

From Arrogance to Destruction



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Daniel 5, Rev. 17:4–6, Ps. 96:5, Col. 1:15–17, Rom. 1:16–32, Eccles. 8:11, Rev. 14:8.*

Memory Text: “And He changes the times and the seasons; He removes kings and raises up kings; He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding” (*Daniel 2:21, NKJV*).

In Daniel 5, the Word of God gives us a powerful example of human hubris that ends in a stunning and dramatic way. Though one could say that it takes Nebuchadnezzar a long time to learn his lesson, at least he learned it. His grandson, Belshazzar, does not. In using the temple vessels in a palace orgy, Belshazzar desecrates them. Such an act of desecration is tantamount not only to a challenge of God but an attack on God Himself. Thus, Belshazzar fills up the cup of his iniquities, acting in ways similar to the little horn (*see Daniel 8*), which attacked the foundations of God’s sanctuary. By removing dominion from Belshazzar, God prefigures what He will accomplish against the enemies of His people in the very last days. The events narrated in Daniel 5 took place in 539 B.C., on the night Babylon fell before the Medo-Persian army. Here occurs the transition from gold to silver, predicted in Daniel 2. Once more it becomes evident that God rules in the affairs of the world.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 8.

Belshazzar's Feast

Read Daniel 5:1–4 along with Daniel 1:1, 2. What is Belshazzar doing that is so bad? How does it reveal his true character? Compare his actions with Revelation 17:4–6. What parallels can you find?

The king commands that the sacred utensils of the Jerusalem temple be used as drinking vessels. Nebuchadnezzar seizes the vessels from the Jerusalem temple, but he places them in the house of his god, which shows that at least he respects their sacred status. But Belshazzar turns the sacred vessels into drinking utensils in a most profane way.

While drinking from the sacred vessels, Belshazzar's lords "praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze and iron, wood and stone" (*Dan. 5:4, NKJV*). It is worth noticing that six materials are mentioned. The Babylonians used the sexagesimal system (a system based on the number 60) in contrast to the decimal system used today (based on the number 10). Thus, the six categories of gods represent the totality of the Babylonian deities and, therefore, the fullness of the Babylonian religious system. Interestingly enough, the order of the materials follows the order of the components of the dream statue of Nebuchadnezzar, except that wood replaces the clay. As in the dream, stone appears last; although here it designates the material composition of idols, stone also evokes God's judgment upon worldly empires (*see Dan. 2:44, 45*), which Babylon symbolizes.

This feast serves as an apt representation of end-time Babylon as seen in the book of Revelation. Like Belshazzar, the woman in end-time Babylon holds a golden cup and offers polluted drink to the nations. In other words, by means of false doctrines and a distorted worship system, modern Babylon lures the world into evil (*Rev. 17:4–6*), oblivious to the judgment that will soon fall upon her. One day judgment will come.

What are ways in which our society and culture profane the truth of God's Word? How can we be careful not to take part in that profanation, even in subtle ways? Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.

An Uninvited Guest

Read Daniel 5:5–8. What happens, and why does the king respond as he does? In what ways does this account parallel Daniel 2, and why is that parallel important? (See Ps. 96:5 and Col. 1:15–17.)

As Nebuchadnezzar does in previous crises (*Dan. 2:2, 4:7*), Belshazzar calls the astrologers, the Chaldeans, and the soothsayers to clarify the mysterious writing. And to make sure that they give their best, the king promises them extravagant honors: (1) purple clothing, a color worn by royalty in ancient times (*Esther 8:15*); (2) a chain of gold, which was a sign of high social status (*Gen. 41:42*); and (3) the position of third ruler in the kingdom. This last reward reflects accurately the historical circumstances of Babylon at that time. Because Belshazzar was second ruler as co-regent with his father, Nabonidus, he offers the position of third ruler. But despite the tempting rewards, the sages once again fail to provide an explanation.

On top of all his sins, then, the king attempts to find wisdom in the wrong place. The Babylonian experts cannot uncover the meaning of the message. It is written in their own language, Aramaic, as we shall see tomorrow, but they cannot make sense of the words. This might remind us of what the Lord speaks through Isaiah: “For the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hidden” (*Isa. 29:14, NKJV*). After quoting this verse the apostle Paul states: “Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe” (*1 Cor. 1:20, 21, NKJV*).

