

DANIEL 5



T. M. Moore

A Scriptorium Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe

Daniel 5
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Cover art: Rembrandt, *Daniel in the Lions' Den*

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Daniel 5: Introduction

It's some years later, now, and Nebuchadnezzar's great-grandson is on the throne in Babylon. He is a wastrel, and it's about to catch up to him.

Belshazzar offends God seriously, and God has a Word for him. It's not good, but he's not paying any attention. Perhaps, when the Persians broke down his bedroom door, he may have listened then. Too late.

Daniel, meanwhile, continues his faithful service and witness, just as we should as well.

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1 Unforgivable

Introduction

Like Solomon's foolish son, Rehoboam, Nebuchadnezzar's "son" was all about self and power. But he overstepped his bounds by misusing the gold and silver vessels that had been dedicated to the Lord, and it would cost him dearly. Belshazzar blasphemed against God by using what had been dedicated to Him for his own indulgence and to extol false deities.

Read 1 Kings 12.1-16.

Read Daniel 5.1-4.

Think it Through

1. Political power can often lead to excesses of self-indulgence and self-vaunting. This is the case here with King Belshazzar, the son (actually, only a descendent, probably great-grandson) of Nebuchadnezzar. What do you suppose was Belshazzar's purpose in holding this "great feast for a thousand of his lords"? Was this for the wellbeing of the empire? Do we see excesses like this by politicians in our own day? Explain.

2. Besides the merely self-indulgent agenda behind this feast, Belshazzar offended against God in two unforgivable ways. First, he explicitly commanded that the vessels consecrated for the service of God be brought so that he and his guests could drink wine from them. Why would this have been an offense against God? What, in effect, was Belshazzar saying by this action? Second, he praised the false "gods of silver and gold", along with others, thus declaring his view of the vessels consecrated to the Lord, and of the Lord Himself. Why would this have been unforgivable? Belshazzar reduced something God had commanded to be used in serving Him to a vessel for self-indulgence and false religion. Do Christians ever do anything similar to this?

Meditate

"And as to the fact that the author calls Nebuchadnezzar the father of Belshazzar, he does not make any mistake in the eyes of those who are acquainted with the holy Scripture's manner of speaking, for in the Scripture all progenitors and ancestors are called fathers." *Jerome (347-420 AD)*

"Therefore I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come." Matthew 12.31, 32

Every good gift comes from You, Lord, and is to be used for Your glory. Thank You for the many good gifts that are mine today. Guard me against mere self-indulgence, and let me use everything in my life to...

Pray Psalm 135.13-18.

As you pray, ask the Lord to guard you against making an idol out of things, things that you trust in for your happiness and wellbeing, rather than in the Lord.

Psalm 135.13-19 (*St. Gertrude: Onward, Christian Soldiers*)

Evermore Your Name, O Savior, shall endure!

Your renown throughout all ages is secure.

For You have compassion, vindicating all

Those who serve Your Name and on Your saving mercy call.

Refrain (v. 1)

Praise the Name of Jesus, you who serve His Word!
Raise your voice and praise our good and glorious Lord!

Vain the nations serve the idols of their hands;
Mouths and ears they have but cannot understand.
Every idol vain is, lacking life or breath;
All who serve them, like them, shall be lost to lasting death.
Refrain

2 The Mystery Writing

Introduction

This episode is the source of the saying, “I can see the writing on the wall.” Usually that means something like, “OK, I get it.” But Belshazzar did *not* get it. But he *was* terrified by the mysterious hand that appeared, and the message it wrote on the palace wall. Those writing fingers remind us of the finger of God, by which He wrote His Law and declared His will to Israel, and by which Jesus demonstrated His power and authority over demons. The message is different in this case, but the effect is just as powerful.

Read *Exodus 31.18*.

Read *Daniel 5.5-9*.

