

Above All Earthly Powers
Daniel 5
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Well, I'm sure you watched, as all of us in Los Angeles did over the last number of months, as we've set before our television screens and seen the troops from our country roll across southern Iraq. I had several thoughts as I watched that unfolding. One was: I don't think there will be any U.S. development companies building subdivisions in southern Iraq. You saw just endless miles of desert and dust and sandstorms. But the other thought I had as I watched that was how strategic that portion of land has been both in human history as well as in biblical history.

About ninety miles south of Baghdad lies the ruins of the ancient city of Babylon. Babylon was originally built by Nimrod, but that great city really reached its zenith, reached its height, during the life and kingdom of a man named Nebuchadnezzar. Now most people don't know this, but Nebuchadnezzar was Babylon's greatest king, and he was Saddam Hussein's greatest hero. In addition, Babylon, the city of Babylon, the ruins of it became a kind of obsession to this man. During the height of the Iran-Iraq War, he set aside sixty million dollars to rebuild a simplified replica of the six hundred room palace that Nebuchadnezzar had built in Babylon. Each year there's an annual festival in Iraq where the people celebrate the ancient civilization and city of Babylon.

But Saddam is not the only one interested in ancient Babylon. The Bible has much to say about this city and empire called Babylon. I want us to turn this morning to the book of Daniel. Daniel records several important events that occurred in Babylon, in the land that we call Iraq, and I want us to examine one of those events together this morning.

But before we can understand the message of Daniel 5 where I'd like us to look this morning, you have to step back and understand the circumstances in which Daniel wrote this wonderful book. You may remember that in the year 605, Nebuchadnezzar came to the land of Israel, and he took away the best and the brightest from Israel and took them back to the city of Babylon. Among them were Daniel and Daniel's three friends Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, also known as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

A few years later in 597, Nebuchadnezzar returned again and took additional captives. But it was in the year 586 B.C. that Nebuchadnezzar descended on the city of Jerusalem and took captive all but the poorest and all but the most feeble from the land of Israel and

took them to the empire of Babylon and specifically to the region around the city of Babylon.

For almost seventy years, God's people lived captive in this city. They lived in a situation where they were under the authority of a succession of brutal pagan kings, each with seemingly limitless power. It was in that darkest of times, as the people of God lived in a strange land under the dominion of a ruthless regime, that God revealed through His prophet Daniel what we could call a divine philosophy of history. In this amazing book of Daniel, God maps out the history of the world – a succession of increasingly powerful and increasingly profane kingdoms, empires that would dominate world politics. Regardless of how the world looks to us, God has a plan, and He's still in absolute control. Daniel reminds us, as we see politics unfolding before our eyes that there is a power behind the politics, that our God sovereignly reigns in human histories, that while earthly kingdoms rise and perish, our God endures unchanging on. Or in the words of Martin Luther, as he mentioned about our Lord, he said, "That word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them, abideth." That's the message of Daniel. And nowhere does Daniel make that point more powerfully than in Daniel 5.

The six historical narratives that are recorded in Daniel 1 to 6 are not a history of Israel. In fact, they're not even a biography of Daniel and his friends. The book of Daniel spans a time and events of seventy years, really a lifetime of events. And yet, Daniel chooses these six incidents from that seventy year period to drive home his primary theme: that God is absolutely sovereign in the affairs of all nations. In the words of one writer,

Jerusalem may be destroyed with its temple in ruins. God's people may be in exile, and wicked rulers may seem triumphant, but God remains supreme. God is greater than all circumstances and His people should be true to Him in whatever situation they find themselves. This is the controlling principle of Daniel 1 - 6.

So, the theme of Daniel provides us with a divine philosophy of history. God is absolutely sovereign in the affairs of all nations and their leaders. He is, in fact, the power behind the politics. In chapter 5 through Daniel's own experience, we see that principle sort of fleshed out. We see this principle in the life of a powerful king and one of the world's greatest kingdoms. And in the process, as Daniel takes us through the events of chapter 5, he teaches us four crucial lessons about God's sovereign control of political

leaders and their kingdoms. I'd like for us to look briefly this morning at those four crucial lessons about God's sovereign control in human history.

Lesson number one is: regardless how wicked the regime, God is in control. Regardless how wicked the regime, God is in control. Notice verse 1 of Daniel 5: "Belshazzar the king." The name Belshazzar means Bel, which is one of Babylon's gods, "Bel protects the king". There was no mention of this man in secular history until about a 125 years ago, and the liberals love to seize on this as an example of the inaccuracy of the Scripture when it comes to historical events. But about 125 years ago all of them were silenced because archaeologists uncovered in the ancient land of Babylon in what we call Iraq, they uncovered a number of records that tell us about this man Belshazzar. After Nebuchadnezzar's death, the events, or I should say which occurred about twenty years before the events recorded in Daniel 5.

