

Weighed and Found Wanting



Daniel 5:1-31

King Belshazzar made a great feast for a thousand of his lords and drank wine in front of the thousand.

2 Belshazzar, when he tasted the wine, commanded that the vessels of gold and of silver that Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken out of the temple in Jerusalem be brought, that the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them. 3 Then they brought in the golden vessels that had been taken out of the temple, the house of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines drank from them. 4 They drank wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone.

5 Immediately the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace, opposite the lampstand. And the king saw the hand as it wrote. 6 Then the king's color changed, and his thoughts alarmed him; his limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together. 7 The king called loudly to bring in the enchanters, the Chaldeans, and the astrologers. The king declared to the wise men of Babylon, "Whoever reads this writing, and shows me its interpretation, shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around his neck and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom." 8 Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or make known to the king the interpretation. 9 Then King Belshazzar was greatly alarmed, and his color changed, and his lords were perplexed.

10 The queen, because of the words of the king and his lords, came into the banqueting hall, and the queen declared, "O king, live forever! Let not your thoughts alarm you or your color change. 11 There is a man in your kingdom in whom is the spirit of the holy gods. In the days of your father, light and understanding and wisdom like the wisdom of the gods were found in him, and King Nebuchadnezzar, your father—your father the king—made him chief of the magicians,

enchanters, Chaldeans, and astrologers, **12** because an excellent spirit, knowledge, and understanding to interpret dreams, explain riddles, and solve problems were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Beltshazzar. Now let Daniel be called, and he will show the interpretation.”

13 Then Daniel was brought in before the king. The king answered and said to Daniel, “You are that Daniel, one of the exiles of Judah, whom the king my father brought from Judah. **14** I have heard of you that the spirit of the gods is in you, and that light and understanding and excellent wisdom are found in you. **15** Now the wise men, the enchanters, have been brought in before me to read this writing and make known to me its interpretation, but they could not show the interpretation of the matter. **16** But I have heard that you can give interpretations and solve problems. Now if you can read the writing and make known to me its interpretation, you shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around your neck and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom.”

17 Then Daniel answered and said before the king, “Let your gifts be for yourself, and give your rewards to another. Nevertheless, I will read the writing to the king and make known to him the interpretation. **18** O king, the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father kingship and greatness and glory and majesty. **19** And because of the greatness that he gave him, all peoples, nations, and languages trembled and feared before him. Whom he would, he killed, and whom he would, he kept alive; whom he would, he raised up, and whom he would, he humbled. **20** But when his heart was lifted up and his spirit was hardened so that he dealt proudly, he was brought down from his kingly throne, and his glory was taken from him. **21** He was driven from among the children of mankind, and his mind was made like that of a beast, and his dwelling was with the wild donkeys. He was fed grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, until he knew that the Most High God rules the kingdom of mankind and sets over it whom he will. **22** And you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this, **23** but you have lifted up yourself against the Lord of heaven. And the vessels of his house have been brought in 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, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which do not see or hear or know, but the God in whose hand is your breath, and whose are all your ways, you have not honored.

24 “Then from his presence the hand was sent, and this writing was inscribed. **25** And this is the writing that was inscribed: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, and PARSIN. **26** This is the interpretation of the matter: MENE, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; **27** TEKEL, you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting; **28** PERES, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.”

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

30 That very night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was killed. **31** And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old.

This story has worked its way into common vernacular with the phrase, “the handwriting on the wall.” This is an very common phrase that’s used all of the time as a way of saying, “You should have seen that coming. It was as plain as the nose on your face. Didn’t you see the handwriting on the wall?” I would guess that most people who use this phrase have no idea where it came from.

King Belshazzar saw not just the handwriting on the wall but literally the hand writing on the wall. He saw a hand appear and begin writing these mysterious words. Did you notice his reaction?

- *Then the king's color changed,*
- *and his thoughts alarmed him;*
- *his limbs gave way,*
- *and his knees knocked together.*

This is a four part description which clearly states that he was scared out of his mind. I was thinking about a way to illustrate his level of fear and I thought of something that happened to me last winter. It was the middle of the night and we were fast asleep when suddenly the strangest sounds started playing all by itself. Here is what I want you to do. I want everyone to close their eyes and listen to something. I promise it won't startle you or be offensive but you have to trust me with this. Close your eyes and [listen](#). It turned out that this was coming from our computer and it was turned up really loud. It was absolutely freaky. I woke up and had no idea where or what this was. I thought it was either the devil or the rapture. I was really frightened for a few moments. And it was all Ryan's fault. This is the beginning of a Skillet song (a Christian rock band if you don't know) that he was downloading and as soon as it finished downloading at about 2 AM, it began to play very loudly. If you could have seen me at that moment, the color would have been drained from my face and my knees would have been knocking together.

