

“Weighed and Wanting”
Daniel 5:1-31

The Titanic was a marvel of engineering for its time. It was declared by its designers and crew to be “unsinkable.” That arrogance caused some God-fearing people to avoid traveling on the ship. Others took special precautions that saved their lives.

The last dinner served to first class passengers on the ill-fated Titanic at the Ritz Restaurant was a feast with ten sumptuous courses. It featured oysters, caviar, lobster, quail, salmon, roast duckling, and lamb.

There was also an eight-piece band on the Titanic, led by violinist Wallace Hartley. As the Titanic was sinking, the band sat on the deck and played music, and all of band members went down with the ship. Survivors reported that the last piece they played was either "Nearer My God to Thee" or a waltz, "Autumn."

Those feasting and partying on that fateful night had no idea that tragedy was just moments ahead. They had been lulled into a false sense of security by the promises of the cruise line and their opulent surroundings. From the time the lookouts sounded the alert, the officers on the bridge had only 37 seconds to react before the Titanic hit the iceberg.

There is an illustration of similar circumstances in the Scripture. Do you know what it is and where it’s found?

In our continuing study of the book of Daniel we are ready to begin looking at chapter five. This is the account of King Belshazzar and the mysterious handwriting on the wall. This account has some similarities with the experience of the Titanic; things like arrogance, terror, and death. The last phrase of Daniel chapter four and verse 37 says “...*those who walk in pride he is able to put down.*” Belshazzar ignored the lessons of his predecessor – and paid the price!

As you regular listeners know, I like, when possible, to take the title of the message directly from the text. Today, we begin the study of chapter five – “Weighed and Wanting.”

Now, once again, we have a lengthy text, 31 verses, so I will not read the entire text today. I’ll begin at verse 1 and read through verse 16. That’s **Daniel 5:1 to 16**.

Before I get into the body of the teaching, I want to set the stage for the events happening in this text. As chapter 5 begins, about 70 years have passed since the capture of Jerusalem in

Daniel chapter one. So, Daniel is an elderly man; most likely in his 80s. Nebuchadnezzar's affliction and restoration in chapter 4 have been followed by his death in 562 BC. Approximately 23 years have elapsed between chapters 4 and 5.

It seems likely, from historical records, that Belshazzar was co-regent with his father, Nabonidus, who reigned from 556 BC until the kingdom fell to the Medes in 539 BC. Belshazzar's mother was either a daughter of Nebuchadnezzar or one of his former wives.

Additionally, the revelations given to Daniel in chapters 7 and 8 occurred in the quarter-century interval between chapters 4 and 5. Chapter 7 was revealed to Daniel in the first year of Belshazzar, king of Babylon. The vision in chapter 8 occurred in the 3rd year of Belshazzar's reign. This means the visions in these 2 chapters most likely occurred 12 years before the events of chapter 5, the chapter we're beginning to study.

In this text we see several SCENES that illustrate the eventual verdict, "Weighed and Wanting."

The first SCENE is,

Audacious Arrogance

One of the meanings of audacious is contemptuous of law, religion, or decorum. That fits this opening scene so well.

Belshazzar, the king of Babylon, is giving a lavish feast for a huge crowd of his officials. Daniel says it was a thousand. If that seems like a stretch to you, consider that Persian monarchs were known to dine daily with more than ten times that many! Ashurnasirpal II gave a great feast at the dedication of his new capital city, Nimrud, in 879 BC. His guest list was over 69,000!

So, the size of this banquet isn't unusual; it was actually on the small side. It may indicate the shrinking that had been taking place in the Babylonian Empire as it was slowly conquered by the Medes and Persians.

As the feast is being held, the surrounding areas have been conquered. Nabonidus, Belshazzar's father, has been captured. Only Babylon, with its massive fortifications remains intact. But it, too, is surrounded by enemies laying siege to the city. History tells us the city was seemingly impregnable, and they had laid in enough supplies to withstand a multi-year siege. So, there was a feeling of safety and security. As we learn, a false sense of security.

Picture Belshazzar sitting on an elevated platform leading the crowd below him in rounds

of drinking toasts to the power of their gods. As the wine flows freely and dulls the senses, natural inhibitions are thrown aside. So, the king, his face flushed with the effect of the wine, orders the gold and silver vessels from the Jewish Temple to be brought. He intends to pass them out and use them as drinking cups in this celebration of Babylon's gods. This is where we find the audacious arrogance of the king.