Shortly after Nebuchadnezzar's death, there was this struggle for the throne, a scramble for who would lead Babylon. There were several rulers in quick succession, but then a man by the name of Nabonidus came along. Nabonidus came to power through a bloody coup. This man would be the last king of Babylon. Babylonian sources now tell us though that this man Nabonidus, for a number of reasons, decided to spend ten of the seventeen years of his rule five hundred miles south of Babylon in Arabia. He had, archaeology as a kind of a hobby, and he longed to be in a place where he could exercise that avocation. And as a result, since he was gone for ten of the seventeen years of his reign, he placed as coregent, his son, a man by the name of Belshazzar.

Belshazzar's evil character, as the archaeologists have uncovered records of this man, his evil character is legendary. He was probably the one who led the coup that placed his father in power. We also read of an account of his murdering one of the sons of his father's governors at a royal hunt simply because of a fit of rage and jealousy because he had been more successful in the hunt than Belshazzar had. He was grossly immoral, and as we shall see in this chapter, he added blasphemy to his crimes as well.

Notice verse 1 says, "Belshazzar the king held a great feast for a thousand of his nobles." Now this was not uncommon in the ancient world. We know that there was one Persian king that fed fifteen thousand people every day. Alexander the Great once hosted a wedding for ten thousand guests. Imagine how many toasters and towels that couple received. The fourth and fifth century B.C. historians, Xenophon and Herodotus, tell us

that this feast mentioned here in verse 1 was an annual festival that simply happened to occur at this time.

But this was no ordinary celebration of this annual feast. This was October 12th, 539 B.C. A few days before the Persian ruler, Cyrus the Great, had entered Babylon. Cyrus the Great's empire stretched, his Medo-Persian Empire stretched, from the Aegean Sea all the way to India. And he came into Babylon, approached the city of Babylon, and he had defeated Babylon's army under the leadership of the now present Nabonidus at a city called Opis on the Tigris River. The night of this feast Nabonidus has fled the country in defeat. The rest of the army along with Belshazzar had retreated into the great city of Babylon and now the great city is under siege. That's the context of this feast.

Why would he do that? Why would he hold a feast in those circumstances? Why would he allow the annual celebration of this feast to go on? Well, there are a couple of reasons. The first was to show contempt for the armies outside the wall. Babylon was a truly amazing city. It was the home of one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

But really the most impressive thing about Babylon was its defenses. The city was protected by a massive double-wall system. The outer wall was at least twelve to fourteen miles in circumference around the city. Some credible estimates have it as high as forty-two miles. We're not sure exactly the size, but at least twelve to fourteen miles this outer wall encompassed the city. It was eighty-four feet thick, a huge wall with the equivalent of a two-lane road on top of it. In fact, historians tell us that a four-horse chariot could make a, a complete 360-degree turn on top of this wall or two four-horse chariots could ride together along the top of this massive wall. Herodotus, who visited the city in the time of its splendor, records that the walls, that outer wall was three hundred and thirty feet high. That's over a hundred yards.

Now most archaeologists believe that Herodotus got a little carried away with his estimates, but it was at least seventy-five feet high. I would assume that this worship center, this sanctuary, is about twenty-five feet at its height. That means the wall of Babylon was three times the height of the distance that you see before you – a massive protective wall. And every one hundred and twenty-five feet along that wall, there were guard towers that rose an additional twenty-five feet. The inner wall was equally impressive. It was fifty-five feet thick and probably higher than the outer wall so that if

that outer wall were breached, the armies of Babylon would be in a position to rain down arrows and other torments on those trying to take the city.

The Euphrates River ran under the walls providing a constant source of water. Part of the Euphrates was diverted around the city to make a small moat. The palace was protected, the palace within the city was protected by a system of six walls, none of them shorter than twenty feet high. The city of Babylon boasted that it had twenty years of supplies within the walls – plenty of time to outlast any invading army. By holding this feast, Belshazzar was showing utter contempt for the Persians outside the walls and trying to convey to his people a sense of calm and normalcy. “We can survive this situation. No one can take the great city Babylon.”

There’s a second purpose behind this feast though - not only to communicate that sort of sense of normalcy and to show his ridicule for the Persian armies outside the wall, but also to honor the gods of Babylon as we will see in the next three verses. Verse 2: “When Belshazzar tasted the wine [literally, when the wine began to taste good. At this point, he’s becoming inebriated, beginning to be under its influence. He says when the wine began to taste good], he gave orders to bring the gold and silver vessels which Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken out of the temple which *was* in Jerusalem...”