Some truths are too important to be left for humans to try to figure out for themselves. That’s why God, instead, reveals these truths to us.

Think about what the rewards were going to be and, given what was soon to follow, how worthless those rewards really were. What should this tell us about just how fleeting things in the world can be—and why we always need to keep the perspective of eternity in mind in all that we do?

Enter the Queen

Read Daniel 5:9–12. What does the queen say about Daniel that the king should have known already? What does it say about him that he seems ignorant even of Daniel’s existence?

As the banquet hall is thrown into confusion because of the mysterious message on the wall, the queen comes and provides direction to the befuddled king. She reminds the king about Daniel, whose ability to interpret dreams and solve mysteries has been demonstrated during the time of Nebuchadnezzar. If Belshazzar were as smart as his predecessor, he would have known where to turn to find the meaning of this mysterious writing. The intervention of the queen proves necessary for the king, who at this point seems utterly at a loss as to what to do next. Her words sound like a rebuke to Belshazzar for having overlooked the only person in the kingdom who can interpret the mysterious writing. And she also gives the king an oral résumé of Daniel: the prophet has the Spirit of the Holy God, light and understanding and divine wisdom, excellent spirit, knowledge; he is capable of understanding, interpreting dreams, solving riddles, and explaining enigmas; he was chief of the magicians, astrologers, Chaldeans, and soothsayers in Nebuchadnezzar’s time (*Dan. 5:11, 12*).

At this point, we again wonder why Belshazzar had ignored Daniel. The text does not offer a direct answer to this question, but we presume that at this time Daniel, after serving the king at least until the third year of his reign (*Dan. 8:1, 27*), is no longer in active service. One factor could be Daniel’s age. He is probably around 80 years old, and the king may have wanted to replace the old leadership with a younger generation. The king also may have decided to ignore Daniel because he did not want to commit himself to Daniel’s God. But whatever the reason or combination of reasons, it remains striking that someone with such a portfolio as Daniel’s could be forgotten so soon.

Read Romans 1:16–32. In what ways do we see the principle expressed in these texts manifested, not just in this story but also in the world today?

Weighed and Found Wanting

Read Daniel 5:13–28. What is the reason Daniel gives for the soon-to-come demise of this king?

Forced by the circumstances, the king resorts to consulting Daniel, but he seems to do so with reluctance. This may tell more about the attitude of the king toward the God of Daniel than toward Daniel himself.

In turn, Daniel's response to the king's offer of reward says a lot about Daniel's priorities and character. It also is likely that Daniel, knowing the meaning of the mysterious words, realizes just how worthless the reward really is.

Daniel then indicts the king on three counts.

First, Belshazzar totally has ignored the experience of Nebuchadnezzar. Otherwise he would have repented and humbled himself like his predecessor.

Second, Belshazzar has used the temple vessels in order to drink wine and to praise his idols. Here Daniel mentions the six kinds of materials used to make idols in almost the same order noted previously.

Third, the king has neglected to glorify God, the One "who holds your breath in His hand and owns all your ways" (*Dan. 5:23, NKJV*).

Having addressed the failures of the king, Daniel proceeds to the interpretation. Now we learn that the divine graffiti consists of three Aramaic verbs (with the first repeated). Their basic meaning should have been known to the king and his sages—*MENE*: "counted"; *TEKEL*: "weighed"; and *PERES*: "divided."

With the Medo-Persian army at the gates of Babylon, the king and the sages must have suspected some ominous meaning in that writing, but the sages do not dare to say something unpleasant to the king. Only Daniel proves capable of decoding the actual message into a meaningful statement in order to convey its full meaning to Belshazzar: "*MENE*: God has *numbered* your kingdom, and finished it; *TEKEL*: You have been *weighed* in the balances, and found wanting; *PERES*: Your kingdom has been *divided*, and given to the Medes and Persians" (*Dan. 5:26–28, NKJV; emphasis supplied*).

Not exactly words of comfort and cheer.

