

## Chapter 50 Daniel 5

### Belshazzar's Banquet

*“You praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone. But you did not honor the God who holds in his hand your life and your ways. Therefore he sent the hand that wrote the inscription.”* Daniel 5:23-24

The Book of Daniel is a true story of defining moments in the life of one of God's faithful and subversive double-agents. Outwardly, Daniel was a highly successful Jewish exile, appointed by Nebuchadnezzar to rule over the province of Babylon. Inwardly, Daniel was a fully devoted follower of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, working behind enemy lines. In the big picture, the Book of Daniel shows us the sovereignty of God over the nations and the testimony of God's grace in history. On a more personal level, it shows us how to live for God in exile. Daniel had grown up on Isaiah's prophecies and Jeremiah's messages. He prayed the Psalms and knew Proverbs. The story of Job shaped his understanding of suffering and Amos and Micah guided him in justice and true spirituality. Daniel did not keep his devotion to Yahweh a secret. Those who knew him knew that Yahweh was the source of his wisdom and courage. His strength and peace came from the Lord. Daniel shows us how to stay in the story, while living in a culture that treats God's good news for the world as a peculiar minority report.

### A Long Obedience

Daniel's decades of perseverance, patience, and prayer were punctuated by crisis encounters that tested his faithfulness to the limit. The author of the book does not even attempt to describe the years of isolation, loneliness, and frustration that Daniel endured along with the exiles. One psalm distills the decades of anguish felt by thousands of exiles, including Daniel and his friends: “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. . . . Our tormentors demanded songs of joy. . . . How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?” (Ps 137). The untold story behind the story of Daniel's defining moments is the year after year persistent practice of unspectacular faithfulness. The argument could be made that to maintain spiritual integrity in the face of these daily small, even banal challenges is where the battle is won or lost. For Daniel and his fellow exiles it was a long, long, long obedience in the same direction.

Only three incidents are highlighted in more than forty years of Nebuchadnezzar's rule (605 - 562 BC). The silent years of quiet struggle in exile are not elaborated on. The tension and tediousness of living faithfully for Yahweh in a foreign and hostile culture form the backdrop for moments of high drama when everything was on the line. The reason Daniel came through these defining moments by God's grace with such faithfulness was because of his consistent dependence on the Lord—everyday of his life. He was prepared for the moment of crisis, because he put his faith to the test in daily life. His daily diet, his daily devotions, and his everyday-obedience demonstrated his commitment to God's will. For Daniel, everything in life pointed to God. He kept the sacred (*sacra*) in mind (*mental*). “To him, a sacramental view of life had everything to do with

direction. Nature, people, eating, work, worship—everything in daily life points up the chain of a reordered world toward God” (Yancey, Rumors, 44, 57). By contrast, Belshazzar had a reducer’s mind-set. He shrunk everything down to the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone.

The author’s abrupt introduction of King Belshazzar does not mention the obvious fact that Daniel has lived into old age. At the age of 85 or so he has seen kings come and go. Nor does he describe Belshazzar’s background. Apparently the author felt it was unimportant to inform the reader that Nebuchadnezzar was succeeded by his son Amel-Marduk (the Evil-Merodach of 2 Kings 25:27), who was killed by his successor Neriglissar, who ruled for only a few years before turning power over to his son, Labashi-Marduk, who was killed in a coup instigated by Nabonidus, Belshazzar’s father. Belshazzar ruled in Babylon during his father’s ten-year absence and until Cyrus entered Babylon and brought his kingdom to an end (539 B.C.) (Longman, 134). Three kings, two of whom were assassinated, are conveniently skipped over by the author who refers to Nebuchadnezzar as Belshazzar’s “father” or “predecessor” (5:11). The author appears disinterested in Babylonian politics, except in those instances where God’s faithfulness and sovereignty are revealed. The story of Belshazzar’s great banquet is sufficient to capture the ethos of his kingdom and to document a defining moment in Salvation History.