Think it Through

1. This writing on the wall was a revelation from God, pointed specifically at Belshazzar, as we shall see. Confronted with divine revelation, how did Belshazzar respond? What was it about this revelation that caused him such distress? Do you think God’s revelation should have this kind of effect on unbelievers in our day? Explain. Do you think it’s a good idea to encourage our unbelieving friends to look at God’s Word in Scripture? Why or why not? Belshazzar was three kings removed from Nebuchadnezzar, and we can see that he did not learn from his great-grandfather’s experience. How is that evident in verse 7?

2. Whatever these “fingers” were, they wrought their message by the Spirit of God (cf. Lk. 11.20; Matt. 12.28). The Spirit of God gave this message to Belshazzar, but not in terms he or any of his counselors could interpret (v. 8). Why not? If God had a message for this pagan, and He took the trouble to “spell it out” for him, right there on the palace wall, why didn’t He just write it so that Belshazzar could not fail to understand it, simply by reading it? What did Belshazzar and his cronies lack that Daniel possessed for interpreting messages from God? How does this instruct us with respect to how the unbelieving world should expect to understand the revelation of God? Why does God prefer to use this method of making known His will to unbelievers?

Meditate

“Forgetting about the experiences of Nebuchadnezzar, he was following after the ancient and ingrained error of his family, so that instead of summoning a prophet of God he summons the magicians and Chaldeans and soothsayers.” *Jerome (347-420 AD)*

“But if I cast out demons with the finger of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you.” Luke 11.20

“But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you.” Matthew 12.28

O Lord, let the revelation of Your Word shine through me today, writing the message of Jesus in all my words and deeds, so that...

Pray *Psalm 135.5-9*.

What will it please God to do with you today? Will He use you as a *sign* to the unbelievers in your Personal Mission Field? Ask Him to do so.

Psalm 135.5-12 (*St. Gertrude: Onward, Christian Soldiers*)

Great and sovereign, Jesus rules o’er all above,
Doing as He pleases, sovereign in His love.

Daniel 5

Clouds and seas obey Him, lightning, too, and rain;
He the winds brings forth in pow'r and sends them back again.

Refrain v. 1

Praise the Name of Jesus, you who serve His Word!
Raise your voice and praise our good and glorious Lord!

Egypt's firstborn fell to God's redeeming powr;
Kings and nations crumbled in redemption's hour.
He the land of promise to His people gave;
Thus His Kingdom Jesus gives to all He's pleased to save.

Refrain

3 Not to Worry

Introduction

Belshazzar strikes me as not the sharpest knife in the drawer. It never occurred to him to consult Daniel, either because he wasn't aware of his existence, wasn't well-grounded in the recent history of his own nation, or wasn't in touch with the goings-on of his own court. The queen – perhaps the queen mother, since she was not invited to the party – hearing the commotion and learning what the problem was, played the role of chief butler to Pharaoh in having God's man summoned to resolve the king's distress. When you have the kind of reputation and abilities Daniel had, somebody will know about you.

Read Genesis 41.1-15.

Read Daniel 5.10-16.

Think it Through

1. Summarize Daniel's reputation. What do we learn from the queen about his character, erudition, and abilities? Belshazzar may have been ignorant of Daniel's existence, but he was eager to have his help at this time of crisis. Jesus said the Spirit would give us power to *be* witnesses (Acts 1.8). How can you see in Daniel that *being* a witness is as important as *giving* a witness?
2. Belshazzar's crassness is revealed in his brief interview with Daniel. First, he made sure Daniel understood that he, the king, knew who he, Daniel, was – a captive from Judah (apparently, the queen mother clued him in). Second, he recounted what he had heard of Daniel's reputation, and that "the Spirit of God" was in him. Then, he put him up against all the wise men and advisors in his court. And finally, he thought to buy him with promises of wealth and power. People in places of influence and authority often try to secure the favors and support of people with good reputations and notable skills. Can this be a snare? Looking at Daniel's situation, and remembering Joseph, David, Micaiah, and Esther, can such situations also be an opportunity for glorifying God? Explain.

