

## The Handwriting on the Wall

Daniel 5:1-31

Harvard professor George Santayana once wrote, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”<sup>i</sup> Over the years, this statement has been paraphrased in a number of ways. “Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it;” “Those who do not know history’s mistakes are doomed to repeat them.” As we shall see in Daniel chapter 5, this is an extremely dangerous trend. The very reason that God has given us these history lessons in Scripture is that we might learn to know Him. After all, “history” is “His story.” That we ought to learn the lessons of history is abundantly clear in this chapter. Using the historical lessons of Nebuchadnezzar, the prophet Daniel instructed his descendant, King Belshazzar. What should we learn? We should learn the lessons of history to fully grasp that the Most High God rules in the kingdoms of men.

The remarkable story in Daniel chapter 5 occurs on the very night that one kingdom conquered another. On that fateful evening, Babylon fell into the hands of the Medes and Persians. This coming change in leadership was revealed to King Nebuchadnezzar about four decades before Babylon was conquered. Daniel and the Jewish people who observed Babylon’s fall probably remembered the words of Asaph in Psalm 75:5-7

**Lift not up your horn on high: Speak *not with* a stiff neck.**

**For promotion *cometh* neither from the east, nor from the west, nor from the south.**

**But God *is* the judge: He puts down one, and sets up another.**

### *Nabonidus and Belshazzar*

The years after the death of Nebuchadnezzar were filled with intrigue, conspiracies and assassinations. He was succeeded by Evil-Merodach, Neriglissar, and Labashi-Marduk in just the seven years after his death. Nabonidus became king about 556 B.C. According to some, he may have married the widow of Nebuchadnezzar to shore-up his authority. Nabonidus was frequently away from Babylon (confronting enemies and studying archeology); his son Belshazzar reigned in Babylon as his co-regent. Both the Babylonian (Nabonidus) Chronicle and the Cyrus Cylinder describe the history leading up to the fall of Babylon.<sup>ii</sup> The name “Belshazzar” is from the Akkadian meaning, “Bel protect the king.” Their worship of the god Bel (or Baal) is also reflected in the similar name they had given to Daniel: “Belteshazzar.”

The story in Daniel chapter 5 can be divided into three parts: *a wicked party (vs. 1-4)*, *a warning prophecy (vs 5-9)* and *wisdom from a prophet (vs. 10-31)*. The heart of the message in this chapter is found in the last section, in verses 17-31.

### **A Wicked Party, 1-4**

In spite of the fact that the Medes and Persians were drawing near, Belshazzar hosted a wild drinking party. Xenophon (the Athenian historian) described this as a festival holiday. The

invaders may have known about this celebration. One author described the situation this way: "Outside the city walls camped the Persian armies. According to the "Nabonidus Chronicle," the Babylonians had suffered a crushing defeat just days before at the hands of the Persians, and Nabonidus had fled. Only the great city of Babylon remained unconquered, and the situation appeared bleak."<sup>iii</sup> Belshazzar apparently thought he had little to worry about. The walls of Babylon were about seventeen miles in circumference.<sup>iv</sup> The Euphrates River flowed through the city, but it was walled on both sides to keep enemies from using it to attack the city. So Belshazzar was at ease on his raised platform as he entertained a thousand guests. In a blasphemous move, he chose to profane the living God by drinking from the vessels taken from the Jerusalem temple (see Daniel 1:2). Verse 4 records, **"They drank wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone."**

In this current pandemic, the abuse of beverage alcohol has run rampant. Here in Ohio, liquor sales have increased by 23% each month; that's "the equivalent of 61 million shots of the hard stuff."<sup>v</sup> Times haven't changed very much, have they? In fact, this has been the way that people have responded to crises across the centuries. For instance, when the Lord called His people to repentance as the Assyrians were invading (Isaiah 22). The people carefully prepared their weapons, their walls and their water supply. But when the Lord called for national repentance, the people responded with **"joy and gladness, killing oxen and slaughtering sheep, eating flesh and drinking wine. 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die'"** (Isaiah 22:13). In other words, they didn't want to think about their imminent danger nor about the words of the Lord. And Belshazzar of Babylon responded the same way as the Medes and Persians invaded the region.

### **A Warning Prophecy, 5-9**

As they began to drink wine in praise of their gods, a hand appeared and began to write the message from God on the plaster of the wall. Verse 6 describes the king's alarm as he watched the hand inscribing the strange words. In desperation, Belshazzar called for his wise men to interpret the mysterious message, but they could not. With a growing sense of horror, Belshazzar knew the miraculous message must be for him and must be understood. God's prophetic Word is like a splash of cold water on wild pagan parties. In the 1957 Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade, they realized too late that the Popeye balloon was poorly designed. The cold rain throughout the day collected in the top of Popeye's hat. And as the parade turned one corner, the head of the balloon tipped and poured 50 gallons of cold rainwater on the unsuspecting crowd below. You can imagine how that affected the drenched spectators. But the cold shock that King Belshazzar received was far worse.

