

• *Belshazzar - a king confirming his damnation*

Our story leaps forward more than twenty years, to the days of Belshazzar. If Daniel chapter 4 was about a king coming to salvation, Daniel chapter 5 is about a king confirming his damnation. In both chapters we are seeing a powerful king. In both chapters the king is given a warning by God. In both chapters Daniel acts as the interpreter of God's warning. Four reigns after Nebuchadnezzar (605–562 BC) a king Nabonidus was reigning (556–539 BC). Belshazzar was his eldest son, and since the father left much of the ruling to the son he was more or less the king in Babylon, and our book calls him 'Belshazzar the king'¹.

¹ 5:9, 26, 30

1. We see a king who despises the God of Israel

• *A proud and foolish man trying to impress others*

1. **We see a king who despises the God of Israel.** Power does not mean happiness, and Belshazzar is not a happy man. He is powerful as the acting-king of Babylon. He holds a gigantic banquet for a thousand of his nobles¹, and he spends an evening drinking wine with them. It is not because his nobles are such charming people! It is not a matter of kindness and concern for the upper classes of the land. It is pride. Men and women like to win the approval and admiration of others and will do all sorts of things to get their attention and admiration. His party is also the height of foolishness and wishful thinking because (as we shall discover in 5:30) the armies of Cyrus of Persia are even at this moment outside the city. Belshazzar is trying to show the leaders of the land that he has no fears, and that all is well in the country – but it is very far from the truth.

¹ 5:1

• *Gold and silver cup taken from God's temple used for an evening of drunken celebration*

Then there comes a point where in his desire to show off before his men he wants the gold and silver cups that were taken from the temple in Jerusalem, over forty years previously. They were originally made to be used for the worship of God within Solomon's temple, but Belshazzar cares nothing about that. He wants to use them for his evening of drunken celebrations¹. Perhaps he even wants to ridicule the God of Israel. So someone goes to the treasure-store and the gold and silver cups from the temple are brought for Belshazzar to use. The guests at the party think it entertaining to use such pretty things, such interesting utensils from an interesting culture². In addition to their drunkenness they deliberately praise their pagan gods while misusing the cups made for the worship of the God of Israel³.

¹ 5:2

² 5:3
³ 5:4

• *Deliberately scorning God*

Belshazzar knows about the God of Israel, and he knows what happened to Nebuchadnezzar. Yet Belshazzar is not seeking peace or cleansing of conscience from the God in whom Nebuchadnezzar eventually put his trust. He is deliberately using the vessels from the temple in acts of sacrilege and scorn. They are drinking heavily.

2. Belshazzar gets a warning

2. **Belshazzar gets a warning.** The judgement of God does not fall instantly on Belshazzar without a preliminary rebuke. The party is at its height. There is no real joy in it. Belshazzar is powerful, rich, famous. He is indulging in the pleasures of wining and dining with the wealthy nobles of the land. There are plenty of women around; the wives and concubines are there. Is this happiness? No, it is blindness, thoughtlessness, ignorance. Suddenly an extraordinary thing happens.

• *Writing on the wall*

• *Guilty conscience*

• *Daniel summoned to explain the meaning of the handwriting*

It is a great mercy to us if we receive a warning

God's warning is step number one

• *Step two - clarification from God's messenger*

A hand appears and its fingers scrawl some words on the wall. It is sheer miracle, like Daniel's miraculous knowledge of Nebuchadnezzar's dream, and like the supernatural person walking with the Hebrews in the fiery furnace. God is showing himself to Belshazzar as he did to Nebuchadnezzar. The king grows pale and weak at the knees^{□1}. He has a guilty conscience. He knows that he has been defying the God of Israel. His misuse of the gold and silver cups from Israel's temple destroyed forty years or so before was deliberate. Now God is showing himself to Belshazzar, and he is terrified at what might happen to him because of his defying God. He knows that this is some kind of message to him, and is desperate to know what the handwriting on the wall might mean. His wise men are offered rich rewards if they can tell him its meaning^{□2}. No one can help him^{□3}. The king is terrified^{□4}. But the queen – the queen-mother as we would say – is older than Belshazzar and knows that Daniel is elderly but is still alive and well. He will be able to help. Let him be sent for^{□5}. So Daniel comes and is offered wealth and eminence in the kingdom if he can explain to Belshazzar what the miraculous handwriting means^{□6}.

□1 5:5-6

□2 5:7

□3 5:8

□4 5:9

□5 5:9-12

□6 5:13-16

It is a great mercy to us if we receive a warning. Belshazzar had been defiantly ridiculing the power of the God of Israel when something happened that utterly shatters him and brings him to a point of terror. If God does this to you, consider it a great mercy! If when you are a long way from obedience to God, he does something that knocks aside your foolish complacency and makes you desperately want to know what he is saying – count it a great act of mercy of God in your life.

God's warning sent Belshazzar to the word of God. The warning was not clear in itself. A man of God who is able to bring the word of God is needed. The warning is step number one. Step number two is to meet Daniel and have the warning clarified and pressed upon his conscience. God sends warnings but it is likely that also we shall need to be more closely in touch with God's people, God's messenger, God's word, before we fully get the help that we need.



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