

Daniel 5

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[0 : 00] If you've got your Bible handy, please turn with me to Daniel chapter 5. Daniel chapter 5 and we will read most of the chapter, verse 1 to 12 and then we'll drop down to verse 18.

Let's hear God's words. Let's read.

And the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines drank from them. As they drank the wine, they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone.

Suddenly, the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall near the lampstand in the royal palace. The king watched the hand as it wrote.

His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his legs became weak and his knees were knocking. The king summoned the enchanters, astrologers and diviners.

[1 : 34] Then he said to these wise men of Babylon, Whoever reads this writing and tells me what it means will be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed round his neck.

And he will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom. Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or tell the king what it meant. So King Belshazzar became even more terrified and his face grew more pale.

His nobles were baffled. The queen, hearing the voices of the king and his nobles, came into the banquet hall. May the king live forever, she said.

Don't be alarmed. Don't look so pale. There is a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods in him. In the time of your father, he was found to have insight and intelligence and wisdom like that of the gods.

Your father, King Nebuchadnezzar, appointed him chief of the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners. He did this because Daniel, whom the king called Belteshazzar, was found to have a keen mind and knowledge and understanding.

[2 : 39] And also the ability to interpret dreams, riddles and solve difficult problems. Call for Daniel and he will tell you what the writing means.

So Daniel was brought in to the king and then verse 18, Daniel speaks. Your majesty, the most high God, gave your father Nebuchadnezzar sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendor.

Because of the high position he gave him, all the nations and peoples of every language dreaded and feared him. Those the king wanted to put to death, he put to death.

Those he wanted to spare, he spared. Those he wanted to promote, he promoted. And those he wanted to humble, he humbled. But when his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory.

He was driven away from people and given the mind of an animal. He lived with the wild donkeys and ate grass like the ox until his body was drenched with the dew of heaven. Until he acknowledged that the most high God is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and sets over them anyone he wishes.

[3 : 55] But you, Belshazzar, his son, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this. Instead, you have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven.

You had the goblets from his temple brought to you and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines drank from them. You praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or understand.

But you did not honour the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways. Therefore, he sent the hand that wrote the inscription. This is the inscription that was written.

Here is what these words mean. Many, God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end.

Tekel, you have been weighed on the scales and found wanting. Peres, your kingdom is divided and given to the medes and persons. Then at Belshazzar's command, Daniel was clothed in purple and a gold chain was placed round his neck.

[5 : 07] And he was proclaimed the third highest ruler in the kingdom. That very night, Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain. And Darius the Mede took over the kingdom at the age of 62.

This is the word of God. My home church in Greenview in Glasgow, we've been going through the book of Daniel.

And I was very pleased and excited when they asked me to speak on Daniel chapter 5. Hence, picking this passage tonight. Because Daniel chapter 5 is such a standout chapter in the whole Bible, isn't it?

It's a kind of Hollywood movie of a chapter. There is drama and decadence. There is shock and suspense. There's the fall of empires. And all with some special effects thrown in.

It is one of the most iconic chapters, iconic stories in the Bible. And of course, it gives us a phrase which is passed into our everyday language.

[6 : 17] The writings on the wall. It was the title of a recent James Bond film, theme song. It's the shorthand way, of course, of saying, it's all over.

No more chances. The end is nigh. Which, of course, as we read, is the message being brought by Daniel to Belshazzar. Time's up.

You've run out of road. God is calling time on you. Your reign, your kingdom, on your very life. It's the ultimate party stopper, isn't it?

The ultimate reality check. But, of course, if we're honest, and with just a moment's reflection, we realise that it's not just a reality check for Belshazzar, but one that sooner or later is going to be true for every one of us.

In the end, life, achievements, possessions, they're all going to go. And when that moment comes and only you and God are left, what then?

[7 : 23] Well, hold that thought. We'll come back to it. But before we get into the text, just a few clearing up points for the eagle-eyed scholars among you.

Firstly, you'll notice that in the passage, Nebuchadnezzar is referenced as Belshazzar's father. Verses 2 and 18.

Now, Belshazzar was actually his grandson. But that's not an inaccuracy because the title father is often used in the Bible just to mean an ancestor. I mean, we do that today ourselves, don't we?

We talk about the land of our fathers. Secondly, Belshazzar at this time was actually the kind of co-regent of Babylon. His father was actually out and off fighting.

But he was fighting a losing battle to the new rising Medo-Persian empire that was coming up under Cyrus.

[8 : 21] To the extent that we know that the context of Daniel chapter 5 is actually, at this time, Babylon is a city that was under siege.

It was surrounded. And we know from other sources that it fell ultimately without a fight. The Persians dammed up the Euphrates River and entered in silently at night through the water tunnels. And finally, the Darius who takes over in verse 30 might just be another name for Cyrus. If you've got an NIV and you flick over to chapter 6, verse 28, you'll see a little footnote at the bottom which makes that point.

