will be leveled and her high gates set on fire; the peoples exhaust themselves for nothing, the nations' labor is only fuel for the flames."