



HG9: Daniel (3/5) *'The Writing's On The Wall!'*

Daniel 5:1-31

Home Group Sermon Notes

8th February 2009 - Revd Paul A Carr

Introduction: The date is 12th October 539 BC. King Nebuchadnezzar has died and King Nebonides, co-ruler of Babylon was outside the city defending it against the mighty armies of the Medes and Persians under Cyrus and Darius. The city itself was considered impregnable. The wall around it was 300ft high, 85ft wide, and extended 35ft into the ground. There were 250 guard towers and 100 gates. The River Euphrates flowed under the walls to provide water as well as supplying its moats. The perimeter of the city walls stretched for 60 miles. There was enough food stored in Babylon to support a 20-year siege for its ½ million inhabitants. The city also housed one of the seven wonders of the ancient world: The Hanging Gardens of Babylon! The exile to Babylon, as we have been thinking about in recent weeks, was a traumatic time for the Jewish people. It was a time of religious and social upheaval which forced a major review of their beliefs. However, as we've seen time and again in this series, God was in very much in control of events and was moving behind the scenes. Yet, if we're honest, there are times in our own lives when circumstances, politicians and world events seem to wield the true power over our lives. Our story this morning is one of a number of incidents in Jewish history where their conquerors didn't take the holiness of the Temple, or what was kept in the Temple, seriously enough (See 1 Samuel). They discovered the hard way that whilst they may have power over the Jewish people they do not have power over their God who is far more powerful than they thought.

Belshazzar's Banquet, vs 1 – 4: While Nebonides was defending the city against the Medes and Persians his son, Belshazzar, who'd been given the responsibility of 'holding the fort' as co-regent, was inside the palace giving a *great banquet*, vs1, *for a thousand of his nobles*. He wanted to impress them and, as you do when you want to impress people, no expense was spared and the wine was flowing freely (read Proverbs 23:29-35). Belshazzar, probably, had too much to drink and, as you do when you have too much alcohol in your blood stream, Belshazzar puts his 'foot in it' and makes a huge error of judgement. For some unknown reason he decides to use the goblets that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the Temple in Jerusalem to drink from and, as they did so, vs4: *they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone*. He dared to ridicule and dishonour God and used cups that had His name written on them to toast the false god's of the Babylonians. Talk about an insult! What a vivid example of spiritual carelessness. Jesus warned us against abusing the temple (Matthew 21:13). Paul warned us against having too casual an approach in our life and worship (1 Corinthians 11:17) and especially against carelessness in the abuse of the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:27ff).

The Writing on the Wall, vs 5 – 12: But suddenly, just as they were getting into the swing of things, vs5-6: *... the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall, near the lamp stand in the royal palace. The king watched the hand as it wrote. His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his knees knocked together and his legs gave way*. The writing on the wall was probably scratched into the plaster with a fingernail. We all know the sound a fingernail makes when it's dragged down on a black board (chalk board) – it sets the hairs on the back of your neck on edge doesn't it? Imagine that 'scratching sound' breaking through the noise and chatter and imagine the abrupt, frightening, deathly silence that would follow when they saw this terrifying, disembodied hand forming a message on the wall. The writing silenced the scoffers and is a great example of how God intervenes and speaks to people in vivid, even unusual, ways: Moses/burning bush; Peter/Cornelius; Philip/Ethiopian Official, etc.

Belshazzar's *... knees knocked together and his legs gave way*. I think that's a bit of an understatement, don't you? The Aramaic word translated 'legs' in the NIV is translated 'joints of his loins' in the KJV and really means the midriff or the centre section of the body. There's a fairly good chance that this is not a reference to legs/joints, but to the bowels/bladder. Belshazzar was staggering around half drunk, his face had turned white, his knees were knocking and, in addition to this, he soiled his pants! And I don't think that's reading too much into this. It often happens when people are terrified and lose control of their bowels!

