

Daniel 5 - Gracious Justice

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

We're going to be in Daniel chapter 5 this morning, Daniel 5. Before we go there, though, I want to talk for just a minute, share one kind of side note with you from my study this week, a little tidbit that I took away before we dive into the story itself.

I share this with you because of our commitment to God's Word and its reliability as one of the most fundamental aspects of our faith.

This is just one of those small instances this week where our faith can be strengthened in the trustworthiness of the Bible. A couple centuries ago, critical scholars began to attack the historical veracity of the Bible, particularly areas of the Bible that require supernatural involvement, right? You're aware of that. In an effort to support a naturalistic worldview where we can explain everything by what we see and experience, miracles were out, right?

[1 : 17] Prophecies were out. And so Daniel, which purports to be written in the 6th century B.C. He undeniably depicts accurately, everybody agrees, some of the events that happen in the next couple hundred years after the 6th century B.C.

So how would the critical scholars explain that? How could the book of Daniel actually do that? Well, the agreed upon opinion was that Daniel was actually written after those events that it writes about.

Probably somewhere in about the 2nd century B.C. is what popular opinion came to be among those scholars. And that explained it, right? No wonder he can write such a good account.

The events already happened, they said. One of the key planks in their argument is the king in our story this morning, a guy named Belshazzar. In all the historical records there about Babylon from the 5th century and the 4th century B.C., historians like Herodotus and others, there was no Belshazzar.

None at all. Lists of all the kings of Babylon, he's not even there. So the biblical author appeared to have made this guy up. You know, 400 years later they said, of course.

[2 : 36] He didn't know any better. And he just made up another king of Babylon. Beginning in about 1860, archaeologists began to find more old records.

They started digging other things up in southern Iraq, actually found several things that had histories of Babylon recorded and lists of kings. And lo and behold, there's this guy, Belshazzar. He is the oldest son of the last formal king of Babylon, Nabonidus. And these historical records detail how Belshazzar actually ruled in Babylon for several years during his father's reign, that he was the one actively ruling in Babylon when it fell.

So not only, according to these newly discovered records, was Belshazzar there, not only was the biblical author correct in having him as the last king in the city of Babylon, but also in the second century when these scholars were arguing the Bible would have been written, there was no record of Belshazzar.

Anybody in the second century trying to write about the fall of Babylon had no record of the guy, never would have made him up. So there's no way a second century author would have written Daniel chapter 5 with a guy named Belshazzar.

[4 : 01] To know about Belshazzar, you actually had to be there in the sixth century yourself. So Belshazzar argues against the possibility of Daniel being written after the events that it talks about and gives extra support to the reliability of the biblical account and the prophetic activity.

Yes, wonderful. We love it when that happens, right? That's so encouraging. I don't usually share little tidbits like that, but I thought that one might really encourage your faith and it's part of what

we're talking about this morning.

If I lost you in that explanation, we don't usually spend a lot of hours here at Southwood talking through the archaeological evidence for critical scholarship and I don't do it real well.

So if you didn't understand any of that, here's what you need to know. What you're about to hear is a trustworthy account of what actually took place at the end of a great kingdom the night Babylon fell in 539 B.C.

Listen as I read God's holy, inerrant, infallible word, Daniel chapter 5 at verse 1. King Belshazzar made a great feast for a thousand of his lords and drank wine in front of the thousand.

[5 : 17] Belshazzar, when he tasted the wine, commanded that the vessels of gold and of silver that Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken out of the temple in Jerusalem be brought, that the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them.

Then they brought in the golden vessels that had been taken out of the temple, the house of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines drank from them. They drank wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone.

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

Then the king's color changed. And his thoughts alarmed him. His limbs gave way and his knees knocked together. And Belshazzar calls together all of his wise men and asks them to interpret what is going on.

Finally, the queen remembers this guy named Daniel who's good at this stuff. Bring him in. And Daniel comes before the king. We'll skip ahead to verse 18.

[6 : 29] Daniel says to Belshazzar, O king, the most high God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father kingship and greatness and glory and majesty.

And because of the greatness that he gave him, all peoples, nations, and languages trembled and feared before him. Whom he would, he killed, and whom he would, he kept alive. Whom he would, he raised up, and whom he would, he humbled.

But when his heart was lifted up and his spirit was hardened so that he dealt proudly, he was brought down from his kingly throne, and his glory was taken from him. He was driven from among the children of mankind, and his mind was made like that of a beast, and his dwelling was with the wild donkeys.