If the king had been sober, he most likely wouldn't have given this command. No human being had any right to use what belonged to the gods. But Belshazzar threw law, religion, and decorum to the wind. His actions remind me of the saying "sow the wind and reap the whirlwind," which he certainly did!

It's also possible that he did this sacrilegious act intentionally. It was his way of putting down the God of Israel. At the same time, he elevates his heathen deities. Try to picture this from heaven's viewpoint. Here is Belshazzar praising the heathen deities that haven't been able to preserve the vast Babylonian Empire. The king knows there's not much left of the kingdom; basically, just the city itself. Maybe, he's trying to put on a brave face. Regardless, Psalm 2 reminds us that the Lord will laugh at men like this, and He holds them in derision.

Whatever his motivations, Belshazzar's audacious arrogance offends the true God. The Temple vessels were the only tangible thing left of the Jewish Temple. They were a symbol of God's presence and His name. He promised they would be preserved until the time when the Temple worship would be restored. They were the hope of Israel in their captivity. You can read about that in Jeremiah chapters 27 and 28.

Treating holy things as common or treating them with disdain is a grievous mistake. Belshazzar's mishandling of these vessels would set in motion the change of kingdoms that would lead, eventually, to these vessels being restored to their rightful place – a restored Temple in Jerusalem. The divine irony is delicious.

Belshazzar's blasphemy is shocking; much like actor Morgan Freeman's blasphemy. Several years ago, in an interview, he was asked if he was a God-fearing man. His response; "No, I don't fear anything. I'm God." We've also seen shocking blasphemy in the art world. These things make news headlines through their crude and offensive depictions of God and Jesus. Believers are rightly offended and mourn the disrespect.

But there are more subtle forms of blasphemy that Believers themselves engage in. It's done sometimes out of ignorance, sometimes carelessness, and sometimes outright disobedience.

One form of blasphemy is speech. The third commandment prohibits misusing the name of God in any way that's not representative of His holy name and character. There are all kinds of situations where people misuse the name of the Lord. They won't use God's name or Jesus' name directly, instead they'll give the name a different form. But it's all the same thing.

Most people wouldn't express the same level of arrogance that Morgan Freeman did; but many live as though they are God. Many professing Christ-followers embrace a practical kind of atheism; "I can do just fine on my own, thank you." That mindset was what infected our first parents in the Garden of Eden and it surely has been passed on to us. Let's be careful that we don't embrace a similar kind of audacious arrogance like Belshazzar did.

The Second SCENE is,

Abject Terror

How quickly we humans can move from one emotion to another! In the middle of this drunken orgy, when praises are being shouted to the pagan deities, suddenly the fingers of a man appear writing on the plastered wall of the palace!

The use of the image of God's fingers is limited in the Old Testament. In Egypt, when Pharaoh's magicians couldn't duplicate the third plague they said, "*this is the finger of God.*" That's Exodus 8:19. And then on Mount Sinai "the finger of God" inscribed two stone tablets with the Ten Commandments. There is one other occurrence of the term in Psalm 8:3, where the Psalmist calls the heavens "*the work of your fingers.*"

The finger of God writing the law was revelation. The heavens are the work of God's finger; that was creation. The finger of God brought the plagues on Egypt for the purpose of redemption. This time, the fingers of God wrote a message of condemnation on the wall.

Again, imagine with me this scene. The raucous party is in full swing, wine is flowing, music is blaring, they're singing and shouting praise to the gods. All-of-a-sudden the king sucks in his breath! What is that? A disembodied hand appears on the wall opposite the lampstand; and its writing on the plaster! Albert Barnes suggests it may have been the very lampstand taken from the Temple in Jerusalem the nearness of the writing to it intimating that the rebuke was directed against the sacrilege.¹

¹ Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). [*Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*](#) (Vol. 1, p. 630). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

When the king sees the hand and the mysterious writing, he comes unglued. His face pales, his thoughts become a jumble of confused fragments, his loins were loosed, and his knees knocked together. The phrase “the joints of his loins (hips) were loosed” may refer to the inability to control one’s bowels. In other words, fear went through his body like an electric current from top to bottom.

The fright he experienced seems to have sobered him immediately! He cries out in terror for his “wise men” to come and read the writing and tell him its meaning. He promises the one who interprets promotion to the rank of 3rd ruler of the kingdom. He promises special tokens of honor to the interpreter. Both are worthless rewards as the kingdom is finished.

But, not one of these supposed “wise men” could read or interpret the writing! And that only increases Belshazzar’s fear. In fact, the effect on him was so dramatic that even his court officials were confounded. Drunken arrogance had changed to abject terror! Now, he is really in a quandary. The helplessness of the king and his officials stands in stark contrast to their brash confidence of the opening verses. That leads us to the next scene.