Meditate

"Daniel's godly manner of life even among the barbarians is worthy of our imitation, for the very grandmother or mother of the king extolled him with such words of praise because of the greatness of his virtues." *Jerome (347-420 AD)*

And when Simon saw that through the laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Spirit was given, he offered them money, saying, "Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit." But Peter said to him, "Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money!" Acts 8.18-20

Lord, You have called me to be a witness, so that when I give my witness...

Pray Psalm 135.15-19.

We can be distracted from seeking only the Lord and His will by the promises of things and prestige – the idols of our secular age. As you pray, name the idols that could ensnare you, and renounce them as you bless the Lord.

Psalm 135.15-19 (*St. Gertrude: Onward, Christian Soldiers*)

Vain the nations serve the idols of their hands;
Mouths and ears they have but cannot understand.
Every idol vain is, lacking life or breath;
All who serve them, like them, shall be lost to lasting death.

Refrain v. 1

Praise the Name of Jesus, you who serve His Word!
Raise your voice and praise our good and glorious Lord!

4 Let's Review

Introduction

Philosophers and historians have observed, in one form or another, that the only lesson from history is that no one ever learns anything from history. The result, philosopher George Santayana explained, is that “Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” Belshazzar is the perfect example of this. And it fell to Daniel to remind him of what he knew, before explaining to him how *ignoring* what he knew, and *failing to live accordingly*, had finally caught up to him. The prophet Asaph sought to do the same for King Solomon and the Israelites of his generation.

Read and meditate on Psalm 81 in the light of 1 Kings 11.1-13.

Read Daniel 5.17-23.

Think it through

1. Daniel was not moved to answer the king by any promises of enrichment or advancement (v. 17). So why would he bother? Why did he feel it was necessary to explain the mystery writing to the king, since his coming to understand the message would not in the least affect its outcome? Belshazzar was standing before written revelation from God. He could probably *read* the words (they were written in Aramaic, which would have been a language familiar to the court); he just couldn't make sense of them. Why did Daniel consider it important that the *meaning* of this message, and not just the *words*, should be made crystal clear to the king? Look at Acts 8.26-40 and Acts 26.1-32. What similarities do you see in these passages with the story of King Belshazzar? Is there any guidance for us in working our Personal Mission Field?

2. Daniel's preface to interpreting the mystery writing was a lesson in recent Babylonian royal history. Summarize that lesson. Why did Daniel feel this was necessary, since, as he said, Belshazzar *knew* all this already (v. 22)? How was Daniel using this history lesson? Of what was Belshazzar guilty? Are secular and pagan governments accountable to God somehow (Rom. 13.1-4)? Is there a lesson for us in Daniel's history lesson about lessons from history?

Meditate

“He did well to instruct those present to worship not visible things but their Creator and Lord. At the same time he also convicts the king of conceit and teaches him that the highest heaven has for its creator the unseen God.” *Theodoret of Cyr (393-496 AD)*

For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God's minister to you for good. Romans 13.3, 4a

Lord, help me to improve my witness for Jesus, both by how I use Your Word, and how I use my own history with You. Show me how to talk with others about Jesus, using...

Pray Psalm 135.8-14.

Confess your sins to the Lord, asking Him at the same time to open your mouth in praise and witness for Him.

Psalm 135.8-14 (*St. Gertrude: Onward, Christian Soldiers*)

Egypt's firstborn fell to God's redeeming pow'r;
Kings and nations crumbled in redemption's hour.
He the land of promise to His people gave;

Daniel 5

Thus His Kingdom Jesus gives to all He's pleased to save.

Refrain, v. 1

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Raise your voice and praise our good and glorious Lord!

Evermore Your Name, O Savior, shall endure!

Your renown throughout all ages is secure.

For You have compassion, vindicating all

Those who serve Your Name and on Your saving mercy call.