He was fed grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, until he knew that the most high God rules the kingdom of mankind and sets it over whom he will.

That was our story last week. Daniel 4, Nebuchadnezzar becoming a beast. And you, his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this.

[7 : 37] But you have lifted up yourself against the Lord of heaven, and the vessels of his house have been brought in before you. And you and your lords, your wives, and your concubines have drunk wine from them, and you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which do not see or hear or know, but the God in whose hand is your breath, and whose are all your ways you have not honored.

Then, from his presence, the hand was sent, and this writing was inscribed. And this is the writing that was inscribed, Mene, Mene, Tekel, and Parson.

This is the interpretation of the matter. Mene, which means numbered. God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end.

Tekel, which means weighed. You have been weighed in the balances and found wanting. Perez, which sounds both like the word for divided and an awful lot like the Persians.

Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians. 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.

[8 : 59] That very night, Belshazzar the Chaldean king was killed, and Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about 62 years old.

Pray with me. Father, this is a sobering passage of your word. Holy Spirit, we ask that you would tenderly, but firmly, apply it to each of our hearts.

Would you do that work with the word? We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Last week, we did see the glories of God's grace on great display as we see God pursuing the proud pagan king, Nebuchadnezzar, all the way to making him a beast in order to humble him, to help him see God's

greatness and then restore him.

And we said as we looked at that, God's grace knows no bounds, right? God's grace reaches even to the beast. It extends to the proudest, most hardened enemies of God.

He forgives. He loves. He restores those who've fallen. That's what our God is like. In this next story, it doesn't feel quite as good.

[10:29] There's no fairy tale ending for this idolatrous king. But the gospel is still here as well. As God's justice is demonstrated, it's still full of grace for us.

And the reason I say that is that what we learn about God here in this whole handwriting on the wall story is that he hates sin enough to judge evil and loves us enough to assure us that he will.

It's both a word of warning and a word of comfort to us about the seriousness of sin and God's commitment to justice. And both the warning and the comfort come from the gracious heart of God.

It's his grace that motivates him to give the firm warning and the tender comfort. I want us to see that this morning. To see this, we must remember for whom the book of Daniel was written.

Who's the audience of Daniel chapter 5? It's not King Belshazzar, is it? He's not the one being warned here. He's dead before the book is written.

[11:45] The kingdom of Babylon is gone. The audience of the book of Daniel is God's people, right? This is not a warning for the nations necessarily.

It's particularly a warning for God's exiled people coming straight from their prophet Daniel. They should be both warned and comforted by this account that they're given.

We receive it as they would have. So first, the gracious warning. God's people are reminded that sin and its consequences are serious.

Deadly serious. You hear the warning part, but you don't hear the gracious part yet, do you?

Doesn't sound real gracious at first glance, does it?

I still remember my driver's ed class back when I was 15 years old, headed into high school, so excited to get ready to drive.

[12:47] I remember that Shannon Pitner was the instructor. I don't remember a lot of particulars that Mr. Pitner taught us in that driver's ed class. But I do remember the video that he showed us on the first day of class before he even introduced himself.

On the video, as sirens blared and lights flashed on the way to the scene of a traffic accident, the words scrolled across the screen.

.01 seconds after impact, the steering column slams your chest. .05 seconds after impact, your head crashes through the windshield.

.1 seconds after impact, and so on and so on for every fraction of a second. I don't remember all of the things, but within a matter of a few fractions of a second, you're pronounced dead.

A morbid video, you might say. .10 seconds after impact, and so on and so on, you're going to be able to do that. But it grabbed the attention of some 15-year-old future drivers in a really stark way.

Why did Mr. Pitner show a video like that at the very beginning of driver's ed?

[14:04] Why did he start the class that way? You know, right? Because Mr. Pitner wanted us to know in no uncertain terms the deadly seriousness of reckless driving.

He wanted us to know the severe consequences of not paying attention and learning how to drive properly. He wanted to give us a gracious warning to caution us away from death and toward life.

That's what God is doing in this equally morbid account here in Daniel 5. Look at verse 30 again towards the end of it.

That very night, the very night all these things happened, Belshazzar, the Chaldean king, was killed. That very night, his life will be demanded of him.

And how will his idols help him then? And he's throwing a party, right? This is supposed to be a fun night for him. He's going to worship the idols of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone, verse 4 tells us.

[15:15] And immediately, verse 5 says, right in the middle of the party, the hand of the true God appears writing on the wall.

