

“Handwriting on the Wall”

Daniel 5

Baxter T. Exum (#946)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
November 4, 2007



Introduction:

“The handwriting is on the wall!” Many of us have heard these words, and we understand that the statement refers to some kind of sign or a warning that comes before some terrible or catastrophic event. I was watching television several weeks ago and heard this statement, I believe, with reference to some kind of political situation, and so it is a statement that we do hear from time to time. Perhaps some of us have personally seen the “handwriting on the wall.” Perhaps that date never returned any of our phone calls for some reason—we could see the “handwriting on the wall.” Perhaps we applied for a job and the employer never responded to our resume—we could see the “handwriting on the wall.” Perhaps we have been in the waiting room when the mechanic comes out shaking his head—we could see the “handwriting on the wall” (that something terrible was about to happen). There may be many other situations that we could imagine, and yet probably very few people in our culture understand that the statement actually comes from the Bible.

Perhaps you have heard the saying that, **“Those who do not study the past are condemned to repeat it.”** Well, there is another saying that goes along with that one, **“Those who do study the past will find new and more creative ways to mess up!”** Nevertheless, there is a value to going back and looking at the Scriptures. This morning, then, I would like for us to look at a rather unusual account from **Daniel 5**.

We actually have quite a bit of secular history surrounding this chapter—especially from a Greek historian by the name of Herodotus. Herodotus tells us that the account takes place on the evening of October 12, in the year 539 BC, and the date is so clear because it is a turning point in world history. It is the night that the Babylonian Empire falls to the Medo-Persian Empire. At this point in history, King Nebuchadnezzar has been dead for about 25 years. We remember King Nebuchadnezzar from earlier in the book of Daniel—the golden statue, the fiery furnace, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego. But by the time we get to the text for this morning, a number of other kings have come and gone, and the prophet Daniel is somewhere in his 80’s. He is no longer an important part of the king’s court, but he is most likely living among the other Jews who are living in Babylon after having been captured in Jerusalem many, many years before.

The Babylonian Empire was now being ruled by two kings at the same time—King Nabonidus, one of the many son’s-in-law of Nebuchadnezzar, and also by his son, Belshazzar. History tells us that Nabonidus was very wicked, and at this point he is

no longer in the kingdom—some have assumed that he had gone out some time earlier to meet the invading army of Cyrus the Great, the king of Persia. He was either killed in that battle or was exiled to what is now Saudi Arabia. In the meantime, Cyrus the Great has progressed and is now surrounding the only remaining stronghold of the Babylonian Empire—the city of Babylon itself. The city is under siege, and King Belshazzar is holed up inside.

I should point out that for many years, critics of the Bible thought that the Bible had made a mistake. They criticized the reference to King Belshazzar—they thought he never existed, ****PPT**** until a cylinder was discovered in a Babylonian temple—written by King Nabonidus, and the cylinder apparently mentions King Belshazzar! Once again, the Bible has been proven historically accurate in every detail that can be verified. And the deeper we dig the more evidence we will find. As Christians, we have nothing to fear from archeology. This cylinder, by the way, can now be found in the British Museum in London.

From secular history, we also know quite a bit about the city of Babylon. Some of you might remember that this past spring I took a bus down to Chicago and spent an entire day at the Museum of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago. It was an amazing adventure—I would encourage everyone to make that trip if at all possible. But among many things, ****PPT**** I was able to see an actual stone lion that had been discovered from along the “main drag” in Babylon. The ancient city of Babylon is located roughly 50 miles south of Baghdad in Iraq, and the excavations have been extensive. But this was an actual artifact from Babylon. If it were not for the scary-looking guard standing right next to it, I could have reached out and touched it! But it was right there—a piece of artwork that the prophet Daniel probably saw with his own eyes—absolutely amazing! Please keep the image of this lion in mind, because on the other side of the room at the museum, ****PPT**** they had a painting of what the city of Babylon would have looked like. If you look very carefully at the street leading through one of the main gates (at the bottom of the picture on the right), you can actually see the lion that we now have. The lions were like a ribbon running all along the wall of the main road leading into the city! And so we do have a lot of archeological evidence from the city of Babylon.