Belshazzar shouted vs7: *... for the enchanters, astrologers and diviners to be brought for help* before he lost face and said to these wise men of Babylon, *'Whoever reads this writing and tells me what it means will be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed around his neck, and he will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom*. This would turn out to be a hollow offer, because the kingdom was only going to last a few more hours. We are told, vs1 that the wives, concubines, and nobles were already at the feast. But there was one queen who wasn't there, and most commentators agree she was either the mother or grandmother of Belshazzar, or one of the queens of Nebuchadnezzar.

This older woman, whoever she was, arrived and gave a grandmotherly lecture to this failure of a king. *The Mede and Persian armies are outside the gates and what we need is somebody who can strengthen and lead these people! You're drunk! Your knees are knocking, you've soiled your pants and you are a sad excuse for a king. Get a grip!* I guess she was trying to stir Belshazzar into showing some royal leadership. Perhaps her references to Nebuchadnezzar were intended to inspire and strengthen his resolve. But Belshazzar wasn't as powerful as Nebuchadnezzar had been. He was, in reality, a pathetic, hollow man? Like many weak people he chose to show off; to give the appearance of power. His life was based on a series of lofty assumptions about himself. He had a facade of royalty, a name and title that he held on to for dear life. He threw parties; he issued commands, spoke of gods, and used religious implements as articles of ridicule and dishonour. He acted as if he was someone important and substantial, but he was none of those things (not too unlike the Emperor Commodus or those of you who have seen the film Gladiator!)

Belshazzar was a man who imagined that because he sat on a throne, with a hint of regal authority, that he was a great person. He imagined that because he was surrounded by the walls of the palace that he was safe from harm. He imagined that because he spoke with bravado when drunk, he was brave. But none of those things were true. The lesson of Nebuchadnezzar's fall was that a man at the peak of human accomplishment is nothing in comparison to the Lord. The most successful, bright, and capable human beings owe everything, even their breath and their sanity, to God. The lesson taught in the story of Belshazzar is different. Here we have a man who was pretending to be successful and needed to learn the truth. You could make a case that Nebuchadnezzar, in his own time, was probably the most successful man who ever lived. But Belshazzar degenerated everything. He was lying to himself, lying to others and surrounded by sycophants who tickled his ego and supported his illusions.

Daniel's Interpretation, vs 13 – 31: Daniel was in retirement when he was summoned to speak to Belshazzar. He began his career by speaking the truth to king Nebuchadnezzar when he was a teenager, ch1. He was too insignificant, because of his youth to have anything to offer - you had to be old to be considered wise in those days - yet God used him to interpret the king's dream. In his middle years he had been the king's counsellor. In his older years (he was certainly in his 70's by now) he'd been set aside by Nebuchadnezzar's successors. But as the dowager queen did, the old man soberly spoke the truth. Belshazzar tried to buy him off, saying: *I'll give you the third-highest ruler in the kingdom - robes, gold chains, the whole thing!* But Daniel said, as he always had: *I'm not interested in what you have to offer.* Daniel's convictions are well described in the simple song that we are sing: *Lord, you are more precious than silver, Lord, You are more costly than gold. Lord, You are more beautiful than diamonds, and nothing I desire compares with You.*

Then Daniel answered the king, vs17: *You may keep your gifts for yourself and give your rewards to someone else. Nevertheless, I will read the writing for the king and tell him what it means.* Daniel told Belshazzar to keep his gifts. A reminder that we shouldn't compromise our faith for gifts or cash or prestige or promotion or flattering plaudits! Cash for blessings, or indulgences as they were known, are what caused Martin Luther to rebel against the Catholic Church, nail his 95 Theses to the door of Wittenburg Cathedral and begin, what we know today, to be the beginning of the European reformation and the establishing of the Protestant Church. Read vs18-22. The end came suddenly - Belshazzar had reached the point of no return. We don't know what previous warnings he'd received but we do know that we cannot try God's patience forever. None of us should presume on God's grace and mercy and knowingly continue in sin (see Romans 6 for Paul's reminder about this).