So the setting then is a city and a king under siege. But of course, such sieges of fortified, well-defended cities like Babylon could go on for years and years in the ancient world.

And Babylon was well stopped. So Belshazzar decides, you know what? Let's have a party. We'll worry about the what-ifs and the dangers another time.

[9 : 33] And so this lavish, opulent, decadent feast gets underway, verses 1 to 4. All the nobles, the concubines, the elite of Babylon are brought together, indulging themselves in every pleasure.

The wine flowing, the atmosphere becoming ever more riotous and hedonistic. We can imagine the scene. Reminds me a little bit of those accounts of Berlin in 1945 when the city is surrounded and the Russians are moving in.

And down in the bunkers, the last of the Nazi elite are breaking open the cases of champagne. And just parting into the night in that nihilistic way.

Well, I guess that's an extreme example. But perhaps that underlying tendency isn't that uncommon really? The desire that we all have not to face uncomfortable truths.

The reaction of burying our heads in the sand when faced with grim realities. It's a curious thing, isn't it, about human nature that people are often so concerned and fastidious about preparing for the eventualities of this life.

[10:47] I mean, just think of all the insurance policies you probably have. The pension arrangements that you make. The contracts that you sign. The alarm systems in our houses and our cars.

But when it comes to our souls. To the one inevitability. To the end of this life. To eternity. So many people just brush aside the question, don't they?

Shrug of the shoulders. Who knows? We'll think about it tomorrow. Today we're just going to enjoy ourselves. And that, of course, isn't just a danger for non-Christians.

It can subtly affect Christians. So while we would never deny the importance or the priority of God, we can be tempted to put them on the back burner a bit at times or to push them to the margins. The thought that we'll properly get to grips with our faith and working out what it means to be a devoted Christian, you know, soon.

[11:50] Just need to get the next few weeks out of the way. Get through the next phase of life. The probation year, the house project, the holiday. But the wheel keeps turning, doesn't it?

In this regard, Daniel in this book is such a contrast and such a great example to us. Because actually by this point in the book of Daniel, Daniel is a man in his 80s.

But remember, he was a man who decided to take God seriously. In his teens, if you went back to chapter 1, to the start of the book of Daniel, I'm sure you're very familiar with it.

He had made his stand then about the food at the king's table. He had done it graciously. He had done it winsomely. But nevertheless, he had done it, not compromising his convictions.

He didn't say, well, I'll downplay my faith a little bit because I'm still quite new in Babylon and I'm just a kind of new guy here. I'll go quiet in God while I get on.

[12:58] It's so tempting to do this, isn't it? People sometimes in their careers or in different situations. Because if I can establish myself, if I can make a bit of progress, if I can get on in this situation, then I can get into a position where I can have even more influence and have a bigger impact.

I can really make a difference for God. Now, the reason that Daniel was able to be the witness he was and have the influence he had at 80 was because, of course, at every stage of life, he had put God first.

So whatever stage of life we're at, it's a challenge to us, isn't it? Not to put off getting serious about God. But also note the contrast between the end of chapter 4 and the start of chapter 5.

In chapter 4, Nebuchadnezzar, the greatest king of Babylon, had been brought literally to his knees under the hand of God. An arrogant, proud king, had been humbled by God, reduced to living like an actual animal until he had raised his eyes to heaven and confessed his dependency upon God and confessed God's goodness and sovereignty over him.

End of his testimony there at the end of chapter 4, verse 37. Now, I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the king of heavens because everything he does is right and all his ways are just.

[14:37] And those who walk in pride, he's able to humble. And then chapter 5, verse 4, just a few decades later, As they drank the wine, they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron and wood, drinking from the very sacred objects taken from the temple in Jerusalem.

Just a generation, the king of Babylon had been honouring God just a generation before, acknowledging God's goodness and power. And yet here's his grandson desecrating the temples taken from the temple.

And we're supposed to be horrified at Belshazzar's actions, his use of these objects and the toasting of these false gods. It's akin to Belshazzar going into a synagogue and throwing chunks of pork about.

It's a huge statement of disrespect, of desecration, trashing the symbols of God's holiness. And what a turnaround.

Within a lifetime, Babylon had gone from a place where God was honoured by the king to a place where the symbols of Daniel's God were being mocked and trashed by the king.

[16:04] I expect that's a kind of change that perhaps some people here can identify with.

Christians who can remember in their lifetime how 15,000 people queued night after night after night outside the Kelvin Hall in Glasgow to hear an evangelist.

You can remember when ministers were given a nightly slot on STV to speak to the nation. You can remember in their lifetime when Church of Scotland membership accounted for 25% of the Scottish population.