As this great city is under siege, we find in the Scriptures that King Belshazzar throws a huge party. This morning, then, I would like for us to study the last party of the Babylonian Empire—it is commonly referred to as “Belshazzar’s Feast.” And as we study this morning, I would like for us to look at it one section at a time.

I. As we study the opening verses we find first of all, that BELSHAZZAR HAD A TERRIBLE PROBLEM. **PPT******

Please look with me at the opening twelve verses—**Daniel 5:1-12**...

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. 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, so that the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines might drink from them. 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. ⁴ They drank the wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone. 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. 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. 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 shall be clothed with purple and have a necklace of gold around his neck, and have authority as third ruler in the kingdom." 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. ⁹ Then King Belshazzar was greatly alarmed, his face grew even paler, and his nobles were perplexed. 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. 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. 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."

1. We start in **verse 1** with the sin of pride.

What an arrogant man! His city is surrounded by invading troops, but instead of going to God in prayer, King Belshazzar throws a huge party. In some ways, we can understand the arrogance. From archaeology, we know that the walls of the city were 85 feet thick. We are told that three chariots could ride side by side on top of the walls. We are told that the city was laid out like a giant square—15 miles on each side. It is 15 miles from this church building to my front door—and so if you can imagine, that would have been one wall of the city of Babylon. We are told that each side had 25 brass gates. The historian Herodotus estimates that the walls were 350 feet tall. I find that hard to believe, and even modern scholars doubt that number, but the point is that Babylon was a fortified city. The walls were surrounded by deep moats and were protected by guards in 250 towers. We know that the Euphrates River flowed through the city—coming in at the northwest and leaving at the southeast. It is estimated that the city of Babylon could have withstood a siege of up

to 20 years—they had plenty of farmland inside the city, storehouses, and all of the fresh water they would ever need. Archaeologists have uncovered a banquet hall that would seat up to 10,000 people. King Belshazzar did not know that the Persian army had been working quietly upstream on a way to divert the Euphrates River. He did not know that that channel would be completed later that evening.

Certainly pride can affect our lives even today. Perhaps you have heard the story of a CEO of a Fortune 500 company. He went inside a service station to pay for his gas, and when he came out he noticed his wife in a deep discussion with the attendant. It turns out that she knew him and even used to date this man before she eventually met her husband. The CEO got in the car and the two drove in silence for a while. He was feeling pretty good about himself when he finally said, "I bet I know what you were thinking. I bet you were thinking you are glad you married me, a Fortune 500 CEO, and not him, a gas station attendant." And the wife quickly replied, "No, I was thinking if I had married him, he'd be a Fortune 500 CEO and you would be a gas station attendant." Arrogance, therefore, is a sin that has stayed basically the same through the ages.

2. *We move on to the sin of drunkenness, with at least five references to drinking just in the first few verses.*

The Bible clearly condemns getting drunk—both in the Old Testament and the New Testament. If you have been to a drinking party, then then you know how quickly things can go from bad to worse. Every Monday, the newspaper has stories about drinking from the weekend that has turned into one tragedy or another.

We have the picture here of something almost like Mardi Gras—one big huge drunken party. Certainly we understand the wisdom of what King Solomon wrote in **Proverbs 31:4-5**, **"...it is not for kings to drink wine, or for rulers to desire strong drink, for they will drink and forget what is decreed, and pervert the rights of all the afflicted."** The Bible tells us in **Psalm 104:15** that wine is a gift from God, and yet (like many people today) the king of Babylon turned God's gift into a curse, and he ends up making a very foolish decision.

3. *Because apparently under the influence of alcohol, King Belshazzar progresses from bad to worse as he commits the sin of blasphemy.*

Belshazzar insults the Lord by using the gold and silver vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had stolen from the temple in Jerusalem. He uses those vessels for drinking as a part of this huge banquet. He uses the vessels that had been set apart for worship to God. Belshazzar was spitting in God's face. Belshazzar was showing off his power—that he was more powerful even than the God of Israel. He kept pushing and pushing until he finally crossed the line. It wasn't enough to be arrogant, but he had to go even further.