The focus of Daniel's indictment was this: *You knew better! You saw what happened to Nebuchadnezzar. But even though you knew that, you purposefully dishonoured the God of heaven.* He had the choice of choosing a blessing or a curse and he chose the latter. His actions were a deliberate and calculated affront to God and you can't get away with that. In Romans 8:7 Paul defines this sin as being 'hostile to God' and he points out that in this hostility man deliberately perverts God's truth and turns it into a lie. The Bible tells me that I shouldn't do that but I don't want to, so I'll do this instead! John's Gospel 3:4, calls it a love of darkness rather than light. Daniel could have spoken the same caring and pastoral words that he had spoken to Nebuchadnezzar all those years before - but he didn't. It seems strange that this should be the case. But Daniel was there to bear witness to God's words, not his own, and this is true of us sometimes isn't it? No matter how much concern and sympathy we may have for people's circumstances if they are walking outside of God's will, then our responsibility is to speak God's words in honesty and love. Don Carson has written a book on this theme and he's called it: *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God.* The difficulty of challenging/disciplining people who ignore God's words and trying to maintain a loving relationship in the midst ...

Nebuchadnezzar had praised God, but it wasn't passed down to the next generation - and this is often the way isn't it? If Belshazzar had learned from history he would not have made the mistakes he did. Steve Turner, poem: *History repeats itself, it has to, no one listens.* How we should learn from the mistakes we make and from the mistakes of others. How we should take words of advice from those who know what they are talking about. We expect our children to listen to us, we hope, when we tell them not to touch the fire because they will be burned. So why don't we take notice of God's word, and each other, when we know we are going to do things that will ruin our lives? We allow ourselves to be burned because our pride won't allow us to change our minds.

The words written on the wall, translated into English, read: *Numbered. Numbered. Weighed. Divided.* They mean, *Your days have been numbered. Your number is up. The kingdom is over. Your life is at an end.* Or put another way: *You have come to the end of yourself and your reign. Your life has been analysed-placed on a scale to see what its worth. And it doesn't weigh anything!* Your life has been found wanting. Therefore, the city (and empire) you had imagined invincible has been taken away from you and given to another nation to rule.

It's quite interesting that God should have used the word **Tekel**: *You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting* because this was a central part of the culture of the afterlife in Ancient civilisations. The Egyptians, for instance, believed that Osiris (god of death and rebirth), Horus (god who looked after the Pharaoh), Anubis (god of the dead) and Thoth (god of wisdom) sat in the hall of justice where the hearts of the deceased were weighed against a feather. If the heart of the deceased is heavier than the feather it means his heart is filled with evil and there is no place for evil in the afterlife and so that person dies a second time. However, if the heart is lighter than a feather, the deceased will be assigned his place in the afterlife. An interesting comparison to judgement isn't it? Belshazzar would have known exactly what **Tekel**: *You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting* meant - even if we don't!

Conclusion: What are we to make of this story? Well, as we draw lessons from it, it's important to have the story of Nebuchadnezzar in our minds. Nebuchadnezzar was a man in a position of authority, who was made to humble himself before the greatness of God. A king, who was reduced to living like an animal (in ch4 we see that God brings Nebuchadnezzar down to earth, once again, and he is forced to eat grass just to survive) yet he was a king who was also the recipient of God's grace. Then what of a lesser soul like Belshazzar whose greatness existed only in his imagination, who made claims about himself that weren't true? The best place to go for answers is the first three chapters of Romans. The end of ch1 is a sad indictment of human inadequacy, of those who knew of God but refused to acknowledge or thank him. In 1:24 it says that: *God gave them over.* That is, he took his hands off, removed himself. He gave them their own way. An echo of God's sobering words spoken to Noah in Genesis 6:3: *My Spirit will not contend with man forever.*