As afraid as I was for about twenty seconds, that pales in comparison to what Belshazzar experienced. Verses 1-4 paint a picture of a wild and enormous party. The feast included 1000 of his lords as well as their wives and concubines. There were probably 3000-4000 people at this feast.¹ This was the Pah-Tay to end all parties. It may have been held outdoors in one of the colossal courtyards of the Babylonian palace but there were also indoor halls large enough to accommodate such a feast. Don't get the idea that all they were doing was drinking. With all of those wives and concubines present, there was no doubt rampant immorality in the room. They praised the gods of gold, silver, bronze, iron...and stone—the same materials of which the statue in chapter two was made. To make matters worse, Belshazzar ordered that the holy vessels of gold and silver taken from Jerusalem be brought out to drink from them. This was no mere feast. It was a massive spectacle of blasphemy, idolatry, drunkenness and immorality. It was a hurricane of sin breaking through all human built levies.

But if you thought that the hand writing on the wall was scary, Belshazzar and company had more reason to be afraid. We know three important facts from two different Greek historians and one Babylonian historian. First, just days before the feast, Belshazzar had been soundly defeated in battle by the Medes and Persians and Nabonidus, his father and co-regent on the throne, had fled the city.² Second, secular history records that there was indeed a huge feast on the night before Babylon fell to the Medes-Persians. Third, it is also recorded that the Medo-Persian army was camped outside the city walls. Chapter five does not tell us these details but it is certainly implied when the end of the chapter informs us that Belshazzar was killed that same night and the kingdom fell and power transferred to the Medo-Persian Kingdom. Just as Babylon built up their power until they were strong enough to defeat the Assyrians to become the world

superpower, so the Medo-Persian kingdom grew their military might until they were able to conquer the once mighty Babylon.

But if Belshazzar was all but doomed, why would they have been holding this massive feast? Perhaps it was kind of a final hurrah to the kingdom, one last drunken, carousing carnival on the eve of disaster. The apostle Paul quoted Isaiah 22 when he wrote, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.”³ I believe that this must have been their mindset that fateful evening.

This might explain their mammoth feast but why did they bring out the goblets from the Jerusalem temple? I think they did it because Belshazzar was well aware of Daniel’s vision in chapter eight. This vision had come to Daniel eleven years prior in 550 BC (Belshazzar’s third year as king) about the destruction of Babylon by the Medes-Persians. Since it happened during his reign, it is likely that Belshazzar heard about this prophecy.

Daniel 8:3-4—*Then I lifted my eyes and looked, and behold, a ram which had two horns was standing in front of the canal. I saw the ram butting westward, northward, and southward, and no other beasts could stand before him nor was there anyone to rescue from his power, but he did as he pleased and magnified himself.*

Later the two-horned ram is specifically identified .Daniel 8:20—*The two-horned ram that you saw represents the kings of Media and Persia.*

Therefore, they feasted because they knew they were going to die, or at least be conquered, and by using the goblets from the temple, it was one last parting shot at the supposed God who prophesied their downfall. In other words, they were making the statement—“The God of Jerusalem predicted our defeat. Let’s see what he thinks about using his holy vessels for our inebriated feast.”

God wasted no time with his answer, hence we have this insight into one of the key events in human history—the fall of the once mighty Babylon. After nearly falling over in fear, Belshazzar responded in the exact same way as did Nebuchadnezzar in chapters 2 and 4.

1. Called in the magicians and enchanters
2. They could not understand or interpret
3. The king grew even more afraid
4. They called in Daniel

And he offered an empty reward. He *shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around his neck and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom.* I call it an empty reward because who would want to be third in command of a doomed kingdom? Once again, Daniel is called in after everyone else failed to deliver an answer, just like happened in chapters two and four. If Daniel was 15 years old when he was taken captive to Babylon as we have assumed he was, he is now 81 years old. This means he would have lived through the reign of five different Babylonian kings and through the entire seventy years of captivity.

605-562	Nebuchadnezzar
562-560	Evil-Merodach
560-556	Labashi-Marduk
556-553	Nabonidus
553-539	Belshazzar co-regent with Nabodinus

Daniel respected Nebuchadnezzar, even in the midst of his rebellion but you can tell he doesn't have any respect at all for Nebuchadnezzar's grandson. He recounted the story of Nebuchadnezzar, his pride, his humiliation and then his humility and repentance. Daniel reiterated that God had given all of this power and glory to Nebuchadnezzar but was a very poor steward of these gifts. And then Daniel pinned him to the wall in verse 22. *And you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this. 23 but you have lifted up yourself against the Lord of heaven. And the vessels of his house have been brought in 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, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which do not see or hear or know, but the God in whose hand is your breath, and whose are all your ways, you have not honored.*

This story perfectly illustrates Romans 1. *For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. 19 For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 20 For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. 21 For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Claiming to be wise, they became fools, 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. 24 Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, 25 because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.*

There are six principles for application in this chapter.