The Next SCENE is,

Authoritative Counsel

Hearing the shouts, the cries, and the confused babble of voices from the banquet hall, the Queen mother appears on the scene. Its difficult to determine exactly who she is, but she definitely speaks with authority! She’s not one of Belshazzar’s wives; his wives and concubines were present at the party. She is most likely the wife of Nabonidus and the mother of Belshazzar. She would’ve been one of the few people who could enter the king’s presence without being called and live to talk about it.

Her first words to the king seem to be along the lines of “pull yourself together.” She informed the king that his panic was unnecessary because someone in the kingdom was available to help. His name was Daniel, and in him was the spirit of the holy gods (THE Holy God).

Here are her words from the text. *“There is a man in your kingdom in whom is the Spirit of the Holy God. And in the days of your father, light and understanding and wisdom, like the wisdom of the gods, were found in him; and King Nebuchadnezzar your father—your father the king—made him chief of the magicians, astrologers, Chaldeans, and soothsayers. Inasmuch as an excellent spirit, knowledge, understanding, interpreting dreams, solving riddles, and explaining*

enigmas were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Belshazzar, now let Daniel be called, and he will give the interpretation.”

There seems to be a sarcastic bite to the Queen’s words. She implies that “if you were worthy to sit on your father’s throne, you would know who this man is.” Wendy Widder says, “The queen’s glowing recommendation [of Daniel] culminates in the delicious wordplay that Daniel was able to ‘loosen knots’ for the king whose ‘knots’ had been loosened.” What the queen meant was that Daniel could solve difficult problems, but her word choice seems like a jab at the king in his confusion.

She ends her counsel by reminding the king that Nebuchadnezzar had renamed Daniel as Belshazzar, a name only one syllable different than his own. His name was remarkably similar to the king’s, but his character was so much different!

Here was information to act upon, even if it was a last resort. Belshazzar was unlikely to appreciate the elderly Daniel, hence the testimonial of the queen, framed in the formalized language of chapter 4, verses 8 and 9.² So, Daniel is called for and brought in before the king, but the narrator doesn’t credit Belshazzar for his arrival. Imagine the contrast here between the calm, godly bearing of the aged Daniel and the trembling, distraught monarch.

It seems that Belshazzar tries to reestablish some sense of control over the situation by speaking to Daniel in a condescending way. These words can easily be read with a sense of sarcasm, although we can’t say that for certain. His words suggest that he was familiar with Daniel. In fact, Daniel may have been demoted by Belshazzar because he was a Jew and because he had faithfully served Nebuchadnezzar.

In verse 14 Belshazzar repeats what the queen said, but at no time does he acknowledge or affirm that Daniel can do the things that are listed! He only said, “I’ve heard about you.” Belshazzar is like many people in the world today. They will only listen to God’s wisdom when all else has failed. By then, it’s often too late.

The Final SCENE is,

Assured Judgment

² Baldwin, J. G. (1978). [*Daniel: An Introduction and Commentary*](#) (Vol. 23, p. 135). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Into the middle of this atmosphere of confusion, apprehension, and fear, Daniel brings a calm demeanor that reflects the deep peace of God. He is confident in his God and the divine revelation He will provide.

Daniel respectfully declines the king's offer of gifts and position. Part of the reasoning for this may have been to show that the offer of reward will not affect the interpretation! Daniel says he'll read the writing and interpret it for the king – but he takes his time doing it. Before doing either the reading or the interpretation, he preaches a sermon to the king. Keep in mind, the guests are most likely still gathered and are listening to Daniel's words.

Daniel briefly rehearses the earlier chapters of the book with specific emphasis on King Nebuchadnezzar's journey. He reminds Belshazzar that it was God who gave Nebuchadnezzar the kingdom. He also reminds him that it was pride that caused Nebuchadnezzar to go from greatness to insanity. But when he humbled himself before God, his sanity and his kingdom were restored. Nebuchadnezzar confessed that God was the one who raised up kings and kingdoms and then, at His will, set them aside for others.

And then Daniel issues the stinging indictment; “YOU KNEW.” You knew all about this, yet you haven't humbled yourself before God. Not only that, you elevated yourself above the Lord of heaven. You took the vessels from His Temple, vessels that your father had safeguarded all these years, and you used them as common drinking cups! And you praised your worthless gods. You have refused to acknowledge the God who holds your very breath in his mighty hand! Your father, Nebuchadnezzar was proud; but you are blasphemously impudent.

