

## **DANIEL: PROFILES IN COURAGE**

### **V. “The Handwriting on the Wall”**

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Daniel 5

#### **INTRODUCTION**

When Mt. St. Helens blew its top in 1980, there were ample warnings that some failed to heed. Almost two months earlier the awakening began with a sharp earthquake after 123 years of slumber. Earthquakes and daily small eruptions followed in successive weeks. Scientists warned people in the area of the impending disaster. Most left. But not old curmudgeon, Harry R. Truman, living on the edge of Spirit Lake. He refused to leave, saying, “I’ve lived here nearly 60 years and it ain’t blown yet.” Things quieted down for a few weeks, seeming to justify his stubbornness. Then suddenly on May 18, just when many thought the danger was past, Mt. St. Helens did finally blow, ripping off 1300 ft. of mountain— 6.6 billion tons of mountain, more than a ton of Mt. St. Helens for every man, woman, and child on the face of the earth. The force was that of 20,000 Hiroshima-class atom bombs. It sent a blast of 300-degree heat outward at 200 mph, killing 60 people, up to 16 miles away, including Harry R. Truman who now lies buried under 40 feet of volcanic ash.

Most of you can probably remember quantities of ash descending from the skies. We were in Whitefish, Montana at the time and had it accumulate like snow. We were told to stay in our homes with the windows closed for days, or wear a mask if venturing outside. It was an eerie time. We began to feel claustrophobic with everything closed up and just recirculating stale air. We longed for a breath of fresh air.

In spite of warnings, when something unprecedented, beyond our experience is predicted, it is hard to relate to and change the way we’ve been doing things in light of the predictions. When we are told there will be a day of reckoning, a judgment for our deeds, it isn’t easy to take it seriously on a sunny day when life is good and all is well. Fortunately, most seem to have gotten the message about smoking and quit because of probable consequences. Yet, many of us continue to enjoy “supersized” meals laden with artery-clogging fats. And a good suntan looks so healthy and it feels so good to lay on the beach and work on it that warnings of skin cancer later on often fall on deaf ears.

Our story from Daniel this morning is one that is a startling reminder that God knows what is going on in our world and there will indeed be a day of reckoning. Seldom do we see the judgment follow the deed as closely as here. But, all of Scripture points to a day when indeed we will all have to give an account for our lives. Last week, we saw the judgment of King Nebuchadnezzar for his arrogant pride. Today, another judgment, about 23 years later on his successor, Nebuchadnezzar’s son, Belshazzar.

READING of Daniel 5

## THE STORY

You might be interested to know that my wife, Polly, when she read this chapter heard a clear teaching that husbands should listen to the wisdom of their wives.

King Belshazzar makes himself pretty despicable here. He throws a banquet for 1,000 of his nobles, the most important people in Babylon. Under the influence of the wine, feeling reckless, powerful, and invincible, he orders the sacred vessels stolen from the Jewish temple in Jerusalem brought in so they could desecrate them. They drink from them in a mocking ceremony, ridiculing the God of the Jews and instead praising the gods of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood and stone. In this way, the king is showing how great he is and that he is afraid of no one and certainly not the God of Israel who was impotent in the plundering of the temple in Jerusalem. Probably what's going on here is something akin to a toast to these various gods along with bloated, drunken rhetoric. You can imagine them beginning with the golden temple vessels, toasting the god of gold. Then, someone proposes a toast to the god of silver, and then on and on until even gods of wood and stone are thrown into their raucous revelry.

Suddenly, a great detached hand appears and silently writes four strange words on the wall of the great banquet hall: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN. The king turns pale, his knees knock together and his legs can't support him. He calls for the enchanters, astrologers, and diviners to interpret it. If you've been here in previous weeks, you know these men aren't worth the money the king is paying them. They are clueless. They can't figure out anything. But the queen, hearing all the commotion, comes into the hall and recommends Daniel, the Jewish exile, be called. She'd at least paid attention to the history and the stories. She knew Daniel's previous invaluable service to King Nebuchadnezzar. After Nebuchadnezzar died, there had been a quick succession of three kings. This scene takes place about 23 years after Nebuchadnezzar's death.

Daniel stands before the king and all the 1,000 plus people in the banquet hall and confronts the sins of Belshazzar. Rarely is anyone (even in the Bible) given a chance to proclaim judgment and see it immediately carried out. Of course as Daniel preaches, he doesn't know the immediacy of the judgment. But to be given a divine mandate to call-down this arrogant, irreverent king must have had an element of satisfaction in it. Daniel boldly reminds Belshazzar of God's dealings with his father, Nebuchadnezzar, and how patient God had been with him, giving him a long leash. But, when he got too big for his royal britches, God brought him low through insanity, given the mind of an animal so that he ended up eating grass like cattle until he humbled himself before God. Then, this stinging indictment:

*"But you his son, O Belshazzar, **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 wine 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 honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your***

**ways** (Dan 5:22-23).

Here is the divine announcement that the king has stepped over the line and judgment has arrived!

