

• *Daniel tells the king what the mysterious writing means*

Belshazzar despises the God of Israel, but he has received a mysterious warning, and now a man of God is needed. Belshazzar meets Daniel and makes him a tempting offer of gifts and prestige. He seems to think that what Daniel wants more than anything else in life is a ‘gold chain around his neck’^{□1}! Daniel replies, ‘You may keep your gifts...!’ However, Daniel is able to tell the king what his mysterious warning means.

□1 5:16

God does not like it when we are unteachable

God does not like it when we are unteachable. The mysterious message is a signal to Belshazzar that he is unteachable. He has not learned anything from what happened to his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar. God gave incredible power and authority to Nebuchadnezzar^{□1}. It led to Nebuchadnezzar’s becoming very arrogant and hard and God stripped him of his royal glory until he acknowledged that his sovereignty came from God alone^{□2}. Belshazzar should have learned something from this. We are all meant to think and to see what God is saying to us. People have an awareness of God in their hearts. Belshazzar knew what he was doing when he defied the God of Israel. Belshazzar should have taken this knowledge that he had, and his knowledge of what happened to Nebuchadnezzar, and he should have pressed on to seek God. We have a sense of God’s lordship over us. Our sense that God exists is given to us so that we might feel after him. He is close; it is possible to know him. Why has Belshazzar not learned from what happened to Nebuchadnezzar? ‘You his son’ – it means grandson – ‘...have not humbled yourself’^{□3}.

□1 5:17-19

□2 5:20-21

□3 5:22

• *Belshazzar failed to learn from the knowledge of what happened to his grandfather*

• *We all start from a position of ignorance but God expects us to learn*

We do well to pause a moment and apply this to ourselves. God expects us to learn about him and his ways. We all start from a position of ignorance. Even highly intelligent people like the apostle Paul have to say, ‘I acted ignorantly and in unbelief’. We all start from that position. None of us are born knowing God and his ways. Yet God expects us to learn. We have a sense of God in our hearts and certain things happen to us that ought to make us see that God is there and that God is real. No one in Nebuchadnezzar’s family could really have any doubts that something amazing had happened to Nebuchadnezzar.

God becomes more angry when we use what we know to sin even more.

God becomes more angry when we use what we know to sin even more. Not only did Belshazzar refuse to learn what he could have learned. He deliberately suppressed what he knew and defied the God of Israel. Daniel says to him, ‘You have set yourself against the God of heaven.’ Belshazzar had suppressed what he knew. He had insulted God by using sacred cups from the temple. He had defiantly worshipped other gods. He had shown no gratitude to the God who gave him life and breath^{□1}. Despite what he knew he had sinned even more!

□1 5:23

• *Writing on the wall*

Daniel now tells Belshazzar what God is saying to him^{□1}. The words on the wall (without vowels as was the common way of writing) were, if they were read vertically:

□1 5:24-28

P T M M
R K N N
S L ‘ ‘

or perhaps (if they were written horizontally):

’ N M
’ N M
L K T
S R P

• *Four well-known Semitic words*

• *Maneh – God has weighed Beshazzar*

• *Tekel – he has been found worthless*

• *Peras – his kingdom will be divided*

Belshazzar defies a warning

• *Only one hope – to ask for mercy*

• *Belshazzar honours Daniel but fails to respond to God*

• *God’s action – the Persian takeover*

They were written in a script – perhaps the old Aramaic script – that Belshazzar could not understand. Daniel (reading left to right Semitic-style, or vertically left to right) read them easily. They were four well-known Semitic words: *maneh*, *maneh* (the name of a weight), *tekel* (another name of a weight, the same as the Hebrew word *shekel*), *u-* (the Semitic word for ‘and’), *peras* (another weight, the half-*maneh*).

Maneh means that God had weighed up the worth of Belshazzar, had found that his attitude to life was worthless, and that his days were limited. As well as being a weight the Hebrew root *m-n-* meant ‘to number’. The word came twice to emphasize the point. This was the main thrust of the message.

Tekel was to be interpreted as meaning: God had weighed up the worth of Belshazzar, had found that his attitude to life was altogether too light (the *tekel* was much less than the *maneh*). He was found lacking in weight, worthless. Semitic *t-k-l* or *sh-k-l* also means ‘to weigh’.

Peras was to be interpreted as meaning that God had weighed up the worth of Belshazzar, had found him wanting and had decided to parcel out his kingdom to others. Semitic *p-r-s* also means to divide, or break in two. The Medes and Persians should form a joint-kingdom sharing what once the Babylonians had had.

Belshazzar defies a warning. The question is what will Belshazzar do now? He had only one hope: to fall on the ground and ask for mercy. God did not destroy Belshazzar at the first stage of his sin, when he refused to learn what he could have learned. He did not destroy Belshazzar at the second stage of his sin when he defied God and insulted him. But now he is in stage three! He now has received a striking warning from God and a prophet of God has put to him what God is saying. But even the warning is part of God’s mercy. Belshazzar is told what God is saying so that perhaps he might ask for mercy.

Belshazzar is impressed. He honours Daniel¹. But he did not feel the matter was so urgent that he should do much about it. It was 16 October 539 BC. Belshazzar did not know it but outside the city were Median and Persian soldiers. The soldiers of Cyrus king of the Persians had diverted the river Tigris near Babylon. The night when Belshazzar got his warning, the Persians marched along the dried-up river-bed and broke into the city. Belshazzar was killed. The Babylonian empire was finished. Seventeen days later Cyrus the Persian entered the city in triumph. The Persians took over the empire. God’s warning for Belshazzar was only a few hours away from the time it would be put into effect. When we get a warning from God we never know how short the time will be until the day of God’s action.

¹ 5:29

 <p>slices.org.uk</p>	<p>Dr Michael Eaton is highly respected internationally as a theologian, author, preacher and teacher. He lives in Kenya where he is one of the leaders of the Chrisco Fellowship. His <i>Preaching Through The Bible</i> (PTTB) books are highly popular worldwide. Michael Eaton puts the theological and practical meaning of the Bible in a clear and down-to-earth way so that what is written can be easily understood by the reader.</p>		
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