Refrain

5 Good News and Bad

Introduction

The good news was that Daniel could indeed interpret the mystery writing. The bad news was that the good news was bad. But like Ahab before him, Belshazzar would pay no heed to the prophet's word.

Read 1 Kings 22:8-29.

Read Daniel 5:24-28.

Think it Through

1. The written revelation of God to Belshazzar was a revelation of judgment. Daniel had not minced words with Belshazzar's predecessor, and he did not mince words here. Summarize his message to Belshazzar. Read Romans 1:18-32. The world is under the judgment of God. Why? What forms does this judgment take? Is it important that lost people *know* this, whether or not they *believe* it? Explain.

2. It's likely Belshazzar could read the mystery writing which appeared on his palace wall: "a mina, a mina; a shekel; half-shekels." That wasn't his problem. Understanding what these strange words meant – *that* was his problem. What was it about Daniel that qualified him to interpret the meaning God had encoded in these words (cf. Dan. 1:17; 5:11, 12)? The Bible can sometimes be difficult to understand. Meditate on John 16:5-15, 1 Corinthians 2:12, 13, and Colossians 3:16. What can we do to improve our ability to understand the mysteries of divine revelation? Why is it important that we do so?

Meditate

"And so there was a need not only for reading the inscription but also for interpreting what had been read, in order that it might be understood what these words were announcing." *Jerome (347-420 AD)*

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Romans 1:18-21

Lord, as I think of the unbelievers I know, the thought that You are giving them up to greater degrees of judgment makes me...

Pray Psalm 135:13, 14.

The Lord judges not only the unbelieving world, but His people as well. But His judgment of us is not to condemn, but to improve. Linger over these verses as you pray, and let the Spirit convict you of any need for confession and repentance.

Psalm 135:13, 14 (*St. Gertrude: Onward, Christian Soldiers*)

Evermore Your Name, O Savior, shall endure!

Your renown throughout all ages is secure.

For You have compassion, vindicating all

Those who serve Your Name and on Your saving mercy call.

Refrain, v. 1

Praise the Name of Jesus, you who serve His Word!

Raise your voice and praise our good and glorious Lord!

6 Regime Change...but Not

Introduction

It looks as if Belshazzar's foolishness has caused his empire to fall to a new sovereign. Nope.

Meditate on Proverbs 8.12-21.

Read Daniel 5.29-31.

Think it Through

1. Down go the Babylonians, and up come the Medes and Persians. Out with Belshazzar and in with Darius. Regime change occurred, but the same Sovereign was still ruling over both empires. Which Sovereign? How do we know this? Meditate on Amos 3.1-8. Daniel undoubtedly understood this. How did he apply it? How should we?

2. We might wonder why Belshazzar did not act immediately on what Daniel reveals. Perhaps the answer lies in Daniel 4.29? Explain ("You say my great-grandfather's judgment did not come until a year later?"). Probably to save face with the members of his court, Belshazzar was more urgent to fulfill his promise of verse 16 than to act on what Daniel had revealed. But thinking we can postpone the judgment of God is foolish. Why? Jesus taught on this subject in Luke 12.16-21. What's the lesson for us as we live for Christ in our Personal Mission Field?

Meditate

"Nor was it strange that Belshazzar should have paid the promised reward on hearing sad tidings. For either he supposed that his predictions would take place in the distant future, or else he hoped he would obtain mercy by honoring the prophet of God." *Jerome (347-420 AD)*

"But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?' So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God." Luke 12.20, 21

Lord, today many people will die without having heard the Good News of Jesus and the warning of judgment. In my own Personal Mission Field there are people who do not know You. I pray for them, and for myself, that...

Pray Psalm 135.8-14.

Think of the ways our sad world and the Lord's Church have come under the judgment of God, then seek His mercy for forgiveness and revival.

Psalm 135.8-14 (*St. Gertrude: Onward, Christian Soldiers*)

Egypt's firstborn fell to God's redeeming pow'r;
Kings and nations crumbled in redemption's hour.
He the land of promise to His people gave;
Thus His Kingdom Jesus gives to all He's pleased to save.