Wow! At the conclusion of that indictment I imagine that great hall was so quiet you could've heard a pin drop. Here was Daniel, a man who didn't fear other men, but God only. He spoke in measured tones the message of judgment. He wasn't insolent or disrespectful. He just stated the charges in a factual and objective way. The king wasn't in a position to argue, even though Daniel's words must've brought even greater fear and foreboding to his heart. At the end of his sermon, Daniel turns his attention to reading the words on the wall.

Transliterated into English they are MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN. Aramaic was written, like Hebrew, without vowels and read from left to right. Each of these words is a standard of measurement. This is the simplest reading of the Aramaic words.

The word MENE means *mina* and is repeated for emphasis. The word TEKEL is the equivalent of shekel. And PARSIN is the plural of *peres*. Daniel then reads the consonants with a

different technique which yields the interpretation; numbered, weighed, and divided. He “loosens the knot” with wordplay. Daniel interprets *mene* as indicating that God has numbered Belshazzar’s kingdom and finished it. It corresponds to the idea that man’s days are numbered. The repetition may be simply for emphasis. *Tekel* means weighed, with the idea that the king has been placed on the balances and come up short. *Peres* is very close to the Aramaic word for Persians. God most likely wanted to lead the king’s thoughts in that way.

So, Belshazzar is made to understand that Babylon will be taken from him and given to the Medes and the Persians. At the command of the king, they put the royal robe on Daniel and placed the gold chain around his neck. They proclaim him as the third ruler of the kingdom. All these honors were short-lived and useless. Even while Daniel is interpreting these words the invading armies are pouring into the city.

The text ends with these words; *“That very night Belshazzar, king of the Chaldeans, was slain. And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old.”*

What are we to make of this account in Holy Scripture? Is it just an interesting story about a proud king who received his just reward? It is that; but it’s so much more than that.

First, it’s a fulfilment of God’s promises. Both Isaiah and Jeremiah prophesied the destruction of Babylon on a night of revelry just like Daniel records. You can read about that in Isaiah 13:17 to 22; Isaiah 21:1 to 10; and Jeremiah 51:33 to 58.

Babylon had conquered Jerusalem, taken its inhabitants captive, looted its magnificent Temple, and completely destroyed the city. Yet its last official act is to recognize and honor one of those captives. Daniel, by God’s grace and enabling, not only predicted the downfall of the Babylonian Empire, but the entire course of the times of the Gentiles until the Son of Man should come from Heaven. Let us never forget that “Man may have the first word, but God will [always] have the last word.” Eventually, this change of dynasty would lead to the return from captivity and the rebuilding of the Temple.

The downfall of Babylon not only reaffirms God’s promises to Israel, it is an illustration of the ultimate downfall of the unbelieving world. Our world today is very similar to Babylon in the way it fosters human pride but provides little in the way of security. Much as Babylon fell on that fateful night in 539 BC, so too the world will be overtaken by disaster when the Day of the Lord finally comes.

There is an additional lesson here as well. We may look at God’s judgment on Belshazzar

as impulsive and sudden. His sin of misusing the Temple vessels was serious. But was it more serious than Nebuchadnezzar's tyranny, brutality, and pride? What's the difference? You must admit that Nebuchadnezzar was a slow learner; but he was a learner. At the end of his experiences he acknowledges God for who He is. Belshazzar has record of all that happened to his predecessor, and yet he refuses to learn from God's judgments on Nebuchadnezzar. In the words of one writer, "he tosses the history book across the room and flips his finger at the teacher." I fear we today are on a similar path.

Like Nebuchadnezzar, our path of learning is sometimes "three steps forward and two back." I wonder sometimes about how God feels as he watches us stumble along. But like a loving parent with a toddler, He helps us get back on our feet and keep moving forward.

Unfortunately, some, like Belshazzar, have stopped responding to God's helping hand. They have seen God work in the past, but now they clutch their fire insurance policy – "I prayed the sinner's prayer when I was a child." They're not interested in the evidence of salvation, the pursuit of discipleship.

The picture of God in the Bible is that of one who is willing and ready to teach us who He is. He creates or allows circumstances in our lives to give us the opportunity to learn and grow. Let us be pupils who delight our Teacher with our desire for learning and our obedience.

Ultimately, we will stand before Him; either in the righteousness of Christ to receive the reward of our faithfulness, or in our own righteousness which will result in us being, like Belshazzar, weighed and wanting. You decide.