

5. The handwriting on the wall

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“The handwriting on the wall” is a phrase so familiar it has become a modern day cliché. It means that whoever that handwriting is meant is about to face very difficult time or his or her life is about to be over.

A. THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Some twenty years pass between chapters 4 and 5. After Nebuchadnezzar’s death, it didn’t take long for greed and ambition rampage in his royal family. His son, Evil-Merodach, reigned only two years before his power-hungry brother-in-law, General Neriglissar who was a son-in-law of Nebuchadnezzar, assassinated him and became a king. After a six-year reign, Neriglissar died, and his young son, Labashi-Marduk, stepped into power. He only lasted a few months before he got killed by another son-in-law of Nebuchadnezzar, Nabonidus.

Nabonidus, spent most of his reign away from Babylon, securing the borders and strengthening the empire while his son, Belshazzar, as co-ruler was handling day to day operation in Babylon. In the heavily fortified city, Belshazzar thought that his kingdom was safe.

Nebuchadnezzar had built the city to withstand any siege. Its wall was actually fifteen square miles and was constructed of brick. It was three hundred fifty feet high and wide enough for four chariots to travel abreast around the city walls. In other words, they could have put a freeway around the top of the city. There was a canal channeled off the Euphrates River which went right through the city. As if this were not enough, an estimated one hundred towers built along this wall provided the Babylonian military all the advantage it needed to fight off an attack against the city. No invaders had been storm the city for over a thousand years. That was about to be changed.

However, in the distance, the Medo-Persian king Cyrus and his army were coming down to Babylon. Belshazzar’s father Nabonidus and his army met them at Opis on the Tigris River. After a great battle, Nabonidus’ troop retreated and gave free access to Babylon. Safe inside of the city, Belshazzar didn’t concern that the enemy completely surrounded the city, because he knew that he had 20 years of supplies within the city and thought he would outlast his enemy outside. So to show off his foolish arrogance, he threw a party for a thousand guests.

B. THE ROYAL DRUNKEN STUPOR PARTY

Daniel 5:1-4 Belshazzar the king made a great feast for a thousand of his lords, and drank wine in the presence of the thousand. 2 While he tasted the wine, Belshazzar gave the command to bring the gold and silver vessels which his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple which had been in Jerusalem, that the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them. 3 Then they brought the gold vessels that had been taken from the temple of the house of God which had been in Jerusalem; and the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines drank from them. 4 They drank wine, and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze and iron, wood and stone.

This feast was in honor of one of the Babylonian gods, and it took place in the fall of 539 B.C. Archaeologists have discovered palaces at Babylon containing great halls

large enough to entertain a thousand guests. They have also discovered that the walls were covered with a white chalklike substance.

By using these sacred vessels of Israel in this way, Belshazzar was defaming the Lord and exalting himself above the King of kings. He just pushed a wrong button.

Alcohol is still the number one drug problem in the United States. There are far more alcoholics in this country than drug addicts. We should have an alcohol control law instead of a gun control law.

So confident was the king that his fortress city was impenetrable that he laughed at the invading armies which were right outside of the wall. What a picture of our world today: judgment is about to fall, yet people are making merry and worshipping their false gods!

1 Thessalonians 5:3 When they say, 'Peace and safety!' then sudden destruction comes upon them

B. ONE QUICK WAY TO GET SOBERED

Daniel 5:5-9 In the same hour the fingers of a man's hand appeared and wrote opposite the lampstand on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace; and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote. 6 Then the king's countenance changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his hips were loosened and his knees knocked against each other. 7 The king cried aloud to bring in the astrologers, the Chaldeans, and the soothsayers. The king spoke, saying to the wise men of Babylon, "Whoever reads this writing, and tells me its interpretation, shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around his neck; and he shall be the third ruler in the kingdom." 8 Now all the king's wise men came, but they could not read the writing, or make known to the king its interpretation. 9 Then King Belshazzar was greatly troubled, his countenance was changed, and his lords were astonished.

Once Belshazzar saw the hand and its writing on the wall, he got sober in record time. Apparently the guests did not immediately see the mysterious hand appear, but the king looked over their heads and saw it on the opposite wall. Imagine how terrifying this scene must have caused the musicians to lay aside their instruments, the dancers to stand motionless, the waiters to stop in their tracks and the banquet guests to become fearful as they sat still in their seats.

I wouldn't be a bit surprised that the One who wrote this is the very One who wrote in the sand when they brought a sinful woman who got caught in adultery before Him in John 8:1-11.

This is the third time the king's wisemen couldn't answer. The king should have taken them off his payroll. Obviously they are waste of money.

C. BRING IN DANIEL

Daniel 5:10-16 The queen, because of the words of the king and his lords, came to the banquet hall. The queen spoke, saying, "O king, live forever! Do not let your thoughts trouble you, nor let your countenance change. 11 There is a man in your kingdom in whom is the Spirit of the Holy God. And in the days of your father, light and understanding and wisdom, like the wisdom of the gods, were found in him; and King Nebuchadnezzar your father--your father the king--made him chief of the magicians, astrologers, Chaldeans, and

soothsayers. 12 Inasmuch as an excellent spirit, knowledge, understanding, interpreting dreams, solving riddles, and explaining enigmas were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Belteshazzar, now let Daniel be called, and he will give the interpretation." 13 Then Daniel was brought in before the king. The king spoke, and said to Daniel, "Are you that Daniel who is one of the captives from Judah, whom my father the king brought from Judah? 14 I have heard of you, that the Spirit of God is in you, and that light and understanding and excellent wisdom are found in you. 15 Now the wise men, the astrologers, have been brought in before me, that they should read this writing and make known to me its interpretation, but they could not give the interpretation of the thing. 16 And I have heard of you, that you can give interpretations and explain enigmas. Now if you can read the writing and make known to me its interpretation, you shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around your neck, and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom." After learning of this incident, the queen who was probably Belshazzar's mother and a daughter of Nebuchadnezzar gave an advice to this soon-to-be-killed king.