Refrain, v. 1

Praise the Name of Jesus, you who serve His Word!
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Those who serve Your Name and on Your saving mercy call.
Refrain

7 Grace All Over

Introduction

The book of Daniel is a study in the workings of God's grace. In particular, we can see how the grace of God works in people, preparing some to know Him, others to become more hardened against Him, and His own people to fulfill their callings as His witnesses. Let's make sure we don't miss the lessons God has for us here, lest we be seen to have received the grace of God in vain.

Read Genesis 6.1-3.

Read and Meditate on Daniel 5.

Think it Through

1. Let's reflect on what we've seen thus far (chapters 1-5) of the grace of God toward Daniel. Meditate on Philippians 2.13. How many different ways can you cite to show that God was at work in Daniel, willing and doing of His good pleasure? Meditate on Philippians 2.12. How would you describe Daniel's responses to those works of grace? That is, what did Daniel do to "work out" God's gracious initiatives toward him? What were some of the effects of this? What are you learning from Daniel about the grace of God, about growing in that grace (2 Pet. 3.18), and how grace works within us to help us in our witness for Christ?

2. Now let's think about Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar. Meditate on Matthew 5.43-45. How many different ways can you see that God acted graciously toward each of them? Compare their responses. That God is gracious, even toward those who ignore or despise Him, does not mean that everyone is going to come to know and worship Him. Nor does His being gracious toward them mean that He will not finally consign some to His wrath. God is graciously at work in the lives of the people you see each week, even those who do not know Him. How can you see that? Why is it a good idea to point out to people the many ways that God reaches them with His grace?

Meditate

"We should not suppose, because he said, 'For it is God that works in you both the willing and the doing,' that he has taken away free will. For if that were so he would not have said above 'Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.' For when he bids them work, it is agreed that they have free will. But they are to work with fear and trembling so that they will not, by attributing the good working to themselves, be elated by the good works as though they were their own." *Augustine (354-430 AD)*

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure. Philippians 2.12, 13

Lord, thank You for your grace and Your salvation. Help me work out that salvation today as I...

Pray Psalm 135

We are called to praise and bless the Lord, even though the world scorns Him and us. As you pray this psalm, let the Spirit suggest reasons to praise the Lord (vv. 3-13) and why it is so important to be faithful in your witness for the Lord (vv. 14-18).

Psalm 135 (*St. Gertrude: Onward, Christian Soldiers*)

Praise the Savior, praise Him, for His Name is good;
Sing, for it is pleasant, to our glorious God!
All whom He has chosen and redeemed by grace,

Praise His Name together, praise Him in this holy place!

Refrain v. 1

Praise the Name of Jesus, you who serve His Word!
Raise your voice and praise our good and glorious Lord!

Great and sovereign, Jesus rules o'er all above,
Doing as He pleases, sovereign in His love.
Clouds and seas obey Him, lightning, too, and rain;
He the winds brings forth in pow'r and sends them back again.

Refrain

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Refrain

Vain the nations serve the idols of their hands;
Mouths and ears they have but cannot understand.
Every idol vain is, lacking life or breath;
All who serve them, like them, shall be lost to lasting death.

Refrain

Bless the Lord you people, all who love the Lord!
Bless Him, you who trust His sovereign, holy Word!
Bless the Lord from Zion, Him Who in it dwells;
Praise Him! Lift your voices, all His grace and glory tell!

Refrain

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. The book of Daniel is about God and His ways with people and nations. Explain.
2. Daniel has been emphasizing the sovereign power of God as King by using two earthly kings as foils. How is God's rule different from that of earthly kings?
3. God uses faithful servants in carrying out His rule on earth, even in midst of those who have no faith in or use for Him. What are the implications of this for you?
4. Should we expect every person to whom we bear witness to come to faith in Jesus? What is our responsibility as witness for Christ?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this study? How are you putting that lesson to work in your life?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.