### **A Great Banquet**

Belshazzar’s banquet epitomizes the Babylonian culture as decadent, perverted, ostentatious, vulgar, debauched, and self-indulgent (see Goldingay, 113). A thousand nobles were invited to the party and the wine flowed. The author spares us the details, but Belshazzar’s harem of wives and concubines were there, and there was more than laughter and heavy drinking going on. We don’t know whether anybody at the party knew or cared that Darius the Mede was posed to kill Belshazzar and take over the kingdom.

Great banquets do not fare too well in the Bible. Things go wrong. Pharaoh gave a feast for all his officials in honor of his birthday and he lifted the head of the chief baker—literally (Gen 40:20-22). After seven days of banqueting and drinking, Persian King Xerxes wanted to put his beautiful Queen Vashti on display for all to see. Presumably he had more in mind than a grand entrance. The queen refused to come and she was quickly dethroned and banned from the presence of the king (Esther 1). At King Herod’s birthday bash for his high officials and military commanders, Herodias’ daughter danced for the dinner guests. She was so impressive and provocative that Herod promised her anything she wanted. Prompted by her mother she asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. The executioner was summoned and she got her wish (Mk 6:17-29).

At Belshazzar’s great banquet he ordered the gold and silver goblets that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the Jerusalem temple of God to be used by his dinner guests to toast “the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone.” This symbolic gesture of disdain against the Jews and their God was consistent with a deep animosity against the Jews. We know little about Belshazzar, but his actions speak for themselves. He managed to combine hedonism, hatred and idolatry in a social event that captured the essence of himself and his kingdom. Belshazzar’s

banquet epitomizes a culture that is missing something large, important and significant. Like many today, Belshazzar surrounded himself with his false infinities: sex, power, wealth and wine. These are the idols that have transcendent meaning and power for the Imperial Self.

The biblical narrative sums up Babylonian culture with lists—lists of wise men, lists of musical instruments, lists of officials, lists of idols. The itemized lists sum up the complexity of the culture, but at the same time these lists imply the shallowness of the culture. The essence of this culture can be explained with lists. Instead of real people with real life stories, we have lists of generic positions, instruments and idols. Only a reduced culture can be summed up with lists. Babylon has magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers, but no wisdom. There are satraps, prefects, governors, advisors, treasurers, judges, and magistrates, but no leadership. They play the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe, but there is no worship. They have no God but the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone. Belshazzar ruled over an increasingly sophisticated, complex culture but when it was itemized in lists it didn't amount to much. All the specialization in the world doesn't mean much if there is no real wisdom. Even the world's most sophisticated administrative infrastructure doesn't really help if there is no justice. Any number of prodigies, virtuosos, artists, and poets, will not make up for a culture of decadence and debauchery. The biblical narrative has numbered, weighed, and assessed Babylonian culture with its lists.

Belshazzar reminds us of the rich fool in Jesus' parable who says to himself, "Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry" (Lk 12:19). The Persians are "knocking at the door of the Babylonian empire" and Belshazzar throws a party. But why? "Was it to rally and encourage the leaders? To give them a diversion in the face of the onslaught? To feast today for tomorrow we die? Perhaps a bit of all three, but we are safe to assume that tension permeated the air in the Babylonian capital at this time" (Longman, 136). What happened next was completely unexpected and illustrates the power of God to get through to anyone anytime. "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. His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his legs became weak and his knees were knocking" (5:6).

### **Handwriting on the Wall**

Try as he might to scorn the testimony of Yahweh and to ignore the Persian threat against Babylon, Belshazzar could not ignore the handwriting on the wall. He was shaken to his core and did what his predecessor Nebuchadnezzar had done many times before. He summoned "the enchanters, astrologers and diviners," and promised them power and prestige if they could interpret the saying on the wall. Once again the failure of the king's wise men to interpret the revelation reinforces the fundamental message of the Book of Daniel that "only God's wisdom can reveal the mysteries of life" (Longman, 73). For the third time (2:10-11; 4:7; 5:8) the king's wise men could not figure it out. "So King Belshazzar became even more terrified and his face grew more pale. His nobles were baffled" (5:9). No matter how powerful he appeared to be and no matter how insulated he was from the pressures of ordinary life, Belshazzar was vulnerable to the hopelessness of the human condition.

