

The Book of Daniel

Lesson 5: The Writing on the Wall -- Daniel 5:1-31

The party is in full roar. Belshazzar, the last king of Babylon, has thrown a feast for a thousand of his lords, and the wine is flowing like water. Outside the walls, the armies of the Medes and Persians are closing in, but inside, the king feels untouchable. Babylon has never fallen. The walls are too high, the river runs through the heart of the city, the storehouses are full. So he drinks and laughs and feels like a god, and in his drunken bravado he calls for the one thing that will turn the celebration into something darker.

Bring out the gold and silver vessels, he says, the ones my grandfather Nebuchadnezzar took from the temple of God in Jerusalem. Bring them here, and let us drink from them. And so the holy cups of the living God are filled with wine and lifted in a toast, and the whole drunken company praises the gods of gold and silver and bronze and iron and wood and stone, the gods who cannot see or hear. It is deliberate. It is defiant. It is a king spitting in the face of heaven, taking what is sacred and using it to honor what is worthless.

And in that very hour, the fingers of a human hand appear and begin to write on the plaster of the wall, in the light of the lamp, where everyone can see. The laughter dies. The color drains from the king's face. His knees knock together, the text says, with a detail almost comic if it were not so terrible. The man who felt like a god a moment ago is undone by a hand with no body, writing words he cannot read. All his wise men are summoned, and none can interpret. And then the queen remembers an old man named Daniel.

Daniel, now well into his eighties, is brought in, and he refuses the king's rewards. He looks Belshazzar in the eye and tells him the truth no one else would. You knew all this, he says. You knew what happened to your grandfather, how God humbled him for his pride, and yet you have not humbled your heart. You have lifted yourself against the Lord of heaven and praised dead gods, and the God in whose hand is your very breath you have not honored. Then he reads the words: Mene, Mene, Tekel, Parsin. Numbered, weighed, divided. That very night Babylon fell, and Belshazzar was slain. This lesson is about the God who weighs kings and kingdoms in His scales, and about the terrible danger of knowing the truth and refusing to be humbled by it.

Group Discussion: Daniel tells Belshazzar that he sinned even though "you knew all this" about Nebuchadnezzar's humbling, yet "you have not humbled your heart" (5:22). Why is it more serious to sin against truth we already know? Where might we, too, be in danger of knowing what God requires and still failing to let it change our hearts?

Personal Reflection: Belshazzar treated as common and even mocked what God had set apart as holy. Where in your own life are you tempted to treat sacred things, God's name, His word, worship, your own body as His temple, lightly or carelessly? What would it mean to recover a sense of the holiness of God in your daily life?

Read Daniel 5:1–31

Study Questions

1. Belshazzar deliberately used the holy vessels from God's temple to toast pagan gods (5:2–4). What does this act of desecration reveal about the human impulse to defy God? Why does Scripture take the profaning of what is holy so seriously (compare Leviticus 10:3)?
2. We can profane holy things in subtler ways, by treating God's name, His word, or His worship as ordinary or trivial. Where have you grown careless about something God calls holy? What is one way you could restore reverence for God in a specific area of your life?
3. Daniel reminds Belshazzar that his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar had been humbled "until he knew that the Most High God rules the kingdom of mankind" (5:21), yet Belshazzar ignored that example. What does this teach about our responsibility to learn from the lessons God has already made plain, in Scripture and in the lives of others?
4. Belshazzar had every opportunity to know better and still chose pride. Whose example, or what past lesson in your own life, is God calling you to take seriously instead of ignoring? Why do we so often have to learn the hard way what we could have learned from others?
5. The words on the wall declared, "you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting" (5:27). What does this picture of God weighing a person's life reveal about His

judgment? How does the certainty that God measures every life confront the illusion that we can live however we please without accountability?

6. If your life were weighed today, where do you sense you would be found “wanting”? Rather than driving you to despair, how can this honest reckoning drive you to the grace and mercy God offers to all who turn to Him?
7. Daniel, now an old man, fearlessly told the king the truth even though it was unwelcome and the king held the power of life and death (5:17–23). What does Daniel’s boldness reveal about a life shaped by the fear of God rather than the fear of man (Proverbs 29:25)? Where does such courage come from?
8. Speaking hard truth, to a friend, a family member, or in a culture that does not want to hear it, often feels risky and costly. Where is God calling you to speak truth in love when it would be easier to stay silent? What helps you fear God more than you fear people’s reactions?
9. That very night Babylon fell, exactly as God’s word declared, and Belshazzar was killed (5:30–31). How does the swift fulfillment of God’s judgment display that He is the sovereign Lord who holds every kingdom and every life in His hand, and that His word never fails? And how does this sobering scene point us to the certainty of a final judgment, in which God will weigh every life and from which our only refuge is Christ (Hebrews 9:27; Acts 17:31)?

10. Look back across the whole chapter, from the defiant feast to the fallen kingdom. Name one specific way the truth that God weighs every life, and that His holiness and judgment are real, is reshaping how you will live, worship, and walk before Him this coming week.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Proverbs 16:18, pride goes before destruction; Galatians 6:7, God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows he will reap; Hebrews 9:27, it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment; Acts 17:30–31, God commands all to repent because He has fixed a day to judge the world in righteousness; Daniel 4:37, the God who is able to humble those who walk in pride.

More studies available on ChurchOfChristBibleStudies.com