### **Wisdom from a Prophet, 10-31**

In times of national crisis, it is crucial that we recover and remember the things that we have learned. Is all that we learn from history that men do not learn from history? Yes, some of us have learned from history. But it certainly appears as if we are getting ready to be dragged through the lesson again by those who did not learn from history. So it's even more important

for each and every one of us to remember what we know about the Lord and His Word. In this story, the queen remembered their national history when everyone else was in despair. She remembered that the Spirit of God dwelled in a wise man named Daniel. In this time of national crisis (the pandemic, the elections, the economy, etc.), you and I need to recall what the Lord has taught us and share this with others. Let us remember God's message and the exhortations of God's Spirit-filled messengers.

**- *The prophet was remembered and introduced, 10-16***

The queen remembered the prophet and asked that he be called to the banquet hall. Even though alcohol may have been clouding his judgment, the king admitted that he had heard of Daniel. He offered Daniel rich rewards if he could interpret the mysterious message. Daniel declined the rewards (v.17), but he interpreted God's message earnestly.

**- *The prophet interpreted the divine message, 17-31***

Here are 5 historical lessons that will help us to see the majestic reign of the Most High God.

The First Historical Lesson

**1. The Most High God gives leaders their authority over nations with majestic glory and honor. 18-19**

Remembering history, Daniel began to explain the work of the Most High God. As he did, he brought out one of the most intriguing themes in the entire book: **"God gives."**

- Daniel 1:2, the Lord gave Jehoiakim, king of Judah, into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar
- Daniel 1:9, God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the leaders
- Daniel 1:17 God gave the four young men learning and skill; He gave Daniel understanding of visions and dreams
- Daniel 2:17-23 God who gives wisdom to the wise gave Daniel wisdom and might
- Daniel 2:37 The God of heaven had given the kingdom, power, might and glory to King Nebuchadnezzar
- Daniel 2:38 The God of heaven had given Nebuchadnezzar authority over people, animals and birds
- Daniel 3:28 God sent His angel to deliver His servants
- Daniel 4:16 God caused Nebuchadnezzar to be given the heart of a beast
- Daniel 5:18 The Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar his kingship and greatness
- Daniel 5:19 The Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar authority among all peoples, nations and languages
- Daniel 5:28 God would give the kingdom to the Medes and Persians
- Daniel 7:13-14 The Ancient of Days gave the Son of man dominion, glory and a kingdom that all people, nations and languages should serve Him.
- Daniel 7:22, 27 The Ancient of Days will give authority to the saints of the Most High God

- Daniel 9:22 The Lord sent His angel to give Daniel skill and understanding

As we learned in Daniel 4:17, all these things have happened and will happen with the intent that the living may know that the Most High God rules in the kingdom of men and gives it to whomever He will; He sets up over it even the lowliest of men. Belshazzar should have remembered this vital lesson from history, but instead, he ignored it. And this is an important historical lesson for our leaders today.

The Second Historical Lesson

## **2. The Most High God humbles proud leaders and takes away their glory. 20-21**

But Belshazzar forgot another important lesson from history. He forgot that the Most High God had humbled proud King Nebuchadnezzar. When the king grew proud, God chastened him; He caused him to wander the earth like a beast. Again, this is a powerful reminder for pompous leaders, even in modern times. Benito Mussolini, the Fascist “Il Duce” of Italy was known for his pompous oratory. He was heavily influenced by the anti-Christian ideas of Nietzsche<sup>vi</sup>, and exercised great power in Italy during the early part of World War II. In April 1945, as Mussolini and his mistress tried to flee to Switzerland, they were captured and killed. Their bodies were hung upside down at a gas station. Mussolini was killed two days before Adolf Hitler committed suicide.

The Third Historical Lesson

## **3. The Most High God sets up and takes down leaders to show that He reigns supreme in the kingdoms of men. 21**

So that King Belshazzar would remember the lesson of history, Daniel repeated it in Daniel 5:21. He reminded Belshazzar that King Nebuchadnezzar was humbled until **“he knew that the Most High God ruled in the kingdom of men, and *that* he appointeth over it whomsoever he will.”**

The Fourth Historical Lesson

## **4. The Most High God does these things so that coming generations may learn to honor the God who controls their very being. 22-23**

In verses 22-23, Daniel moved to the application of the divine message. He pointedly applied it to King Belshazzar. He told him, “You have not humbled your heart though you knew all this.” Indeed, Daniel said, “You have lifted yourself up against the Lord of heaven.” He declared to Belshazzar that he had blasphemed the living God by praising idolatry with his revelry. He told the king, **“the God in whose hand thy breath is, and whose *are* all thy ways, hast thou not glorified:”** (5:23). This is a powerful reminder about our God. “History” is “His story.” He is the God who holds the breath of every man in His hand. He deserves all the glory and praise – and refuses to yield His glory to idols. In a reminiscent fashion, the Apostle Paul told the philosophers on Mars Hill, **“For in Him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring. Forasmuch then as we are the**

**offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device"** (Acts 17:28-29). God's lesson to King Nebuchadnezzar needs to be recovered by each new generation. Belshazzar should have learned the lesson. The philosophers at Mars Hill should have learned the lesson. And even today, this lesson should be very much before us. One of the problems that many people are experiencing right now is difficulty in breathing. Whether through coronavirus, seasonal allergies, bronchitis or wildfires in places like California, the lesson is still clear: **"God in whose hand your breath is."** Think about this as you take your next breaths. Knowing all these things, have you humbled yourself before the Most High God?