Judgment comes swiftly upon the king. How can we learn to trust God in cases in which, for the present, justice and judgment have not yet come? (*See Eccles. 3:17, 8:11, Matt. 12:36, and Rom. 14:12.*)

The Fall of Babylon

Read Daniel 5:29–31 along with Revelation 14:8, 16:19, and 18:2. What can we learn about the fall of Belshazzar’s Babylon that points to the fall of end-time Babylon?

Whatever his faults, Belshazzar is a man of his word. So, despite the bad news, he is satisfied with the interpretation given by Daniel, which is why he bestows upon the prophet the promised gifts. It appears that by admitting the truth of Daniel’s message, the king implicitly recognizes the reality of Daniel’s God. Interestingly, Daniel now accepts the gifts he has refused before, probably because such gifts can no longer influence his interpretation. Besides, at that point such gifts are meaningless since the empire is about to fall. Thus, probably as a matter of courtesy, the prophet accepts the rewards, knowing all the while that he will be the third ruler of the kingdom for only a few hours.

Exactly as announced by the prophet, Babylon falls. And it does so quickly; while the king and his courtiers drink, the city falls without a battle. According to the historian Herodotus, the Persians dug a canal to divert the Euphrates River and marched into the city on the riverbed. That same night Belshazzar is slain. His father, King Nabonidus, has left the city already, surrendering himself later to the new rulers. Thus, the greatest empire humanity has ever known to this point comes to an end. Babylon, the head of gold, is no more.

“Belshazzar had been given many opportunities for knowing and doing the will of God. He had seen his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar banished from the society of men. He had seen the intellect in which the proud monarch gloried taken away by the One who gave it. He had seen the king driven from his kingdom, and made the companion of the beasts of the field. But Belshazzar’s love of amusement and self-glorification effaced the lessons he should never have forgotten; and he committed sins similar to those that brought signal judgments on Nebuchadnezzar. He wasted the opportunities graciously granted him, neglecting to use the opportunities within his reach for becoming acquainted with truth.”—Ellen G. White, *Bible Echo*, April 25, 1898.

What opportunities do we have to become “acquainted with truth”? What does that mean? At what point can we say that we are acquainted with all the truth that we need to know?

Further Thought: Large feasts were common in the courts of the ancient world. Kings loved to throw parties with extravagance and luxury to show their greatness and confidence. Although we do not know all of the details of this particular feast, we know that it took place when the Medo-Persian army was poised to attack Babylon. But humanly speaking, there was no reason for concern. Babylon had fortified walls, a food supply for many years, and plenty of water, because the Euphrates River flowed through the heart of the city. So, King Belshazzar sees no problem in having a party while the enemy surrounds the city. And he orders a momentous celebration, which soon degenerates into an orgy. What a powerful testimony to the hubris of humanity, especially in contrast to the power of the Lord. Through Daniel, God tells the king that despite the opportunities he has had to learn truth, “the God who holds your breath in His hand and owns all your ways, you have not glorified” (*Dan. 5:23, NKJV*).

“The history of nations speaks to us today. To every nation and to every individual God has assigned a place in His great plan. Today men and nations are being tested by the plummet in the hand of Him who makes no mistake. All are by their own choice deciding their destiny, and God is overruling all for the accomplishment of His purposes.”
—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 536.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In class, discuss the answer to Sunday’s question about the ways in which society and culture profane the truth of God. What are these ways, and how should we as a church and as individuals respond to those profanations?
- 2 What does this story teach us about how salvation is not so much about *what* we know but about how we *respond* to what we know? (See *Dan. 5:22*.)
- 3 Read Daniel 5:23. What important spiritual principles are found in this verse? For example, how does the text warn us against defiance of God? Or, what does the text teach us about God as not only the Creator but also the Sustainer of our existence?
- 4 Even without knowing what the words mean, Belshazzar was frightened (*Dan. 5:6*). What does this tell us about what it means to live with a guilty conscience?

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Daniel 5:11, 12*

Study Focus: *Dan. 5:1–31; Prov. 29:1; Ps. 75:7; Isa. 45:1, 2; Luke 12:19, 20.*

Introduction: Daniel 5 stands in close parallel with Daniel 4. Both chapters portray in graphic terms God’s sovereignty over the kingdoms of the world. In Daniel 4, God took away the power from Nebuchadnezzar for a limited period of time. In Daniel 5, God removes the power from Belshazzar and brings the Babylonian kingdom to its end.

