

Daniel 5

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[0 : 00] I just extend my welcome to you on this Lord's day. If they had asked me, and you're well aware that they did not, to provide a title over chapter 5, I simply would have written the parties over.

I think from this text, I simply want to explore the truth that we either honor God, or we'll find ourselves in the grip of his almighty hand.

Honor God, or find yourself in the grip of his almighty hand. If we were to exit our front doors today, and you were to walk with me north along Woodlawn Avenue, a mere three blocks, at which point we would turn left, we would find before us very quickly the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures.

Upon entering, we could find a docent or a worker who would perhaps make available to us many ancient Neo-Babylonian texts.

They're that close to where we reside. And on some of these texts, we would read words that speak of this very king, Belshazzar, son of Nebonius, the one who was ruling Babylon, until, of course, the kingdom fell on this surprising and fateful night into the hands of the Medes and the Persians.

[1 : 50] This text provides us without any walking distance at all to what was going on during the final fateful hours of Babylon's empire.

Although the Persian army had been assaulting Babylon for some extended length of time, it appears that Belshazzar hosted a party in keeping with a calendar tradition, a great feast in honor of his gods.

And what a party it was. It's all there for you, put out with resplendent language in the opening four verses.

It was called a great feast, not only for the abundance of food, but the number in attendance, upwards of a thousand there.

Have you ever been in a ballroom or on a great party floor with a thousand in attendance? The talking, the dress, the finery, the preparations.

[3 : 11] He says that his leading men were there and their wives and their concubines. What a party. The best of the Babylonian wines was set out.

It was for the delight of the people and the lords. The prettiest of women were present and there evidently in abundance.

As you read the opening verses, you get the allure of this seductive excess that takes place in parties as the night goes on.

Not some small house party or fraternity or sorority party. Not even some wedding ceremony that extols the glories of a union.

No, a gathering now of upwards of a thousand, the wine now flowing. And as things tend to go at parties like this, things got out of hand.

[4 : 23] The wine began to work on Belshazzar. He calls for Israel's gold drinking vessels to be brought in.

These were the treasures taken some 70 years before by Nebuchadnezzar indicating Babylon's victory over Israel and her God.

He's mocking the God of Israel. He means to pour Babylon's best a libation of their luxury into the cup of Israel's God.

And by doing so, display his power over the impotence of a kingdom long ago vanquished by his own gods.

You can imagine, can't you now? I can almost see it. The quiet beginning to move through the crowd as the king attends now to address them all.

[5 : 38] He stands with a wine goblet of gold glittering in the lights of the night with the Babylonian wine inside. And he, in a sense, has his fingers clenched around the God of Israel.

A toast for no one can stand before our gods. And in defiance and in delight, his eyes widen, glasses are raised all across the great expanse, and he drinks his victory over Daniel's God. He imbibes the best of wines and thereby declares his firm grip on God.

It is as though he says, I own Yahweh. one can almost envision him after the toast, perhaps pounding it down the way young people do at parties today, placing it on the table, wiping his lips dry, and saying, pour me another.

But the text moves. Verse 5, even the writer with surprising speed using the word immediately.

[7 : 19] In this very moment, before the words were barely out of his mouth and the wine into his person, we see an unexpected, uninvited guest.

Immediately, the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace opposite the lampstand.

I love the little phrase opposite the lampstand. Here are the lights of the enlightened Babylonian world that are now opposite so that one can see on the opposing wall the fingers of a hand larger than his own writing upon the plaster itself.

Centuries later, it would be Rembrandt who would paint the scene perfectly. Their faces in the eyes of the king filled with fear.

Those around him betraying their own fear. Wide open yet lines creased, characters drained of color.

[8 : 43] It would then be Lord Byron, the poet, who put the impish stuttering of the king to prose. He writes, the monarch saw and shook and bade no more rejoice.

All bloodless waxed his look and tremulous his voice. Let the men of lore appear, the wisest of the earth, and expound the words of fear which mar our royal mirth.