4. In verse 4, we find that he praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone.

And with this final insult, the fingers of a man's hand write a message in the wall, and what a change takes place! We are reminded of what Solomon wrote in **Proverbs 16:18**, "***Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling.***" At this point, the king's face turned pale, he became terrified, his knees started knocking together. In the NASB, we read about how his "***hip joints went slack.***" Scholars tell us that this very well could have been a euphemism. "***Hip joints***" could also be translated as "***loins.***" His loins went loose. He messed himself. So here we have a drunken king staggering around, soiled and shaking—absolutely terrified.

Have you ever wondered why the king didn't assume that the message was good? If he couldn't read it, it could have just as easily been a message of victory. I have a theory here: Deep down inside, King Belshazzar knew that he had violated the Law of God. In the book of **Romans**, we read that the Gentiles before the time of Christ were subject to the Law of the Heart. Basically, they had to answer to their own conscience, and when Belshazzar sees the writing on the wall, he knows that he has crossed the line.

The king calls all of the experts in to give an opinion until the queen remembers a man named Daniel who had been so faithful in speaking the truth to King Nebuchadnezzar.

II. At this point we move to the next paragraph as we see THE MESSAGE THAT DANIEL BRINGS. **PPT******

Please look with me at **Daniel 5:13-28**...

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? 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. 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. 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." 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. ¹⁸ "O king, the Most High God granted sovereignty, grandeur, glory and

majesty to Nebuchadnezzar your father. ¹⁹ "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. 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. 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. ²² "Yet you, his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, even though you knew all this, 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. ²⁴ "Then the hand was sent from Him and this inscription was written out. ²⁵ "Now this is the inscription that was written out: 'MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN.' ²⁶ "This is the interpretation of the message: 'MENE'—God has numbered your kingdom and put an end to it. ²⁷ " 'TEKEL'—you have been weighed on the scales and found deficient. ²⁸ " 'PERES'—your kingdom has been divided and given over to the Medes and Persians

Up in **verse 16**, the king offers Daniel a garment of purple, and a gold chain, and third place in the kingdom, but Daniel very wisely turns it down. The message cannot be influenced by money. The prophecy is not for sale. Daniel was not interested in tweaking the message to avoid making someone angry, but he was determined to tell the truth.

Daniel tells the king that the hand was sent from God, but before giving the message, Daniel gives a history lesson. King Nebuchadnezzar was widely respected, but as a result of pride, God brought him down. Then the prophet Daniel makes the application directly to King Belshazzar starting in **verse 22**, "**...even though you knew all of this...**," you have made the same terrible mistakes, you have still done all of these terrible things.

And so the message of repentance that Daniel had preached decades earlier to King Nebuchadnezzar had to be repeated to the next generation. I am reminded of a young man fresh out of preaching school who started with a new congregation and on his first Sunday he preached an amazing sermon on "Love." Everybody congratulated the young man and told him what a great lesson it was. The next Sunday came around, and he preached the exact same sermon—word for word. The people wondered what had gone wrong, but they still made the nice comments. But then the next Sunday he did it again—the exact same lesson. Finally, the men of the

congregation had a special meeting and pulled him aside. "Have you been too busy to write a new lesson?" No. "Is this the only lesson you have in your files?" No. "Are you having trouble coming up with new ideas?" No. The young man replied, "I will move on to Lesson #2 once you show me that you have truly heard Lesson #1." In the same way, the prophet Daniel had to repeat himself.

And after making the connection with Nebuchadnezzar, the prophet Daniel reads the message almost like the foreman of a jury reading the verdict: **Mene. Mene. Tekel. Upharsin.** Literally, "**Numbered. Numbered. Weighed. Divided.**" Basically, a very simple three-point sermon!

The first word is repeated for emphasis, "**Mene. Mene.**" King Belshazzar was "**measured,**" he was "**numbered,**" or "**counted,**" as it could also be translated. Today, we need various forms of measurement—inches, feet, yards, miles, gallons, liters. We measure everything from the air in our tires to the sugar in our blood. And we find here that God also measures. God had measured or numbered King Belshazzar. His days were numbered.