And what if Christians are weak and fail? Paul cries out: *What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord,* Romans 7:24. There is a great summary (to a complex, brilliant argument) in Romans 8:31: *What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? Must we come to the end of ourselves in order to cry out for mercy to the one who can help? Must we come to the end of ourselves so we can find a Saviour who will give us peace of mind and take his offer of life! In the end it is not our lives that are given up, only our faithlessness. The writing was on the wall, so to speak, for Nebuchadnezzar and, after seeing the power of God at work, humbled himself and was delivered (ch4). The writing was on the wall, literally, for Belshazzar and, after seeing the power of God, hardened his heart and was destroyed. If/when the writings on the wall for you, which path will you choose? Blessing or curse?*



*Heavenly Father, we seek the truth but sometimes don't like what we find.
It probes too deeply, sees through things too clearly.
It shows up our pretence, it exposes our shallowness.
But your truth comes to us in love,
To give us time to change, to allow us to seek your face,
To turn from what is wrong and seek what is right.
Give us the grace and courage we need
To face the truth and respond to it before it's too late, and
Where necessary, to speak the truth in love and not to shy away from it.
For Jesus' sake we pray. Amen.*





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COMPLETE AS MUCH AS YOU CAN ON THIS WORKSHEET IN PREPARATION **BEFORE** THE MEETING!

Don't forget to take your Bible to House Group along with any previous/other notes that might be helpful.

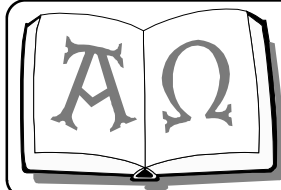
Welcome/Icebreaker (10 mins)

We've all made (silly) mistakes in our lives. What is the most embarrassing mistake you've ever made and what were the consequences of that - for you and/or for others?



Looking Upwards - *Worship* (10 mins)

Songs of Worship; Prayers; Bible Readings; Meditations etc.



Looking Upwards - *Bible Study* (40 mins)

Read through the above Bible reading (and any readings below and the references in the sermon notes) and answer the following questions. You may find it helpful to read through the sermon notes as you do so. Discuss your answers in your Home Group.

- 1:** When Belshazzar used the goblets from the Temple in Jerusalem to drink from, vs 1-4, he was, to say the least, guilty of spiritual carelessness and, as a result, dishonoured God. In what ways might we, as Christians, be guilty of taking something that is sacred and end up dishonouring the Lord?
- 2:** The writing on the wall was a supernatural act of God. How would you have felt if you had witnessed this at Belshazzar's party? Have you ever witnessed a supernatural act of God? Share with your group your experience?
- 3:** What message do you think the queen mother was trying to say, indirectly, to the king vs 10-12?
- 4:** Remind yourself of the meaning of the message: *Mene, Mene, Tekel, Parsin*. What features of our society (and church) might provoke 'hand writing on the wall' today? What do you think God might write?
- 5:** What could we do to ensure that God's hand does not need to write that message today? What could we do to improve standards in our community and nation?

6: If Belshazzar had learned from history he would not have made the mistakes he did. Paul mentioned Steve Turners, poem: *History repeats itself, it has to, no one listens.* What can we do, in our Christian lives, to ensure we don't repeat the mistakes of our past?

7: What would you have felt if you were asked to speak for God in such surroundings? What gave Daniel such confidence? Of what sins did he accuse Belshazzar, vs 22-24?

8: Do you understand what Don Carson means when he talks about '*The difficult doctrine of the love of God*'? Can you give an example of this?



Is there anything you most want to put into practice as a result of this study?



Looking Inwards - *Caring for each other* (15 mins)

Is there anything you would like to share with the group:

For Thanksgiving?

For Prayer?

Or for help from the group?

*(Reflect with the Lord on your life at the moment and think if there is anything you would like to share and which you feel is appropriate. This is an **opportunity to share**, not something you have to do, however - 'it's the sharing that enables the caring!')*



Looking Outwards - *Concern for others* (15 mins)

Is there anything concerning someone in: church; family; friends; or neighbours which you would like to share:

For Thanksgiving?

For Prayer?

Or for possible action by the group?

(Please be careful not to pass on anything that is confidential or which you think the person concerned would not wish to be shared).