And the message is this, you will not find safety in being idolatrous. Be warned, those other gods you're seeking pleasure in will not save you.

Think of the warning, not just to Belshazzar, but to God's people here. God's people in exile in a foreign land. Why is it, after all, that they find themselves in exile in Babylon?

Of all of the sins the Bible mentions that they've committed, what's the one that it most often comes back to? Wandering after other gods. Bowing down to their idols and serving them instead of the true God.

A warning to God's people who found themselves wandering after other gods. Where are you bowing down to a God of your own design?

[16:22] An idol of your own pleasure? You've shirked the call of the one true God to faithful obedience and told yourself you're safe following the ways of your own desires and direction.

You've told yourself you're safe to indulge in the sins of the day like everyone else. Hey, come on, everybody's struggling with these things. It's okay.

Materialism. Self-defined sexual morality. Greed. Lying to get ahead.

And God loves you enough to warn you, sin is deadly serious. Stop.

Turn back. You're not safe there chasing those idols. We see not only a warning against the idolatry of other gods, but also a warning against the idolatry of human strength.

[17:25] What does Daniel say to Belshazzar? It's a very pointed conversation he has with him. You haven't learned anything. Did you not see Nebuchadnezzar, your father, meaning your predecessor as king, a couple kings before you?

Nebuchadnezzar was taught this lesson in a painful way about his pride. God turned him into a beast to humble him until he understood and acknowledged who was truly great and in charge. And Belshazzar, you know this. And you, his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this.

But you've lifted yourself up against the Lord of heaven, just like he did, and you saw what happened to him. How many times have we as parents thought, I wish you could learn from my mistakes.

And you know what? It looks like you're going to have to make them again yourself. We think we're stronger. We'll be safe where others fell.

[18:33] Listen, what's happening in this picture, while he's at the party that night, Belshazzar is surrounded by the armies of Persia.

They're laying siege to Babylon. But instead of being worried about that, he throws a huge party for a thousand people. After all, I'm safe behind these great walls at points 87 feet thick, the walls of Babylon.

350 feet tall. Ain't nobody coming in here. We can have a party. They can stand out there and hold us siege as long as they want.

We're safe. No one's coming through. And we've got the Euphrates River flowing right through the city. We can eat and drink as long as we want while they sit out there and get tired.

It reminds you of Nebuchadnezzar from last week on the roof of the palace. Sitting out there and thinking, wow, this is pretty amazing. I'm something.

[19:34] Marveling in his arrogance at his own human might. Thinking he finds safety there. And here it rears its ugly head again.

That very night, the Persians will kill Belshazzar in his palace and take his city. I think of God's people.

Prophet after prophet. Warning after warning. And yet, failure to trust God after failure to trust God. Wandering again and again. And you must see your own frailty, Daniel would be saying to these people in exile. You must see the devastation sin has brought upon you and your fathers.

If you don't see it, if you don't turn from it, you too will perish in exile. But return to God and you can be restored. That's a clear warning to us as well, isn't it?

[20:40] Don't think you're safe hiding behind the thick walls of outward strength or success. That you won't be found out or that your sin won't receive dire consequences.

Don't pull into your garage and close the door. Walk into your office and close the door. And in the privacy of your own heart and life.

Think that you're safe and that your sin won't bear painful fruit. Be warned. Sin is deadly serious. So we won't find safety in being idolatrous.

In serving other gods of sin and self. But perhaps even closer to home. Even more under the radar in the church this morning.

We will not find safety in being religious. And you may have thought that's the answer. If I need to stop running after all these other gods. I better run into church this morning and do some religious.

[21 : 45] I better start being more religious. And Daniel gives a very clear warning. And we can tend to deflect this warning. And say, oh, it's for somebody else. But it's so clear in this passage.

Look at verse 3. Look what's happening before the hand shows up. They brought in what? The golden vessels that had been taken out of the temple. The house of God in Jerusalem.

These were the vessels back from the first verse of this book. That Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple in Jerusalem. They were there for the worship of God. And he'd taken them into Babylon. And Belshazzar calls for them and has them brought.

So they can drink from them. Immediately when that happens. The fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the wall. Immediately God shows up with a message.

Daniel connects these same dots. We're not just reading into it when he's talking to him. Here's what it's looked like to lift yourself up against the Lord of heaven. The vessels of his house have been brought in before you.

[22 : 45] And you've all drunk wine from them and praised other gods with the vessels used to worship Yahweh. You've worshipped gods who don't see or hear or know.