And in they came, leaders, the elites, those who had studied languages, those who knew a thing or two, and they all came and looked.

But notice here something curious about the king. although it says he was alarmed, verse 6, and that his color had changed, and that his limbs gave way, he nevertheless presents himself as the man still in complete control.

Bring them in, and I will dispense of my royal privileges in giving them power.

[10 : 22] Truth be told, this is the intoxicating effect that arrogance has upon us all. Find yourself suddenly in a place in life where you can't control the events.

You might shake a bit, but then you stand and control the scene as you're able. Strike one on Belshazzar.

Interestingly, the wise men of Babylon were incapable of knowing this particular script. They read it, it says in verse 8, but they could not make known to it what the interpretation was.

They could pronounce it, but they had no meaning to go with it. And notice the effect it has on the king, verse 9, he now moves from being alarmed, verse 6, to greatly alarmed, a little bit less in control.

people. It appears, though, for a moment, that he's saved by the royal woman, the queen herself, who enters the story in verse 10.

[11 : 47] I don't know for sure if it's Belshazzar's wife, or Nebonius, his father, who was the fourth in line from Nebuchadnezzar, or it was the queen mother, as it were, but someone who had familiarity with the rule of Nebuchadnezzar, because now when we greet Daniel, he's no longer a young man, but obviously perhaps in his 70s, or maybe even an octogenarian, not able to stand for the lengthy reading of our day.

But she comes, and notice what she says, O king, verse 12, let not your thoughts alarm you.

In other words, the text moves from alarm, yet in control, to greatly alarmed, to there's no need for alarm.

And so the king will listen to the words of the queen mother, and he will bring Daniel in according to verse 12, who can show the interpretation.

notice what he says to Daniel. He's brought in, verse 13, and the king once again puffs Daniel up as being worthy of this moment, puts his own enchanters down as being unworthy of it, but then with that strong adversative in verse 16, but I have heard that you can do it, and if you do, I will put purple on your back, a chain of gold around your neck, and give you the third place of rule in my

kingdom.

[13:58] Strike two. twice now, the impotent, intoxicated king claims yet to be in control.

We look on. I'm sure the early readers of the text were humorously almost laughing at this repetition of the king's control.

He's meant to appear on this chapter, the pages of this chapter, as a street drunk. It's almost as though, given the season we've just come out of, he's in Halloween dress.

He's a pretender to power. He stammers out promises he cannot keep. He provides Daniel, he says, with bling, and I'll give you the best of my shawls, and I'll give you a share of my power.

And the early readers, of course, would have thought he's just a stumbling idiot on the pages of Scripture. Evidently, Daniel thought so himself.

[15:12] We can now see Daniel entering here at verse 17. The aged man stands calmly before power, the one who yet at this moment is the ultimate power over all the earth.

And his introductory words, his opening statement, if you're in law, his opening statement places himself completely independent of any outside influence.

I love it. Verse 17, he says, let your gifts be for yourself and give your rewards to another. father. Let me put it this way, Daniel evidently had no interest in becoming third in power in a kingdom he knew had already come to an end.

after the introduction, he provides almost a statement of historical facts, just as one would do when presenting your work before those who are in need of knowing.

[16:35] You could just call verses 18 to 21 a lesson from family history. I don't know if you picked it up. You'd have to read it again this afternoon probably a couple times, but three or four occasions in the story, the writer makes you aware that Nebuchadnezzar had been Belshazzar's father.

Your father, the king. O king, your father. And this father keeps coming, not as though he was the direct descendant of Nebuchadnezzar. He was the son of Nebuchadnezzar the way, well, the way Jesus was the son of David or Abraham.

He stood in the line of lineage. But the family history is to connect the present rule with the one who had the glorified rule, Nebuchadnezzar.

And he says, I need to refresh your mind on some family history, some stories that aren't often told. Let's get the laundry out and look at the dirtiness of it all again.