Lesson Themes:

- 1. Arrogance.** One theme that pervades the book of Daniel and is graphically demonstrated here is that of the arrogance of the human powers in their rebellion against God and what stands for God in the world. When he should be more focused on defending his city against the impending attack of Medes and Persians, Belshazzar was offering a lavish banquet to his officers.
- 2. Judgment.** The blasphemous gesture of Belshazzar in defiling the temple vessels, which represented the temple, amounted to an attack against God Himself. At this point, the Babylonian king and the system that he represented had filled up the cup of their iniquity. In that moment, the heavenly tribunal pronounced the sentence. A supernatural hand wrote on the palace wall the sobering message: “MENE, MENE, TEKEL UPHARSIN” (*Dan. 5:25*).

Life Application: What was Belshazzar’s most egregious sin the night of Babylon’s downfall? More even than hosting a hedonistic party, his worst sin was his treatment of the vessels from God’s temple. The blasphemous handling of the sacred objects epitomized Belshazzar’s contempt for the God of Israel and finally filled the cup of Babylon’s iniquity. However, the root of his faults lay in his refusal to walk in the light that God revealed through His dealings with Nebuchadnezzar. To avoid making the same mistake, we should pay close attention to the experiences of others, both positive and negative. And most important, we must walk in the light that

God has shed in our path through His Word.

Part II: Commentary

1. Arrogance

The last night of Babylon was marked by a great celebration. Xenophon and Herodotus indicate that the Babylonians were observing a regular festival. The Bible does not mention the reasons for the party, but scholars have speculated that it might have been the (spring) New Year's *Akitu* Festival. Whatever feast it was, with the Medes and Persians ready to attack against Babylon (*Dan. 5:29–31*), we wonder why Belshazzar was partying. Most likely he felt secure within the city, which was surrounded by a wall twenty-five feet in width and a height of at least forty feet. Inside the city there were abundant water and food supplies to withstand many years of siege. So, Belshazzar harbored no fear of an invasion any time soon. The feast conveyed a sense of normalcy to the city's inhabitants in spite of the enemies gathering outside the city walls.

At the height of the celebration, Belshazzar praised the gods “of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone” (*Dan. 5:23, ESV*) but not the living God. Apparently, he forgot what God had done through Daniel to teach Nebuchadnezzar. However, Belshazzar's very act of desecration indicates that he may not have been completely oblivious of the living God. By seizing the sacred vessels of the Jerusalem temple to be used as drinking cups in that blasphemous celebration, the Babylonian king demonstrated that he not only refused to honor the God of the Hebrews, but he also exerted willful contempt against Him. By profaning the temple vessels, the king was expressing his most outrageous contempt for the reality those objects represented; namely, the worship of the true God. Such objects, though in exile, remained holy, and Belshazzar should have treated them with utmost respect.

Isaiah demanded purity from the exiles who would carry the sacred vessels back to Jerusalem (*Isa. 52:11, 12*). Nebuchadnezzar apparently understood the status of the temple objects when he placed them in the temple of his god. As opposed to his predecessor, Belshazzar showed no respect for the temple vessels. By defiling them in his orgiastic celebration, he challenged God Himself.

Belshazzar's profanation of the sacred vessels stands as another episode in the long conflict between Babylon and Jerusalem, depicted in the Scriptures. The term *Babylon* appears for the first time in Genesis 11 (spelled as Babel in most translations), when a company of rebellious individuals begin constructing a tower intended to reach to the heavens. Thenceforth, a conflict between God and Babylon as a representation of the forces that oppose God and His truth emerges time and again in the Scriptures. When the armies of Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judah and razed

Jerusalem and the temple, it appeared that Babylon had won. Belshazzar appears intent on reconfirming such appearances by defiling the vessels of God's temple. In praising his gods and defiling the temple vessels, the Babylonian king intended to make a public demonstration of contempt toward the God of the Jews. This act of profanation points to the eschatological attacks of the little horn and the king of the north against God's people and God's heavenly temple, as depicted in the prophetic section of Daniel. Subsequently, the book of Revelation provides a broader picture of the conflict between Babylon and Jerusalem, which culminates in the annihilation of Babylon and the establishment of God's eternal kingdom from the New Jerusalem.