The queen mother, possibly Belshazzar's mother (Baldwin, 122) or Nebuchadnezzar's wife (Longeman, 139), overheard the raised voices and sensed the panic. By now Daniel is an old and forgotten official well into his 80s. Three kings had come and gone without Daniel playing a major role in the royal court. However, Daniel's spiritual vitality had not weakened. The visions that follow in chapters 7-12 take place during and after Belshazzar's reign. Daniel was as convinced as ever of the sovereignty of God over the nations and he anticipated the Persian conquest of Babylon (8:1-4).

The queen mother's introduction of Daniel sheds much more light on his character than we know of the king. Her opening line is ironic, "There's a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods in him." Up until now, there was no need for a person who had "insight and intelligence and wisdom like that of the gods." How had Belshazzar managed to rule for a decade without consulting a man with a "keen mind and knowledge and understanding?" What prejudices and corporate conspiracies led to Daniel's demotion and the elimination of his influence? Daniel's name didn't even appear on the list of magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners. He was living completely below Belshazzar's radar. Needless to say the wisdom of God had not endeared Daniel to the Babylonian intelligentsia. So now, after all these years, the queen mother re-introduces Daniel to the royal court.

Belshazzar's condescending, if not antisemitic, attitude was apparent from his opening question, "Are you Daniel, one of the exiles my father the king brought from Judah?" The very race and religion that he had sought to denigrate only hours before is now represented before him in the person of Daniel. His skepticism was thinly concealed behind a somewhat pompous attitude: "I have heard" all about you and "if you can" give me the interpretation, then "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." Daniel wasn't buying it. What Belshazzar meant as a demeaning slight by referring to him as "one of the exiles," Daniel saw as his honored status. He wasn't being interviewed for a job. He was only there because he was God's agent in a foreign land. He didn't want the purple robe or the gold chain. He didn't want to be number three in the kingdom. There was nothing that Belshazzar could give to Daniel that he wanted.

When Daniel answered the king, it was with the voice of the prophet, not the diplomat. Gone was any tone of deference that Daniel had shown Nebuchadnezzar and in its place was a rigorous, no-holds-barred, *now hear this message*. It was one thing for Belshazzar to have forgotten who Daniel was, but it was inexcusable for him not to have learned from Nebuchadnezzar's life and testimony. Against the list-making assessment of Babylonian culture, Daniel tells the story of Nebuchadnezzar. He credits Nebuchadnezzar's rise and fall to "the Most High God" who is "sovereign over the kingdoms on earth and sets over them anyone he wishes" (5:21). Then Daniel brings the message home by pointedly pinning the blame on the king. "But *you*, Belshazzar, his successor, have not humbled *yourself*, though *you* knew all this. 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."

Fourteen times, Daniel zeroes in on Belshazzar's responsibility, as if to say, "Make no mistake about it, this message of judgment is all about you!" The story of Belshazzar is a story of accountability and judgment. We are responsible for our actions. We will reap what we sow. There are consequences for our actions.

The four words written on the wall made perfect sense to anyone who spoke Hebrew or Aramaic: *Mene, Mene, Tekel, Parsin*. These four Aramaic nouns had a market place ring to them. The kind of thing a merchant might shout out, indicating measures of weight in descending order, "a mina, a shekel, and a half." We might think in terms of "a hundred pounds, a pound, and an ounce" or "a dollar, a dime, and a cent." The mystery however was not so much their literal meaning as their deeper meaning. They imply diminished value, a descending order of importance, a devolution of significance. These nouns carry a verbal meaning: *mene* can mean *numbering*, *tekel* can mean *weighed*, and *peres* can mean *divided*. Daniel gave out the meaning of the words: "*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" (5:26). In three different ways, using three different means, *numbering*, *weighing* and *measuring*, the message is clear. Time is up on Belshazzar's reign, his character lacks substance, and his kingdom will be divided up. The handwriting on the wall was God's verdict on Babylon, a judgment delivered by the prophets years ago (Isaiah 13; 21; Jeremiah 51). Belshazzar did not have long to wait for his punishment, that very night it was measured out. No sooner had he rewarded Daniel with meaningless symbols of Babylonian power than Belshazzar was assassinated. Darius the Mede, namely Cyrus the Persian, took over the kingdom (Baldwin, 27). Some scholars have speculated that the reason his age is given was because a mina, a shekel, and two halves of a shekel, add up to 62 shekels. Darius is the agent of fulfillment in God's judgment on Belshazzar and Babylon (see Goldingay, 112).