Your father raised up his own heart against the God of Israel and God brought him low. He became like a beast and wandered the world until the mercies of God restored his mind, all the things that we saw last week.

[18:01] After the father's family history, one would get the sense that the listener of this. Now, namely, Belshazzar would understand this truth.

I need to honor God or fall into the grip of his almighty aim. But he doesn't.

He moves as though he's still free and in control. and there is an indictment then that comes upon him.

Verses 22 and 23 to me are the epicenter of the story. They're the moment in the story where as if my mother or father was reading this to me as a child in bed, I would have quickened and been made aware that I have arrived at where this story sits.

look at verse 23 just for instance. You've praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze and iron and wood and stone which do not see or hear or know but there's those strong adversities again, but the God, notice this, in whose hand is your breath.

[19:27] Oh, the irony of the language in the story. in whose hand is your breath and whose are all your ways you have not honored.

Twice there he says, and you, and you. I can see the octogenarian now before the young king and all of his garb, Daniel in his simple dress, long pointed finger like clothespins in your aged days, and you, and you, you, have not honored.

You, who claim to have the God of Israel clenched in your own fist. You have not learned yourself the lesson of life.

Honor God or fall into his almighty hand. Your father needed to learn the lesson, and for some inexplicable reason, you are no better for having learned it when it was told to you along the way.

These are strong words. The direct speech of Daniel should have cut Belshazzar to the quick.

[20:51] but let! But let me just stop and talk about ourselves. Does it cause us to change?

How many more Friday and Saturday nights will we hold on to that which we purport to be our own power?

how many glasses will we yet raise to the heavens and stubbornly hold to the notion that we control our own lives and its outcome?

how often will we adorn the grounds before us with all the allurements of sexual capacity and claim that we have power?

Romans 1 a book in the New Testament declares that each of us have not honored God or given thanks to him as we should.

[22 : 24] We have exchanged the desire to live under a most high God and instead we have garnered the delights of things which are of lesser honor and as a result we stand with this king.

we are without hope save his sovereign mercy.

We will drink from the cup of his wrath. Honor God or succumb to the grip of his almighty hand.

The verdict for the king and for ourselves is clear. Verse 25 and this is the writing that was inscribed and this is the interpretation of the matter.

Mene God has numbered the days of your kingdom. Tekel you've been weighed in the balance and found wanting. Perez your kingdom is divided and given to another.

[24 : 06] With all the assonance of Aramaic we have these words. Mene which in Aramaic has the sound of having been numbered.

Tekel which in Aramaic has the sound to it of being weighed. Parson which has the notion in Aramaic of being divided and separated into two.

Counted. Counted. Wanting. Divided. You know weights and measures have often been used from the beginning of time to represent justice or righteousness.

To this day you can't enter into a law court without coming under the emblem of lady justice.

Perhaps Themis carrying the scales of justice in one hand and a sword in the other.

Most often her eyes are covered blindfolded indicating symbolically that she justice law is impartial completely with integrity without prejudice and this is what the words now declare that the king has been weighed and found wanting.

[25 : 48] Let me just put it as simply as we should. The interpretation of the vision and the writing on the wall indicates that for Belshazzar and his kingdom the party was over.

And it was suddenly over. Unexpectedly over. It was unforeseen to now be over.

This is the day the music died. McLean 1971. Some of you might be old enough.

On February 3rd 1959 the music world lost Buddy Holly the Big Bopper and Richie Valens in a crash just outside Iowa City.

Plane crash. Holly was 22. 22. Just played a concert. Another day. Gonna go.

[26 : 59] The Big Bopper was 28. 28. Richie Valens 17. The day the music died.

Moving on. Done. What's incredible to me is the king's insistence that he still was in control.

Look at verse 29. Then Belshazzar gave the command and Daniel was clothed with purple. A chain of gold was put around his neck and a proclamation was made about him that he should be the third ruler in the kingdom.

Wow. The pride of man. His last executive order was to distribute some of his wealth and rule to Daniel, which from Daniel's perspective meant absolutely nothing at all.