Tekel, the second word, refers to being weighed and found lacking—almost like a merchant using a dishonest weight, or like the scanner at the grocery store that always charges too much for a particular item. If he had been weighed by fellow military leaders at the time, Belshazzar would have been set for life. The city of Babylon could not be conquered. If he had been weighed by the religious leaders of the day, Belshazzar would have come out just fine—he was worshiping the gods of gold and silver. He was a very religious man. If he had been weighed in the opinion of the thousand rulers who were invited to the party, Belshazzar once again would have passed with flying colors. But Belshazzar was weighed in the hand of God, and he was found to be lacking. The balance came up short. According to **verse 27**, "**...you have been weighed on the scales and found deficient.**"

And finally, Daniel explained the meaning of the final word—divided. Belshazzar's kingdom would be divided—it would be chopped up and given away. It would be split between the Medes and the Persians.

And so it was a very simple message: **Numbered. Numbered. Weighed. Divided.** You know, we do not have many other examples of God's finger doing any writing. As far as I can tell, there are two—one in the Old and one in the New. In the Old Testament, we read that the Ten Commandments were written by the finger of God. In the New Testament, you may remember that Jesus also wrote with his finger. According to **John 8**, Jesus wrote with His finger in the dirt. I would not be one bit surprised if Jesus wrote, "**Numbered. Numbered. Weighed. Divided.**" But whatever He wrote, the Bible explains that the Jewish leaders slowly walked away—from the oldest to the youngest.

Nevertheless, the message for King Belshazzar was very simple: **Numbered. Numbered. Weighed. Divided.**

III. Before we close, we need to move on and consider GOD'S JUDGMENT.

****PPT****

If you will, please look with me at Daniel 5:29-31...

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. 30 That same night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was slain. 31 So Darius the Mede received the kingdom at about the age of sixty-two.

How strange, that Belshazzar would go ahead and give Daniel the clothing, and gold, and the position of honor in the kingdom. Daniel did not want it. And so perhaps it was one last insult to God—to accept the message as being true and then to stubbornly refuse to change. How sad it is to look into the word of God, to say to ourselves, “Man, I have messed up,” and then to refuse to change—to refuse to do anything about it! King Belshazzar had just a few minutes to turn his life around—he did not know it yet—but he ignored the final warning and he was killed the same night that he was warned by God.

Truly, ***“It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Hebrews 11:31)***. The historian Herodotus tells us that Babylon fell as the Babylonians were holding a city-wide party. By looking at the Bible, we know what happened at that party. As the king was insulting God, we know from history that the Persian soldiers were completing their canal to divert the river, and when they finished the Euphrates River shut off as if someone had turned off the faucet, and the Persian soldiers marched in under the wall where the river had once flowed.

Numbered. Numbered. Weighed. Divided. King Belshazzar was killed that evening.

Conclusion & Invitation:

King Solomon put it like this in Ecclesiastes 12:14, ***“For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.”*** The names may change, the situations may be different, but God will always have the last word. There is not a city strong enough to protect us from the judgment of God. The words of Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:10 are still true, ***“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.”***

The scales of God are still weighing us today through the gospel of Jesus Christ. According to Romans 2:16, there is a day coming when, ***“...according to [the] gospel, God will judge the secret thoughts of all.”***

As we close, let us suppose that as we are eating lunch today a hand appears and starts writing a message on the wall. What would that message be for each of us?

For many of us, it would say that we have been made acceptable to God because of the salvation offered through His Son Jesus Christ. But there are others who would be in the same situation as King Belshazzar—**Numbered. Numbered. Weighed. Divided.**

Some here this morning have heard the gospel over and over again but have not yet responded to it. You are in a dangerous situation. He did not know it, but Belshazzar was standing before one of the greatest prophets to ever live. He could have asked Daniel what to do. He could have repented. He could have asked for Daniel's help in getting his life straightened out. But he chose not to, and his soul is now in the hands of God.

At the end of this chapter, God's people were still living in captivity. In a few years, though, the new king would make it possible for them to return to Jerusalem. Even so, that was all very temporary. And yet there is still another day coming—a day when all of God's children will enter together into another city. It will not be 15 miles square, but according to the book of **Revelation**, it will be 1,500 miles from corner to corner. It will not be built with stone walls and brass gates, but it will be built with streets of gold and gates of solid pearl. It will have a river flowing through it, but it will not be the Euphrates—it will be the river of the water of life. Are we ready to go there together?

The Bible requires that we turn away from sin, that we confess the name of Jesus as being God's Son, and that we allow ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins. If you are ready to respond to the writing on the wall, please let us know as we sing the next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org