How different things are today. When I became a Christian in my teens back in the 1980s, that was still a fairly kind of respectable choice to make.

I mean, it was a nice choice. Most people would have said, well, not for me. But they would have kind of seen it perhaps as a misguided attempt to better yourself or some kind of self-improvement. But not anymore. Can we are Christian today? Why would anybody want to do that? Even in those years, Christianity has become marginalised, vilified, and may, before we know it, actually become criminalised in some aspects if things like the conversion therapy ban are passed.

[17 : 42] And for Daniel, that decline in such a short space of time in his lifetime in Babylon must have been really discouraging. I mean, that goes without saying, doesn't it? His hopes raised under Nebuchadnezzar.

At one point in his life, things looked really positive. God was being honoured in Babylon. But fast forward just a few decades and how terribly bleak the outlook had become.

But you know what? it wasn't Daniel's fault. It wasn't his responsibility. It wasn't a reflection in his personal faith.

See, the big theme in Daniel that runs from first to last is that God is sovereign over the nations. God is in charge of kingdoms. He raises up kings and gives kingdoms to whoever he will.

the times and the spiritual temperature of those times are ultimately in God's hands. That's not to say we don't have a personal responsibility to pray and to seek God's favour.

[18 : 54] It's not to say it wasn't a disaster when the national churches turned away from the Bible. But for those Christians who tried however imperfectly to keep the faith, these were changes that were out of their hands.

I remember a few years ago at one of our FIC conferences Don Carson spoke and he talked about the post-war missionaries folks from the United States and the UK and Europe who had gone out after the war on mission to various parts of the world.

And some of those folks went to Korea and some of them went to Japan and fast forward 70, 80 years and Korea is one of the most Christianised countries on the planet with huge mega churches bursting at the seams sending out its own missionaries all over the world today.

And you go to Japan and Japan is still such an impenetrable country when it comes to the gospel. Still so closed, so, so difficult for Christian workers to get a foothold there.

The church is still so tiny and marginal. And his point was do you think that the missionaries who went to Korea were more godly and more prayerful and more gifted and more zealous than the ones that went to Japan?

[20 : 23] God help us if we think that. Daniel can't change the king's heart. All he can do is be faithful in the things that he's responsible for.

Being faithful in prayer. Praying, of course, that God might turn the tide. Being a good citizen. Being a good worker. Showing integrity.

Honouring his God and his life. Trusting Monday to Friday year after year. Often unnoticed, undramatically. Must have felt a very long time for Daniel since the heady turbulent days of interpreting Nebuchadnezzar's dreams and the miracle of the fiery furnace.

You see, we often imagine, I think, and this is true of a lot of Bible characters, that Daniel's life must have been just a constant wall-to-wall succession of amazing exploits for God.

In reality, of course, the book of Daniel records, what, five dramatic incidents over the course of 80 years. So maybe something to write a chapter about every 15 years or so.

[21 : 42] So Daniel, what were you doing in the 10 years between the fiery furnace and Nebuchadnezzar being humbled? Just working away.

Going to the shops. Doing the admin. attending meetings. Keeping the faith in his everyday decisions and situations. But here's the thing.

When the crisis came and Belshazzar is on his knees, freaked out and desperate for answers, guess who's still there? Guess who's still at his desk? Old, faithful, trustworthy, God-honoring Daniel.

It's brilliant, isn't it, at the end of chapter 12. Call for Daniel. He knows about these things. Maybe he can help us.

Can I suggest that that's likely to be life for most of us most of the time? Maybe a few dramatic stories to tell, but most of the time a pretty ordinary life.

[22 : 52] being a good neighbor, being reliable, being kind, being helpful, being known as a Christian. Maybe if you have lots of non-Christian family, just being the religious one.

But then, in God's mercy, should he start to move and to push into somebody's life, we're there. because God is speaking to Belshazzar and Belshazzar doesn't understand.

He needs an interpreter. He needs somebody to make sense of what's going on in his life. That's true throughout the book of Daniel. The dreams, the furnace, what does it mean?

Remains true for every non-Christian today. They need an interpreter. somebody who can be there to explain what is going on.

Why is the world so messed up? Why do we have so much and yet remain so restless? Why is all our untrammled freedom, our individuality, our liberty to decide who and what we want to be not making us any happier?

[24 : 06] Why do we seem to be increasingly fearful and angry and burnt out and medicated? Why do we even exist? So many people are asking what is the point of me?

Is there any point? Is there any help? Does anyone even care? And when like Daniel that door starts to creak open or perhaps we need to give it a little push because we can start to see it opening, then we'll likely need a bit of courage, won't we?

Because the message of hope contains some uncomfortable truths. And Daniel's message to the king, verses 18 to 24, begins by putting the writing on the wall in its context.