Now in his eighties, Daniel still carries himself with a steadiness born out of a lifetime of faith in God in the enemy's territory without a single piece of the Holy Scripture or a place to gather together to worship his God. Still treating Daniel as nothing more than a Jew from a conquered land, Belshazzar was trying to buy his interpretation.

D. A MAN TO ADMIRE

Daniel 5:17-29 Then Daniel answered, and said before the king, "Let your gifts be for yourself, and give your rewards to another; yet I will read the writing to the king, and make known to him the interpretation. 18 O king, the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father a kingdom and majesty, glory and honor. 19 And because of the majesty that He gave him, all peoples, nations, and languages trembled and feared before him. Whomever he wished, he executed; whomever he wished, he kept alive; whomever he wished, he set up; and whomever he wished, he put down. 20 But when his heart was lifted up, and his spirit was hardened in pride, he was deposed from his kingly throne, and they took his glory from him. 21 Then he was driven from the sons of men, his heart was made like the beasts, and his dwelling was with the wild donkeys. They fed him with grass like oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till he knew that the Most High God rules in the kingdom of men, and appoints over it whomever He chooses. 22 But you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, although you knew all this. 23 And you have lifted yourself up against the Lord of heaven. They have brought the vessels of His house 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, bronze and iron, wood and stone, which do not see or hear or know; and the God who holds your breath in His hand and owns all your ways, you have not glorified. 24 Then the fingers of the hand were sent from Him, and this writing was written. 25 "And this is the inscription that was written: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN. 26 This is the interpretation of each word. Mene: God has numbered your kingdom, and finished it; 27 Tekel: You have been weighed in the balances, and found wanting; 28 Peres: Your kingdom has been divided, and given to the Medes and Persians." 29 Then Belshazzar gave the command, and they clothed Daniel with purple and put a chain of gold around his neck, and made a proclamation concerning him that he should be the third ruler in the kingdom.

Daniel refused to be a man-pleaser. Instead, he chose to continue being a faithful servant of God.

Galatians 1:10 For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ.

Some of you may have heard a sickening news yesterday:

COLUMBUS, OHIO (6/21/06)-While addressing a morning Eucharist at the 75th General Convention of the Episcopal Church, Presiding Bishop-elect Katherine Jefferts Schori declared, "Our mother Jesus gives birth to a new creation. And you and I are His children."

With Jefferts Schori as the leader-to-be of the Episcopal Church, it seems that the church will move beyond gender-inclusive language to transgender-inclusive language.

Yesterday however, the Episcopal Church's House of Bishops refused to even consider a resolution that would affirm the exclusive Lordship of Jesus Christ as "the only name by which any person may be saved." The Rev. Canon Eugene McDowell of the Diocese of North Carolina explained, "This type of language was used in 1920s and 1930s to alienate the type of people who were executed. It was called the Holocaust."

Perhaps Episcopalians would be more receptive of a resolution affirming the supreme trans-sexuality of Jesus.

Not in this church, over my dead body.

Daniel received gifts and promotion from Nebuchadnezzar without any fuss, because the king praised God of Daniel. But Belshazzar was not seeking God of Daniel, nor he was willing to take Daniel's advice, so Daniel didn't want this arrogant king's gifts.

Literally, the translation of the writing is "a mina, a mina, a shekel and half shekels" in Aramics. To interpret this cryptic message, Daniel digs down to the lexical roots. Mene comes from the verb "to number, to reckon"; tekem, from the verb "to weigh"; and parsin, from the verb "to break in two, to divide."

Belshazzar was done, finished. He is gone. There is not a wall high enough nor thick enough to prevent a nation from falling when God pronounces that nation's doom.

E. MEETING HIS FATE

Daniel 5:30 That very night Belshazzar, king of the Chaldeans, was slain. 31 And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old.

Cyrus conquered the city by diverting the flow of the Euphrates river into a nearby lake. The Babylonians had seen the enemy digging, but they thought they were going to build a mound against the city. Consequently it lowered the level of the river so his troops could march through the water up to their thighs and under the river-gates. But they still would not have been able to enter, if the bronze gates of the inner walls had not been left unlocked.

Why was the city taken unawares? Because most of the people were drunk. It was a great religious feast day, and the people were too involved in pleasure to think about defense. The enemy came right into the banquet hall, and the king was slain. What a warning to any nation! We have such a pleasure-gone-mad world today that it will be easy for some enemy to take us unawares, and history will repeat itself.

F. APPLICATIONS

1) It's easy for us to think that we are too spiritual for us to be conquered or duped by our enemy satan.

Many of the backslidden people thought so, too. We cannot let our guard down for even one moment.

2) We must remember that we are accountable for the truth we learn through the Word of God.

When we choose to ignore God's commandments that we've learned, the consequence for that action is far more severe than if we don't know at all.

3) We should never underestimate the power of one godly life.

God wants to use His people today, but they must be committed to serving Him regardless of the pressures to do otherwise. Are you willing to be His spokesperson with your life, not just talk? Then submit yourself completely to Him and seek to obey Him without reservations.