But the God in whose hand is your breath and whose are all your ways you have not honored. You've held his cup but you haven't honored him.

You have held in your hand the things of God. But the God who holds you in his hand you have not honored.

God will not be mocked will he? There's not safety in the outward forms of religion. In external religiosity.

And God's people need to heed that warning. Lest they think they're safe because they've worshipped in the temple. Or because they've been circumcised. God takes your sins seriously.

[23 : 43] And he's calling you to return not merely to the outward forms of religion. Not merely to find a holy cup to hold on to. But to a heart that embraces him. And his ways.

You will not find safety in merely being religious. In holding in your hands the things of God. While not truly honoring the God who holds your breath in his hand.

Are you rationalizing sin? Telling yourself the sin you're consistently indulging in is okay. Because you're consistently showing up at church too.

Do you think you're keeping God placated? By showing up regularly. Giving occasionally. Not even serving when asked. Is your religiosity merely a charade?

Like Belshazzar's. Holding the cups from Yahweh's temple. Bringing them to his party as though he cared about Yahweh. But using them to serve his own pleasure and worship his own gods.

[24 : 55] God says be warned. You will not find safety in being religious. And we're the ones who have to hear that warning. We're the ones sitting in the pews at church.

The ones who have easy access to the things of God. Who so easily grab on to them and hold them in our hands. And God says that's not what it's about. It's not merely outward forms of religion.

While living a life completely differently. Indulging your sin every other day. The sin in your heart playing out in your life is deadly serious.

The solution is not to hide it. Not to cover it with outward religious activity so that everybody thinks I'm a good guy. Because I wear a suit and go to church and show up so often.

The solution is not to medicate it with human success. That it appears like I've got my life together. You must confess it. You must turn from it.

[25 : 58] Receive God's forgiveness. And seek to be guided by His Spirit. Spirit, I'd ask you this morning. What is the sin that you're thinking?

You're crazy. I could never let anyone know about this struggle. Or that failing. Don't you understand, Pastor?

Have you not lived in Huntsville, Alabama? The consequences would be terrible if people knew about this. Can you imagine if people found out? What would happen to me?

What people would say? What about my family? Hear the gracious warning of God's Word to you this morning. The consequences may indeed be terrible.

But if you do not turn from your sin, the consequences of that, of not turning from sin and seeking Jesus, will most certainly be worse.

[27 : 00] will most certainly be even more terrible than the ones you anticipate right now. God is deadly serious about sin. First and foremost, repent and turn to God.

Plead for His mercy. He delights to forgive. We have celebrated that this morning. Don't forget who He is in the midst of your sin. Alongside that, I'd urge you to find someone else that you can share with.

Someone you can tell about your sin. Someone you can ask to pray with you about your struggle.

Someone who can walk with you through the painful, but fruitful process of repentance.

You'll need help. You may think, no one will understand. These church people, they've got it figured out. They won't understand. I can't tell them. Y'all, that's the beauty of a community like this.

That's the way we're supposed to be, that it is a safe place for you to share your struggle with someone. Because our hearts are all wracked by sin.

[28 : 12] I won't be looking down on you when you share something with me. I'll be looking in the mirror. I'll be right there beside you. We're all in it together.

Father, you can uncover your sin. You can share and find safety. You see, those of us who have declared that our hope is in Jesus as we have this morning, we have to admit the seriousness of our sin in order to do that.

The hymn writer reminds us it took the death of the Son of God to pay for our sin. That's how serious it was. The hymn, Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted is one we often sing around Easter.

Ye who think of sin but lightly, nor suppose the evil great, here, here at the cross, may view its nature rightly, here its guilt may estimate.

Because we look, mark the sacrifice appointed. What had to happen to pay for the sin? How serious was it? See the one who bears the awful load.

[29 : 16] 'Tis the Word, the Lord's anointed, Son of Man and Son of God. It's the perfect one who had to die because of our sin.

Those of us who hope in Christ know and admit the seriousness of our sin. Nowhere better than at the cross do we see how seriously God takes sin.

His grace does not mean that sin gets ignored and the bar lowered. Quite the opposite. It means sin gets punished and we sinners are warned and urged to throw ourselves upon the only one who reached the bar.

Jesus. That's grace according to God's Word. So the gracious warning is that God takes sin seriously.

And that same truth is for God's people a gracious comfort. Try to put yourselves in the shoes of God's exiled people for a minute.