He reminds Belshazzar of his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar's testimony. verse 18, of how God had humbled his grandfather and that astonishing turnaround in Nebuchadnezzar's life and how at the end of it all as we read, Nebuchadnezzar testified about his utter dependency upon God, verse 21. But verse 22, but you, Belshazzar, his son, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this.

[25 : 43] You did not honour the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways, verse 23. You took all the gifts, gifts, but with no regard, no thankfulness, no fear.

It's a very vivid illustration, isn't it, of that old saying, God has children, but he doesn't have grandchildren, literally, in this case.

That is, every person, every generation needs to know God for themselves, needs to engage God personally. Nobody inherits God from their parents.

Faith and salvation isn't genetically passed on, and that's also true in society at large, isn't it? Our own society is testimony to it. How quickly Christian blessings evaporate if they are not renewed. And how quickly Belshazzar has forgotten that, taken all the fruit while throwing away the root. And so, to the writing on the wall, verses 25 to 28, Daniel translates four words, numbered, numbered, weighed, divided.

[27 : 11] But what do they mean? Are they about Belshazzar? Maybe they're about his enemies. Is it a message about money, food, family, power? Well, of course, they're going to have implications for all those things, but they are primarily a spiritual assessment.

Verse 27, Belshazzar, you've been found wanting. The image of those scales of justice, the scales that are held in the hands of the statue on top of the old bailey in London, the courthouse, the scales in one hand and the sword in the other.

It's the weighing up of the evidence, it's the case for, the case against, will it be innocence and acquittal or will it be the sword and condemnation? Well, Belshazzar, your life has been weighed and the scales are against you.

You thought you had it all, Belshazzar. Indeed, you had everything that this world could offer you, but you lack the one thing upon which everything else depends, because you've rejected the one thing that transcends everything else, God himself.

It's the words of Jesus. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?

[28 : 49] I hope that every one of us here will have a long and healthy life, but of course the reality is that even if we were to live to 120, the moment's going to come when it will be all over, when as one writer puts it, the toys all go back in the box.

Unlike Belshazzar, what then? what about those scales? Because our world would have loved Belshazzar. Our society would love him, wouldn't they?

Rich, powerful, stylish, edgy, fun. It would roll its eyes at Daniel with his odd beliefs and his quaint habits and his outdated views.

But at the end, when the crunch comes, Belshazzar's got nothing. He's got no answers. The wise men of Babylon, the cultural hipsters and the social gurus of the day, they're no help either when they actually want help.

But Daniel's got something because he has hope and security, say, whatever the times. Whether things were up with Nebuchadnezzar or falling apart with Belshazzar.

[30 : 16] The kingdom of the Babylonians was about to be overtaken by the kingdom of the Persians. Just as surely as today's trendsetters will become tomorrow's has-beens.

But Daniel was unfazed because neither of those kingdoms was his kingdom. He knew that running through them all, sometimes hailed, sometimes hated, runs a kingdom that stands the test of time. A kingdom that Nebuchadnezzar saw in that great dream in chapter 2 that would one day fill the earth and will outlast the years. The kingdom of God.

God. And I guess the big question for every single person, for every one of us, is will I be part of that eternal kingdom?

Or might I be part of the opposition that needs to be purged in order for that kingdom and all its peace and justness and truth and light to be established?

[31 : 20] Well, the Bible is clear, isn't it? There is only one way to enter God's kingdom and that is by making peace with its king. A king who was weighed and was found worthy and whom was no want.

The only one in whom no sin was found so that heaven could pronounce not with a hand but with a very voice from heaven, this is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased.

And yet the king who at the cross was to have the sword of justice fall on him. The love of God for God forgetters, God deniers for the worshippers of gold, silver, pleasure and self.

Quite a question, isn't it? God's hand hovering over our lives waiting to write the verdict. But of course if we humble ourselves before the eternal king of kings, we ask for his forgiveness, we place ourselves under his good rule and the promise of God is that he will wrap us into himself.

So when the day comes, when the road finally runs out and our lives are finally weighed before God, we won't be found wanting, but found in Christ.

[32 : 54] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for the Lord Jesus Christ. We thank you that he is the king in whom there is no deficiency, the king whose righteousness outweighs all sin, the one who although he was found worthy, stood in the place of those who are unworthy that we might go free.

Father, we thank you for these ancient stories. We thank you for Daniel and for his example. We thank you for this book which speaks to us so powerfully as today we feel so much what it is like to be exiles in a pagan land and yet which gives us such great hope that though empires rise and fall, though our beliefs might sometimes be honoured and sometimes despised, that you are never not on the throne, that Jesus is never not in charge, that he is working out his will and that one day we will stand in his kingdom by faith and by grace, peace and truth, the kingdom that will endure, the kingdom that will outlast the years.

Bless your word to us we pray as we give you our thanks in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Thank you, Andy.