1. God's word is always certain. God's promised the fall of Babylon 150 years before it happened. Isaiah 44:28. Daniel's vision actually named the Medes and Persians as the conquerors of Babylon eleven years before it happened. In addition, we have seen again how secular history back sup the truths of the Bible.

2. God grants repentance in his own time. Nebuchadnezzar was also very rebellious but God gave him eight years to repent! Recall that he had twelve months of prosperity which was followed by seven years of merciful pain to get his attention. God gave Nebuchadnezzar eight years to repent but he only gave Belshazzar a few hours to repent. Why was God seemingly more patient with Nebuchadnezzar then he was with Belshazzar. Perhaps God was less patient with Belshazzar because Belshazzar knew all about Nebuchadnezzar's humiliation and eventual repentance. But on the other hand, God showed major miracles to Nebuchadnezzar over a period of decades and gave him crystal clear warnings in advance of his judgment.

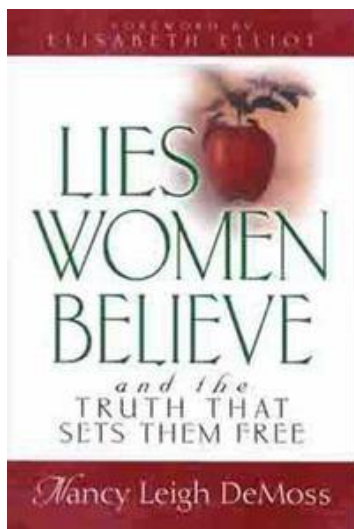
Why does one person repent and the next person does not? Why did my dad give some evidence of saving faith but I never saw it in my mom? I can't answer that and God seems to act differently with different people. In 1 Kings there was a prophet who disobeyed the Lord once

and immediately he sent a lion to kill him but the prophet Jonah disobeys and whines and cries to the very last word of the book but God only gives him mercy. God grants repentance in his own time. He is not just sovereign over kings and kingdoms, he is sovereign over salvation and we need to trust him with the salvation of our loved ones. We may not always understand what the Lord is doing, but we do know that he is good and just and will always do right when it comes to granting repentance for salvation.

3. We are held accountable to the light and knowledge that we have been given. God held Belshazzar to a higher standard because *have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this*. I think this is the key verse in chapter five. You knew all of this but you refused to humble your heart. In the same way, God will hold us accountable to the light and knowledge we have been given. To him whom much is given, much will be required. Now some smart aleck will say, if God holds me accountable to the knowledge I have been given, then wouldn't I be better off not reading my Bible, not really paying attention to the sermons because then my knowledge will be less and so will the level of accountability. If you are tempted to think in this way, then we have before us a whole other set of problems.

4. God uses sinful beings to accomplish his purposes. God used the idolatry of Belshazzar to remove the kingdom of Babylon and give it to the Medo-Persians. This was his sovereign plan in action, the first step in the fulfillment of the statue dream in chapter two. The head of gold has been replaced by the chest of silver, not because Babylon was too weak, not because Belshazzar was unrepentant and idolatrous, but because God sovereignly willed it. However, his power is so great that he used Belshazzar's sin and lack of repentance to accomplish his purposes, just as he used Pharaoh's sin and the sin of a long list of other Biblical characters. He even uses our sin to accomplish his purposes. None of that means that he wants us to sin, of course, but nothing stops his will from being accomplished. And thankfully he still uses sinful people or else you and I would be in trouble.

5. Daniel did not waver in his old age but grew in his courage. As an 81 year old man, he politely told the king off and did not express an ounce of fear. We are not Daniel and we will most likely never face this kind of intense pressure, but in addition to everything else, these stories are in the Bible so that we can take courage from Daniel's courage. Daniel was an ordinary man, just like us, which is why his courage is so relevant and meaningful for us.



6. We still exchange the truth of God for a lie. Praise God that as believers we are not in danger of the wrath of God, but when you think about it, all of our sin is based on one lie or another. In our fight against our sin it is helpful to trace our sin back to the original lie. For example, this excellent book is filled with *Lies Women Believe* contains a long list of lies that not just women, but all believers falsely believe.

- God is not enough
- God should fix all my problems
- God is just like my father
- God is not really enough

- I'm not worth anything
- I can't help the way I am
- I should not have to live with unfulfilled longings
- My sin isn't really that bad

Rich Maurer
September 2, 2012

¹ These large feasts were not uncommon. According to Esth 1:1–4, Xerxes I held a gathering for a large number of people that lasted 180 days.

² Concerning the historicity of this feast, both the Greek historians, Herodotus and Xenophon testified that a banquet was in progress on the night Babylon fell (see later discussion). The date would have been October 12, 539 B.C., about thirty years after the events of chap. 4 (Miller, S. R. (1994). *Vol. 18: Daniel*. The New American Commentary (151). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.)

³ Paul quoting Isaiah 22:12 in 1 Cor 15:32.