2. Judgment

At a divinely chosen moment in the lustful revelry, mysterious writing suddenly appears on the wall of the banquet room. The king immediately perceives the gravity of the situation. Although he could not read the writing, he felt it was an ominous pronouncement of impending doom. Once more the magicians and professionals of the palace failed to produce an interpretation that satisfied the king. It was only at the suggestion of the queen mother that the king requested that Daniel be brought to his presence. Some scholars identify this woman with Nitocris, daughter of Nebuchadnezzar, wife of Nabonidus and mother of Belshazzar.

One may wonder why Daniel was ignored up to that point. In this regard, we should bear in mind that Daniel had served until the third year of Belshazzar (*Dan. 8:1, 27*). Therefore, the old prophet was not any stranger to the king. On the basis of Belshazzar's overall attitude and behavior, it appears that this king may have relegated Daniel to the margins for political (religious) expediency.

In his appearance before the king, the old prophet no longer used deferential language as in former addresses to Nebuchadnezzar. After making clear that he rejected the rewards the king promised to whoever interpreted the writing, Daniel spoke to the king in the most severe terms. Above all, Daniel faulted Belshazzar for not learning from the experience of Nebuchadnezzar, particularly when the latter was expelled from the throne for a period of seven years (*Daniel 4*). Thus, Belshazzar should have known better: "But you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, although you knew all this" (*Dan. 5:22, NKJV*). Therefore, the writing on the wall meant judgment for Belshazzar and Babylon: *MENE*, *MENE* ("counted"), *TEKEL* ("weighed"), *UPHARSIN* ("and divided,") (*Dan. 5:25*). Ellen G. White says that those letters "gleamed like fire," and that the king and others seemed to be "arraigned before the judgment bar of the eternal God, whose power they had just defied."—*Prophets and*

Kings, p. 524. The sentence was given, the Babylonian king and kingdom were doomed. In spite of the unfavorable interpretation, the king kept his word, rewarded Daniel, and made him third ruler in the Babylonian empire, even if only for a few hours.

On that same night, the enemy diverted the river Euphrates—which ran through the city—to a marsh, and with the level of the water lowered, the soldiers entered Babylon underneath the city wall through the riverbed. Belshazzar was killed, and mighty Babylon fell before the Medes and Persians, in October 539 B.C. The fall of historical Babylon—as the gold gave way to silver—symbolizes the final defeat of the spiritual end-time Babylon, as hinted at in the prophetic chapters of Daniel. In Revelation, the fall of the end-time Babylon is connected with the sixth plague, which results in the drying up of the Euphrates to prepare the way for the kings from the east (*Rev. 16:12*). In the end, the victorious city (Babylon) is defeated, and the defeated city (Jerusalem) is established.

Part III: Life Application

- 1. In what ways can you prevent the fault of Belshazzar (in not learning from the past experiences of his predecessor Nebuchadnezzar) from being replicated in your life today? How can you avoid falling into the same trap of not learning from the experience of others?**

- 2. Why is it important to know what God has done in the past history of His people? What happens to those who forget the past? How can you learn about God's past acts?**

- 3. In your view, what was the most offensive sin of Belshazzar? Explain your answer.**

4. Imagine yourself in Daniel’s place. After being ignored, you are eventually called to solve the problem that the astrologers, the Chaldeans, and the soothsayers have failed to solve. How would you have felt? How would you have treated the king? Would you have accepted the rewards promised by the king? Explain.

5. Belshazzar ignored the true God and praised the gods of silver and gold, bronze and iron, wood and stone. Which “gods” today pose a threat to your relationship with the true God? Money? Status? Education? Career?

6. Daniel indicts the king for not glorifying “the God who holds your breath in His hand and owns all your ways” (*Dan. 5:23, NKJV*). How meaningful is this depiction of God for you? How do you feel about such a God? Love? Fear? Discuss.

7. In what ways can the judgment of Belshazzar and the fall of Babylon give you assurance that, eventually, the forces of evil will be defeated? What picture of the judgment and of God’s character can you glimpse from this narrative?