[30 : 25] You're in Babylon away from the promised land. You've been dragged there by mighty but pagan Babylon. Who's come into your land.

Who's tortured your families. Taunted your God. Dragged you away into servitude. What are you thinking? What's going through your mind?

Where is God? Will the Babylonians ever get what's coming to them? Why do the wicked prosper while the righteous suffer?

Why do those who trust in God seem to have it hardest? Have you ever felt something was so unfair but you couldn't do anything about it?

Perhaps at work with a promotion. Perhaps with your kids at school. Perhaps with someone you know suffering unjustly and you just can't help them.

[31 : 30] There's nothing you can do. Doesn't that burn you up? Don't you hate that feeling? You're longing to see justice prevail and things be made right and it's not in your power to do it.

So often we're not powerful enough or connected enough or knowledgeable enough to bring the justice we long for. But God is.

both of His hands we said equally skilled at ruining evil. At administering justice.

That's the grace of God's justice again. This time from a little bit of a different angle. God loves us enough to assure us that He will judge sin. The judge of all the earth will do right.

The bully will be called to account by someone bigger and stronger than He is. The mighty Babylonian kingdom comes to an end in an instant.

[32 : 31] Even in a moment where it still looks splendid and powerful. The Persian army has taken their strength and used it against them. They've dammed up that Euphrates river so that the water level begins to get lower.

And what happened the night of the handwriting on the wall is the Persian army rode right in on that river underneath the passageways that ran right through those thick walls.

Right into the middle of Babylon and the city fell. That's what happened the night Belshazzar saw God's hand writing on the wall Mene.

Mene. Tekel. Parson. He was weighed in the scales of God's justice and found wanting. His days were numbered by the God of heaven.

His kingdom was given to another and his life taken. That very night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was killed and Darius the Mede walks in and receives the kingdom.

[33 : 36] Why? Because God will judge sin and will bring justice to his people. Listen to the comfort of this y'all.

If you haven't been in their shoes it may be hard to feel the comfort of Babylon falling. But this is not a parable that teaches us a theoretical principle about God and justice.

This is an actual historical account of a story you are a part of as God's people. These are your ancestors. This is your God at work.

God created the world good and he is committed not only to defeating evil but to ridding the world of evil forever so that we enjoy his perfect world with him as he always intended.

He will do that. That's your story that you're living in and this is a glimpse of what's coming. Isn't that our hope that God's going to do that?

[34 : 37] That we would then live forever with him and his world made perfect with evil being eliminated? That's our hope. That is so comforting. For you it may be a particular individual who has mistreated you.

A particular injustice you've suffered in the past that continues to haunt you. or it may indeed feel like an entire kingdom opposed to you and your God and you face the weight of that today.

I'll admit that Babylon looked mighty for a long time before its fall in this story. God's justice sometimes lingers even into eternity.

eternity. But God says I've got eternal scales that on many days you can't understand or appreciate. Trust me.

That's his call this morning. Trust me. I'm committed to justice. I will punish evil. I will vindicate my people against those who mistreat them.

[35 : 50] And you can find great comfort in that promise. The cross of Jesus is once again our great assurance of that isn't it? The cross of Jesus there where God defeats the greatest of our enemies.

Death. Satan. Sin. There where God shows his hatred for sin by pouring out his wrath on the sin bearer.

There where the justice and grace of God kiss. There at the cross we know that as serious as sin is it will not haunt us forever.

While God has promised to punish sin he has also promised not to punish you again for the sin Jesus has already died for. Hallelujah. You won't be punished for it because Jesus was.

And while other lesser enemies still haunt you today and life is painful and justice seems far off because of it you can be confident your Savior will deliver you from them as well because he's delivered you on the cross from your greatest enemies.

[37 : 03] So it's safe. The first safety we've been able to find it's safe to entrust yourself even as a great sinner.

even as one greatly sinned against to Jesus. It's safe to entrust yourself to him.

The warning of this chapter is clear. God takes sin seriously. You will not find safety in being idolatrous. You will not find safety in being religious.

you will find safety only in your perfectly just and gracious God. Let's pray to him now.

Father, we don't look forward to sermons like these. We like the other stories better. sin. But we believe we need to know the truth about sin because sin is something we know all too well.

[38 : 21] And we need when we face the reality of our sins something to give us hope. And it is only you that gives us hope.

Don't let us look anywhere else but to Jesus. Might we find hope in him for today and enough hope in him to make us confident for eternity.

Do that work in our hearts. We ask it in his name. Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.