The abruptness of Belshazzar's judgment (as well as his introduction) is an indication that the story is not about the king of Babylon, but about the vindication of Yahweh and his servant Daniel. The message is plain: "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. People reap what they sow. Those who sow to please their sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; those who sow to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life" (Galatians 6:7).

*The contemporary significance for this story can be identified in several ways.*

Belshazzar used the confiscated temple goblets in a profane and blasphemous act of disdain for the God of the Jews. He did this in spite. He spit in the face of Yahweh to bolster his pride and boast of his Babylonian glory. Today's Belshazzars do not use temple objects to mock God. They do something far worse. They use the saints, brothers and sisters in Christ, who are the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19). The persecution of our brothers and sisters in Christ is something far worse than Belshazzar's sacrilegious act of desecration. Belshazzars come in the form of government officials and religious leaders who target Christians for persecution, imprisonment and death. Such people are entitled to the same judgment call that Daniel delivered to Belshazzar.

But there are little Belshazzars in our offices and universities who prey on the saints. They have reduced their world to the gods of money, sex, and power. They bow before the idols of cars, homes, clothes, and vacations. They use up people for their lustful pleasures and ego pursuits. They stalk Christian girls and guys on campus and they like nothing better than to use a Christian to toast their idols. They see Christians as easy prey for seduction, manipulation, and indoctrination. Little Belshazzars rule their little realms with the same arrogance and selfishness practiced by the original Babylonian Belshazzar.

It would be nice if there was an impenetrable wall separating the lifestyles and world-views of Belshazzar and Daniel. But there isn't. The shocking and sobering truth is that we can praise the testimony of Daniel, yet take after Belshazzar. We can use others for our purposes. We can mock the things of God. We can usurp the authority of God's Word with our opinions and actions. In our own way and in our own style, we can act like the ancient Babylonian potentate. Sadly, the Belshazzar influence invades the church and the spirit of the great banquet, sponsored by Belshazzar, competes with the integrity and authenticity of the Lord's Supper. The apostle Paul encountered such a problem in the church at Corinth. When the church met to celebrate holy communion they were so divided along social and economic lines that some believers were starving for a meal while others had feasted until they were full and were drunk. Paul contended that wealthy members were not hosting the Lord's Supper but their own private dinner party. Paul's anger at their blatant insensitivity and worldly pride comes through passionately: "Do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter!" (11:22).

For Paul it was inconceivable that the Corinthian believers could "eat this bread and drink this cup" and "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" and then live in flagrant disregard for the physical and spiritual welfare of their brothers and sisters in Christ. It was a betrayal of everything Jesus accomplished through his sacrificial death on the cross. We cannot party with Belshazzar in the great banquet and then simply show up sober for the Lord's Supper.

To eat the Lord's Supper "in an unworthy manner" meant to disregard poor brothers and sisters in Christ for whom Christ died. In other words, to take on the attitude of Belshazzar. To say of the bread, "This is Christ's body, eat this in remembrance of him," and to deny solidarity with the Body of Christ, the Church, was tantamount to denying the atoning sacrifice of the Cross. The self-examination Paul calls for here, is not so much a private examination of one's thought life but a public acknowledgment of one's genuine fellowship with the entire body of Christ. To discern the body of Christ is to undergo a social transformation that challenges worldly notions of status and success and breaks down the economic, racial and social divisions between believers. According to Paul, failure to discern the body of Christ resulted in serious physical consequences, "For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep" (11:29). Failure to discern the Body of Christ by showing respect, sensitivity, and compassion for all its members, resulted in the spiritual, emotional and physical breakdown of the Body.

The story of Belshazzar's banquet teaches us "to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Ps 90:11). We are invited to let God weigh us on his honest scales (Job 31:6), and challenged to make God's justice and righteousness the measurement of our success (Isaiah 28:17). The choice between Belshazzar and Daniel is as plain as the writing on the wall.