Strike three. People go to their deaths. not honoring God. And then it says it fell.

[28 : 28] And if you're a history major, there's import here in verse 30. That very night Belshazzar, the Chaldean king, was killed and Darius the Mede received the kingdom. These are statements of fact.

These are records way beyond the scriptures that indicate what happened. We just saw what happened on the faithful hours. Herodotus, Greek historian, 5th century, confirms how the battle was won.

This is what he writes on that night concerning the victory that was taken from Babylon. it says that the army was posted at the place where the river goes into the city.

See, the river walled. The city of Babylon was walled and a river ran through it. Another part of it behind the city where the river comes out of the city.

And he told his men to enter the city by the channel of the Euphrates when they saw that it was fordable. So what the Medes and Persians did is they just blocked up the river upstream, dammed it for a while.

[29 : 34] The water began to go down and Herodotus tells us that the stream sank until it was about the depth of the middle of a man's thigh, he writes, at which time the Persians took them unaware.

But the inhabitants in the middle part of the city knew nothing of it. All this time, says the historian, they were dancing and celebrating a holiday, which happened to fall then until they learned the truth only too well.

And time goes on. And kingdoms rise, kingdoms fall. Well, what do we do with it?

I'm about to press home the truth of the story to the hearts of my listeners. Lord, help me be clear.

May we never throw back our heads in defiance upon Israel's God.

May we never live in principle as though we have a firm grip on God. May we honor God knowing that we don't want to fall into the grip of his almighty hand, which then ought to have the hands of many all over the auditorium raised.

[31 : 03] How? How, please? Because Edwards, president of Yale, also a Christian, in a sermon, speaks about the hand of God holding us.

he talks about sinners in the hands of an angry God. We are like those who are dangling from a thread as a spider does. And all it takes for almighty God at any time he chooses is to rub his forefinger and thumb and release and the thread goes and our lives are over.

where do we go if that's our true condition? And it is.

Well, I've got to find God's hand underneath me somewhere, not just over me.

I need a hand extended to me, not merely hammering down upon me. Which leads me to another time and another king, to the story of the Bible.

[32 : 30] A king comes, Israel's king, in contrast to Belshazzar, son of Nabonius, son of Nebuchadnezzar, by the name of Jesus, a Nazarene, who is called the son of David, and the son of Abraham, and the son of God.

To be the son of David meant that he was to be in the line that would be a savior, leader, ruler. To be the son of Abraham meant that he was in the line who would bless all the families of the earth. To be the son of David and Abraham and of God was to be the one who would receive a kingdom that is forever.

Now, this is the only place I find I can go. As his hands are out upon the cross, he dies a death.

He allows his father to separate and he falls into the hands of God taking punishment, but not for his own errors, his own arrogance, his own pride because he was the most humble of all men.

[33 : 51] He always honored God and yet then he was taking on something, the sin of the world, so that anyone who would have faith, anyone who would say, I have got to get off the throne of my life, I have got to put him in the center.

I have to fall into the hands of Christ if I am to avert the inevitable judgment that is rightly mine.

And so when you look at your own life and you say, wow, I've struck out. all my faith, all my trust moves to him for the God of Israel who holds us over the pit of hell justly will also bear us up humbly if we look to his son.

It's that simple. someone is going to be king of your life. You, your libations, your luxuries, your plans, or Jesus.

Jesus. I pray today that you will repent of your power, your pride, your sense that you will orchestrate the produce and product of your life and give yourself to him because that party, they call it a wedding supper of a lamb, that party, that one is never going to be over.

[36 : 08] You'll be seated at that table. Our heavenly father, we thank you for this day, this, these extraordinary meetings we call Sunday gatherings, in which we pause every week to be led in our mind, in our heart, in the obedience of our will, to explore again your word and what it means for our lives.

Help each one here to make Jesus king and thereby be benefactors of your grace.

In Jesus' name we pray.