The Writing on the Wall
Daniel 5
November 15th, 2026

1. A surprising _____ to a blasphemous feast (5:1-6)

2. A forgotten _____ to a recurring problem (5:7-28)

3. A sudden _____ of a repeated prediction (5:29-31)

4. Applying the Word
    a. Pride may lead to _____ catastrophe.

    b. We may also face sudden _____.

Questions for Discussion/Reflection on Daniel 5

1. Why do you think Belshazzar brought out the gold vessels from the Jewish temple to drink from? What message was he communicating?
2. If Belshazzar doesn't understand the writing, why does he respond the way he does in v. 6?
3. Before Daniel gives Belshazzar the message, he first compares him to King Nebuchadnezzar (vv. 18–23). What are the points of similarity and the points of difference between Belshazzar and Nebuchadnezzar?
4. How does 5:21 connect the events of this chapter with the previous chapter? (see 4:17, 25, 32)
5. Why does scripture warn us so much about pride?
    a. It's in narratives (Daniel 4-5)
    b. It's in wisdom literature (Prov. 10:18)
    c. It's in the teaching of Jesus (Mark 7:21-23)
    d. It's in the epistles (James 4:6)
6. How would the original audience of Daniel (Jewish exiles living in a foreign land) benefit from the lessons of Daniel 1-5? How are we in a similar position today and how can we benefit from the lessons in a similar way?

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Big idea: Once again God demonstrates His power over a Gentile king who refuses to humble himself. It proves the final verse of Daniel 4 – He is able to humble those who walk in pride.

Intro

The Bible has shaped our English language in so many ways, one of which is the introduction of phrases that have their roots in a Biblical story even if people have forgotten the origin.

When the film director, David Lynch, was diagnosed with emphysema and realized he needed to quite smoking, he said, "I saw the writing on the wall. And it said, 'You're going to die in a week if you don't stop.'"

The talk show host, Larry King, discussed the moment he knew he was on the way out the door at CNN because they offered him a very short contract, he said, "And the last time they came to me was a one-year contract. And I saw the writing on the wall."

When Zuma resigned as president of South Africa in 2018, a newspaper writing about his resignation said, "the writing was on the wall for some time."

What do each of those have in common? The recognized a sign that something inevitable (and usually bad) was about to happen or a major change was coming.

That saying comes from this chapter in Daniel when literal writing appeared supernaturally on the wall, but unlike those other examples, the king did not perceive the meaning. Daniel, however, did. And the writing was a sign that a major change was coming for the king and the kingdom of Babylon.

But you could also call this chapter, Another Lesson in Humility. Once again, a powerful king is brought low for failing to humble himself before God. Once again, we are reminded that it is the Lord who is the only sovereign ruler over humanity.

1. A surprising ***conclusion*** to a blasphemous feast (5:1-6)
    a. This chapter takes place in the year 539 BC.
        i. Nebuchadnezzar has been dead for at least 23 years, so there's at least a 23 year gap between the events of chapters 4 and 5.
        ii. Why this large leap in time?
            1. The book of Daniel is not intended to give a history of Babylon. Babylon is simply a world power that God is going to brush aside and replace by other world powers.
            2. Rather, it is designed to bolster the faith of the Israelites at the time of Daniel and in future generations and beyond the Israelites to Christians of our day who go back to this book and find out who is in charge around here and who is not.
    b. There's a new king on the throne, Belshazzar.
        i. Who is this guy?

ii. For 2,300 years we didn't know. There were no records of Belshazzar and, in fact, there were records of another king on the throne of Babylon, a man named Nabonidus.
    1. Skeptics claimed it was evidence that the Bible was unreliable and inaccurate.
iii. That changed in the 1850's when a British archeologist digging in Babylon uncovered four, small, barrel-shaped clay cylinders with cuneiform writing that had been undisturbed for 2,300 years. When the writing was deciphered, we learned that Nabonidus, the king of Babylon placed his son, Belshazzar in charge of Babylon while he was away on distant travels.
iv. After Neb, one son reigned for a year and was assassinated by a man who lasted 4 years and then was succeeded by his son who lasted a month before he was assassinated and replaced by Nabonidus, who was the king when this chapter unfolded.
v. Nabonidus traveled far and effectively settled in modern day Saudi Arabia and left his son in charge exercising kingly authority in Babylon.
vi. That's further confirmed by the repeated promise that someone who explains the writing will have the authority as the third ruler in Babylon (Nabonidus, Belshazzar, and then third)

c. Don't confuse Belshazzar the king with Belteshazzar, the Babylonian name for Daniel.
    i. If that seems strange or confusing to you, ask your friend Kristin, Kristine, Christina, or Kjiersten if they ever have problems with the slight differences in their names

d. Belshazzar was in the middle of a great feast for a thousand of his friends.
    i. We're planning our church Thanksgiving meal for a few hundred people, and that seems daunting enough, but this was a common occurrence by nobles in the ancient world.
    ii. We know that as they dined that night, the Medo-Persians surrounded the city where they had been for four months. In fact, THEY probably knew it also.
    iii. Why could they celebrate so freely? Because they had proud confidence in their great city walls.
    iv. Royals would have fled to the city in confidence that they would be safe behind the massive double walls of Babylon that Neb was so proud of. They gathered for this feast while the enemy was at the gates.
    v. The Euphrates River flowed under the walls to provide fresh water and some ancient estimates tell us they had stockpiled enough food for 20 years.