Then Daniel reads off the words of the indictment. Four Aramaic words to which he provides the interpretation— God’s message to Belshazzar.

*Mene* means “numbered.” It is repeated twice to emphasize the certainty. “God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end.”

*Tekel* means “weighed.” “You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting.”

*Peres* means “divided.” “Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.”

In summary, God says the time is up for you and your kingdom and all the arrogant boasting. God has weighed you in the scales of His justice and found you wanting. Now your kingdom is taken from you and given to the Medes and Persians.

The secular history of that night is rather exciting and adds color and details to the succinct Scriptural account,

*That very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain, and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom, at the age of sixty-two.* (Dan 5:30-31).

The ancient Greek historian, Herodotus, is helpful to us here. The armies of King Cyrus of the Medes and Persians had moved to the edge of the City of Babylon to conquer it. But this caused little concern in Babylon because they felt their defenses were impregnable. Remember from last week, the two huge walls, wide enough for a four-horse chariot to turn around on, and the moat outside the outer wall? The water supply was unlimited since the Euphrates flowed through the middle of the city. The walls were built over the river with vertical sides down into the deep water, so there was no way to come in along the riverbank. They had huge stores of food, enough for a blockade to last 20 years. The armies of the Medes and Persians were completely baffled. Then, King Cyrus came up with a bold plan. He figured out a way to, way up river, divert enough of the flow of the Euphrates for a brief time to reduce the depth enough for some soldiers to be able to wade in under the walls of the city. It was this night Cyrus put his plan into effect. Under the cover of darkness, he diverted the river, slipped enough soldiers in to take the guards at the gates totally by surprise from behind, open the gates and enter the city. Some of the soldiers were immediately sent to the palace where the scene of our Scripture was taking place. As the battle began outside with the palace guards, there was quite a ruckus. King Belshazzar, hearing it and never expecting anything like an invasion, ordered the guards inside to go out and check on what was happening. When the palace gate opened, the Medes and Persians rushed in the gate and killed the king.

While history tells us this was King Cyrus, Daniel refers to him as Darius the Mede. While there are a couple of possible explanations, Herodotus claims that “Darius” was a Persian title rather than a proper name. “Darius” means, “holder of the scepter.” Remember this is the first fulfillment of the prophecy contained in Nebuchadnezzar’s

dream in chapter two where the gold head of Babylon is replaced by the silver chest and arms of the Medes and Persians. The two arms joined in the chest indicate the two kingdoms coming together in Medo-Persia. This is a neat, satisfying fulfillment of prophecy and justice letting us know God is aware of evil, will punish it, and is ultimately directing the course of history.

### **OUR HUNGER FOR JUSTICE**

There is something satisfying in a story like this, where the bad people get what they deserve. One of our problems we have with this world is that we don't very often see this kind of quick, satisfying justice. If every sin and blasphemy against God met immediate divine retribution, people would certainly live differently. Justice executed by God absolutely and immediately would be satisfying to our inner longing for justice. Of course, we only want this for other people's transgressions. For our own transgressions, we want delay and mercy.

I remember several years ago visiting the largest gothic cathedral in Northern Europe in York, England while we were doing a vacation exchange with a pastor in England. They were still rebuilding the 13<sup>th</sup> century south transept that had been damaged by a lightning-caused fire 15 years earlier. But, in the timing of that lightning bolt in 1984, some speculated divine retribution. Canon David Jenkins, who had publicly asserted that neither the Virgin birth nor the Resurrection need be taken too literally, was consecrated as Bishop of Durham in York Minster. Then just three days later, at 2:30 a.m., lightning struck, igniting the south transept. Conservatives were quick to suggest that perhaps this was divine intervention against such heresy.

But, of course, we have to realize if all heresy were met with lightning bolts from heaven, our world would be lit up like a Christmas tree. There seems to be a kind of randomness to life. Think about the law of sowing and reaping. Sometimes there is a reaping of what we sow. Hard work and careful, thoughtful choices lead to prosperity. But also, we all know of some who work very hard and seem to have things go continually wrong and never get ahead. Cars break down, accidents, medical bills, or unscrupulous people taking advantage of their good hearts seem to unfairly sabotage their best efforts. And mercifully, at least if it is us or our loved ones, we don't seem to reap the bad things we sow. We make serious mistakes and don't suffer any consequences. Driving, we are distracted and drift left of center, but no one is coming so we have no accident. We make bad health choices, but seem to get away with it. We mess-up in our parenting or marriage and yet things end up all right.