The Fifth Historical Lesson

**5. The Most High God numbers the days of nations, weighs them in the balances, and gives them to whom He will. 24-31**

Daniel began his interpretation with the reminder that the handwriting on the wall was sent from God.

Mene, Mene – this was a standard weight of silver or gold (like the mina). Daniel interpreted, "God has numbered your kingdom and finished it" (5:26)

Tekel – this refers to a shekel of weight. Daniel interpreted, "You are weighed in the balances and found wanting." (The Apostle Paul may have had this illustration in mind in Ephesians 4:1 when he commanded "Walk worthy of your calling." The Greek word [axios] used there calls to mind a balance scale.)

Upharsin – this is from the word [peres]. This word can refer to a unit of measure (half shekel) but its intriguing to note that spelling of the word can also refer to Persia. Daniel interpreted, "Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians."

These words, strange as they seem to us, should echo down the halls of history right into our hearts. The Most High God rules in the kingdoms of men. He is still weighing nations in the balances today. Let us cry out to the Lord for our nation, and not be found wanting in His sight.

Daniel 5:30-31 records the history with certainty: **"In that night was Belshazzar the king of the Chaldeans slain. And Darius the Median took the kingdom, being about threescore and two years old."**

The historian Herodotus described that attack on Babylon by the general, Cyrus. He wrote that the general diverted the river Euphrates so that his men could enter the city and attack. Others have expressed the belief that conspirators within the city worked with Cyrus.

To the best of our understanding, the name "Darius" was more of a title than a name. (In that sense, it would have been like "Pharaoh," "Czar" or "Abimelech." Some have surmised that the title "Darius" was given to Cyrus, but it is difficult to reconcile this with passages such as Ezra 6:14. It is likely that the Darius referred to here is a reference to a man named Gubaru, who

was appointed by Cyrus to be the governor of Babylon. The prophecy and history of Cyrus demonstrates the central message of the Book of Daniel: "The Most High God rules in the kingdoms of men, and He appoints over them whomever He will." One hundred and fifty years before this fateful night in Babylon, the Lord demonstrated His mastery over the kingdoms of the earth. The Lord named the man who would issue the proclamation to rebuild Jerusalem. His name was Cyrus. You can see this reflected in the prophecies of Isaiah 44:28 and 45:1. A century and a half before the fateful night of Belshazzar's fall, the Lord named the ruler whom He would use to restore His people to the land! Ezra 5:17, 6:3, and 6:14 show us the fulfillment of the prophecy made in Jeremiah 25:11 and 29:10.

What does this teach us? The Most High God rules in the kingdoms of men!

The return to the Promised Land was part of God's preparation to send the Promised Lord – Jesus Christ. It's exciting to know and see how the Most High God has fulfilled these prophecies and promises concerning His Son and our Savior. And the prophecies that have not yet been fulfilled will be fulfilled in the same way. And here is the exciting part: you can dwell in the secret place of the Most High God! Psalm 91:1-2 describes it this way:

**"He that dwells in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, *He is my refuge and my fortress: My God; in him will I trust.*"**

How can we enter into that kind of relationship with the Most High God and trust Him for the future? The Apostle Paul put it this way: **"For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him"** (1 Thessalonians 4:14). Do you believe that Jesus died for your sins and rose again? Then you dwell in the secret place of the Most High God. And He is the One who rules over all the kingdoms of men.

*Pastor Gordon Dickson, Calvary Baptist Church, Findlay, Ohio [www.cbcfindlay.org](http://www.cbcfindlay.org)*

---

<sup>i</sup> George Santayana quotes accessed at [https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/George\\_Santayana](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/George_Santayana)

<sup>ii</sup> See The Fall of Babylon accessed at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fall\\_of\\_Babylon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fall_of_Babylon)

<sup>iii</sup> Stephen R. Miller, *Daniel*, vol. 18, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 151.

<sup>iv</sup> John Walvoord, *Daniel, the Key to Prophetic Revelation*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1989, p. 119

<sup>v</sup> Randy Ludlow, "Signs of the pandemic: More drinking, more smoking, more home improvement" The Columbus Dispatch, October 18, 2020, accessed at <https://www.dispatch.com/story/news/politics/government/2020/10/18/ohio-says-covid-19-has-hiked-liquor-cigarette-home-improvement-sales/3676256001/>

<sup>vi</sup> For more about Friedrich Nietzsche, see "How Could I Know the Bible Is True?" accessed at <https://www.cbcfindlay.org/how-could-i-know-the-bible-is-true/>