e. During the celebration he brought out the items taken from the Jewish temple to drink from them.
    i. These were the vessels of pure gold that Solomon had made in 1 Kings 7.
    ii. 2 Kings 24 and Daniel 1 records how they were carried away to Babylon.
    iii. Maybe Belshazzar brought out the Jewish items to drink from in this celebration as if to flaunt the former prophecy (that he would likely have

been aware of) that his kingdom wasn't going to end and be passed over to another great power, even though another great power is surrounding the city as they dine.

iv. Babylon conquering Israel = Babylonian gods conquering the Jewish God … in their worldview. What better way to celebrate this than by drinking Babylonian wine out of a Jewish vessel to celebrate Babylonian gods?

f. As they celebrated toasted to their gods using the vessels from the Jewish temple, the fingers of a man's hand emerged and began writing on the wall.
   i. I love the description of the king's response in v 6
   ii. Rembrandt captured this in a famous painting from the 1600's that hangs in the National Gallery in London.
      1. *See pic*

2. A forgotten ***solution*** to a recurring problem (5:7-28)
   a. The wise men were unable to help (5:7-9)
      i. Are you sensing a pattern in Daniel?
      ii. The wise men can't solve it. The king is powerless.
      iii. The narrative is written to encourage God's people that they don't need to fear the world's wisdom or the world's rulers.
   b. The queen recommends Daniel (5:10-12)
      i. From here to the end of the chapter it's a series of speeches that carries the story.
         1. The queen
         2. Belshazzar
         3. Daniel
      ii. Who is this queen? I thought the royal wives were already present?
      iii. Likely the queen mother, the wife of Nabonidus, the mother of Belshazzar and possibly even the widow of Nebuchadnezzar.
      iv. That would explain the emphasis in v. 11 on King Neb. as his father. Could be literal father or used in the sense of ancestor.
      v. She knew about Daniel and recommended him as one who can interpret dreams and explain enigmas (or ESV explain riddles)
   c. The king talk to Daniel (5:13-16)
      i. Irony that the only one who can help him is a servant of the God he was profaning by eating and drinking out of the vessels taking from the Jewish temple
      ii. Davis – the only help for Belshazzar was a cast-off Jew whose God he despised.
      iii. Walvoord – Too often the world, like Bel., is not willing to seek the wisdom of God until its own bankruptcy becomes evident. Then help is sought too late, as in the case of Bel., and the cumulative sin and unbelief which precipitated the crisis in the first place becomes the occasion of downfall.
   d. Daniel talks to the king (5:17-28)
      i. Daniel speaks as a seasoned older saint now. The events of Daniel chapter 1 are 66 years earlier. It would be similar to someone in their 80's looking back

on the events of the early 1960's. Chapters 3 and 4 were at least 25-40 years earlier.

ii. All the king asked for was an interpretation of the writing. He will get that in vv. 26-28, but first there is a message that the king did not ask for.

iii. He recounts what God had done for Nebuchadnezzar
    1. God GRANTED him sovereignty…
    2. He had power, such that he could kill whomever he wished – which we are very familiar with and saw in chapters 1-3
    3. But his pride led to his fall and his period of madness "until he recognized that the Most High God is ruler over the realm of mankind and that He sets over it whomever He wishes."
        a. Repeated the key quote from chapter 4 (used 3x in that chapter
        b. Shows the connection between this event in chapter 5 and the previous event in chapter 4.
        c. God is still teaching this same point.

iv. Belshazzar knew all about this (v. 22) but he did not humble his heart.
    1. He knew but did nothing about it. His own life and practice were not affected by this knowledge.
    2. Sometimes truth hits people's ear drums but doesn't penetrate their hearts.
    3. The Spirit of God must apply the Word of God to the human heart for it to take root and bear fruit.
    4. Instead, he exalted himself against the Lord
    5. He praised false gods of silver, gold, bronze, iron, wood and stone – that can't actually see, hear, or understand
    6. But did not glorify the God "in whose hand are your life-breath and your ways."
        a. Likewise, your life-breath and your ways are in God's hands.
        b. Do you live with that realization or do you live as if your life is merely your own?

v. Translation
    1. The language was Aramaic – unsure why the wise men couldn't read it.
        a. Aramaic, like Hebrew, was written right to left and without vowels. With only the consonants and without context, it could be difficult to understand the meaning.
    2. Mene means "numbered" – repeated twice for emphasis
    3. Tekel – weighed – put in the balance and found wanting
    4. Peres means divided – Peres is another form of Upharsin in v. 25

vi. His days – the days of his kingdom – are numbered

vii. You have been weighed and found deficient.
    1. We use a figure of a woman holding scales to indicate justice, usually with a blindfold over her eyes. That's an ancient practice.