Yet, even in this world, given enough time, we sometimes see some measure of justice. The self-centered person who's swindled others at the end of life is alone, without friends, paranoid, thinking everyone's out to get his money. Or the person who has had huge troubles and adversity in her life, you begin to see incredible beauty of character being formed, a deep, interior richness woven into her life.

But mostly, we don't often see the evil, God-defying king being slain and the Godly

Daniel rewarded in our world. It seems that far too often, the righteous get shafted and bad, undeserving people get away with terrible things and even prosper. Yet, within each of us, there is a deep hunger for justice— for all good to be rewarded and all bad to be punished. Where does that longing come from? It rarely happens in this world, so why would we have this deep, inner need for justice? Think of your whining four-year-old complaining, “But it’s not fair!”

There is indeed a sense and longing for justice rooted deep in the human heart from birth. The Bible makes it clear this longing is part of the divine nature implanted within us— part of our being created in the image of God. Do animals worry about injustice and fairness? I doubt if our dog loses any sleep over a sense that something is unfair.

This story from Daniel, and others in Scripture are helpful in reminding us that God too is concerned about justice and will, in the end, be sure all is fair and square. The law of sowing and reaping **is** woven into the universe. The reason we don’t often see it now is because our time frame is too short. We need to let the story finish. Only from heaven’s perspective will we be able to see how it all works out. Jesus gave frequent reminders of this.

- *Matt 10:26– There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known.*
- *Matt 10:42– And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little one because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward.*
- *Matt 12:36-37– But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned."*

And in 2 Cor. 4:17, God reminds us that even the troubles we’ve had and suffering we’ve endured will be more than amply rewarded.

*For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.*

## **OUR JUDGMENT**

We too will be weighed in the scales of God’s justice like King Belshazzar. What would the finger writing on the wall say about you? 2 Cor 5:10 tells us,

*For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.*

That prospect is enough to make our knees tremble. All of us have rebelled against our Creator and broken most of the commandments at some time or other. How will it feel to have everything laid bare before a holy God? No excuses. Every single short-coming will be examined, every sin revealed, and every secret motivation laid wide-open.

The truth is, as revealed in Jesus Christ, none of us stands a chance before a holy

God. That's why Jesus came to save us. We can never, ever save ourselves or makeup for our sins. Jesus came to take our punishment upon himself and die in our place. When we invite Him into our lives as our Savior and Lord, whatever sin we have is washed away, completely forgiven. Our eternal salvation is guaranteed by Him.

Steve Winger, from Lubbock, Texas, tells about his final exam in a logic class in college. This class was known for its difficult exams. The professor told them each one could bring a "cheat sheet"— a single sheet of paper with as much information as they could fit on an 8 ½ x 11 sheet. He said most students had sheets crammed with tiny writing covering front and back, squeezing on as many facts and principles as they could. One student walked in with a blank sheet of paper and placed it on the floor and had an advanced logic student stand on it. This advanced student supplied all the information needed, and this creative test-taker was the only "A" in the class.

When we stand before God in our final exam, only one thing will matter as far as our salvation is concerned. Is Jesus there covering for you? It matters not how much you've done or how well you've done. Salvation is through Christ alone. He's promised to stand in for you IF you've asked Him into your life as your Lord and Savior. We can be saved only through His grace and mercy.

While that has to do with our eternal salvation, it is also true that there will be rewards in heaven. Our entrance into heaven is assured through Jesus. But also, all we've done in His name on earth, the character we've developed, the people we've won to Christ, our faithfulness to His call, will receive rewards. For that reason, Paul concludes that great chapter on the resurrection and eternal life with,

*Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. (1 Cor 15:58)*

I want to end with a prayer from the older Book of Common Prayer— a prayer that was for daily use in families as a morning prayer, called a "Prayer for Grace." To begin each day with a lively sense of God's judgment as well as His grace in Christ Jesus is something we could learn from.

*Imprint upon our hearts such a dread of thy judgements,  
and such a grateful sense of thy goodness to us,  
as may make us both afraid and ashamed to offend thee.  
And, above all, keep in our minds a lively remembrance of that great day,  
in which we must give a strict account of our thoughts, words and actions  
to Him thou hast appointed the Judge of the quick and dead,  
thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*