2. You were weighed in the scales of justice, weighed as a leader, weighed as a king – and you've failed.

viii. So his kingdom will be divided and given to the Medes and Persians.

1. Belshazzar would not say, "who are they?"
2. He knew. He knew they surrounded his city. It was the growing super-power.

3. A sudden ***fulfillment*** of a repeated prediction (5:29-31)

a. As promised, Belshazzar gave Daniel the clothing, jewelry, and title of power.

i. Given the evens that would happen that night, this might be a little like being given a fortune in confederate currency in 1865.

ii. Last official act that was recorded for the Babylonian kingdom and king Belshazzar was honoring Daniel

b. That night Belshazzar was killed, the Babylonian kingdom was over, and the Medo-Persians took over.

i. The book of Daniel has been anticipating this event although it's a shock for it to be so brief and matter of fact at the end of this chapter.

1. 1:21 tells us Daniel served until the first year of Cyrus, who is the Medo-Persian king after Babylon falls
2. The prophecy of chapter 2 tells us of a succession of kingdoms that will come after Babylon.
3. In chapter 3 God upends the Babylonian kings decree by rescuing Shad, etc. from the fire
4. In chapter 4 God humbles the Babylonian king through insanity.

ii. We have detailed historical records of what happened.

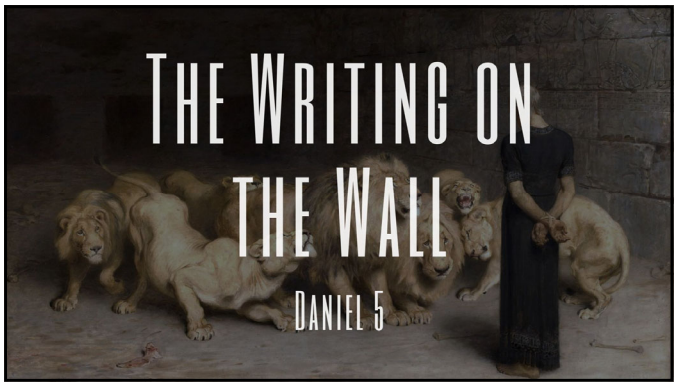
1. (from Showers and others) Cyrus diverted the river and the soldiers walked through the river channel unhindered and took the city with very little conflict.
2. A group of soldiers made their way to the royal palace to get Belshazzar. As they attacked the guards outside the gates, a great deal of noise was caused. Out of curiosity, Bel ordered some men to investigate the noise. As they opened the palace gates to investigate, they discovered the soldiers, who rushed directly to the banquet hall and found Bel standing with his sword drawn. They killed him and many of his official.
3. Herodotus: "The inhabitants of the middle part knew nothing of it; all this time they were dancing and celebrating a holiday which happened to fall then, until they learned the truth only too well."

c. Isaiah predicted this a full century ahead of time.

i. **Isaiah 47:10-11** "You felt secure in your wickedness and said, 'No one sees me,' Your wisdom and your knowledge, they have deluded you; For you have said in your heart, 'I am, and there is no one besides me.' [11] "But evil will come on you Which you will not know how to charm away; And disaster will fall on you For which you cannot atone; And destruction about which you do not know Will come on you suddenly.

ii. Secure – with a double row of city walls
iii. Wickedness – making a mockery of the treasures of the Lord
iv. "I am, and there is no one besides me." – arrogant pride
v. Evil will come on you, disaster, destruction – suddenly – by the end of the chapter, in a single verse, Babylon will fall suddenly to the amassed army of the Medo-Persians.
vi. Bryan Chappell, "There is no human wall so high, no human accomplishment so great, that it is secure against the judgment of God."

4. Applying the Word
    a. Pride may lead to ***sudden*** catastrophe.
        i. What plays out in Daniel 5 in a specific case for Belshazzar is given as an enduring principle in Proverbs
        ii. **Prov. 29:1** A man who hardens his neck after much reproof Will suddenly be broken beyond remedy.
    b. We may also face sudden ***judgment***.
        i. **Hebrews 9:27** And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this *comes* judgment,
        ii. Like Neb. in chapter 4 and Bel. In chapter 5, the solution is to humble ourselves – specifically, humble ourselves before God as we recognize our sin and need for mercy.
        iii. God – man – Christ – response



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