Now the reference here to Nebuchadnezzar as his father is an interesting one. The Aramaic word, and, by the way, this section of Daniel is written in Aramaic. The Aramaic word for “father” is a generic word. It can mean father, it can mean grandfather, or it can mean ancestor. Here it’s probably best to take it as grandfather. Nabonidus, Belshazzar’s father, after the coup in which he took power, married one of Nebuchadnezzar’s daughters to legitimize his rule and to strengthen his credibility among the leaders. And so Nabonidus married Nebuchadnezzar’s daughter so that makes Belshazzar Nebuchadnezzar’s grandson. So, best to translate it here, “Nebuchadnezzar his grandfather”.

The gold and silver vessels described here in verse 2 are those vessels that the priests used in the temple service. Nebuchadnezzar had taken them some fifty years before and brought them to what amounted to the national museum of Babylon. Now why was it important for the Babylonians to gather the temple articles and keep them in a museum? In the ancient world, the defeat of one nation by another heightened the strength of that nation’s gods. If one country defeated another, it was an indication in the ancient world that that nation’s gods were greater than the nations it had conquered. And so, collecting

these articles from the temple demonstrated that, in fact, the gods of Babylon were stronger than the gods of these captured nations. Belshazzar created a bit of propaganda by drinking from these. He was saying to his nobles that were gathered, “The gods of Babylon who have enabled us to conquer all of these peoples will enable us to conquer and survive the Persians as well.”

But I think there’s a more sinister purpose that Belshazzar has in mind than just propaganda. Why, out of all the nations that Babylon had conquered, why did he choose the articles from the house of God, the house of Yahweh, in Israel? Well, if you were to look at chapter 8:1 (and we won’t take time to do that this morning), you would see that in the third year of Belshazzar’s reign, some years before this account, Daniel prophesies that the Persians will take Babylon. No doubt with the Persians surrounding the wall, word about that prophecy had spread throughout the city. And I have no doubt that what Belshazzar had heard of this prophecy, this Jewish prophecy, that the Persians would conquer Babylon. And by choosing to bring the vessels from the house of God, he is in a sense defying both the prophecy and the God who made this prophecy through His prophet.

Verse 4 says as they drank from the temple vessels, “... they praised the gods of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood and stone.” That further makes the point that he was taunting Yahweh. Today he’d be wearing a t-shirt that says, “No Fear”. Daniel’s point is that even in the case of a profane ruler like this man who defies God, even in a case like that, the God of heaven still has a plan, and He’s working out that plan in human history. So, God is in control regardless how wicked the regime.

That brings us to the second part of the story and lesson number two: no matter how powerful or protected, no earthly ruler is beyond God’s reach. No matter how powerful or protected, no earthly ruler is beyond God’s reach. At the height of Belshazzar’s blasphemy, drunkenness and immorality, the band stops playing and a sort of deathly silence comes over the room. Verse 5 records the reason: “Suddenly the fingers of a man’s hand emerged and began writing...” The hand apparently appeared from within the wall and Belshazzar watches it as it begins to write on the plaster of the wall of the king’s palace. It’s interesting to note that excavations have uncovered this very room in the ancient city of Babylon and, in fact, the walls are white gypsum plaster.

Verse 6 - as the hand finishes writing, sheer terror overwhelms this drunken king. Notice “the king’s face grew pale.” Instead of the rosy face you would expect from his inebriated

condition, his face turns ashen white. It says, “his thoughts alarmed him.” Even in this drunkenness, he has to connect the divine message he’s just received with the act of desecration he’s just committed. He has to be thinking to himself, “I have defied the God of Israel, and now I have received a message from Him. I have offended Israel’s God.” The verse goes on to say that “his hip joints went slack [in other words, he lost physical strength even to stand], and his knees began knocking together.” You get the picture.

Verse 7: “... [He] called aloud...” Now that sounds like a man under control, doesn’t it? He calls aloud. In the original language, it’s better translated this way: “He screamed for the Chaldeans and the magicians to be brought.” He screamed for them. All sense of dignity is gone. At this point, panic has set in. Now when the crowd of wise men assemble, he offers an amazing three-part reward to them, and he’s serious about this. Notice what he says: “... [Whoever is able to interpret this will] be clothed with purple [now in the ancient world, understand that meant something. In the ancient world, purple was the color of royalty], ... [he’ll receive] a necklace of gold ... [and again, at this time, a chain of gold could only be worn by those in a position of authority and only when given by the king] and [he will be or] ... [he will] have authority [rather] as third *ruler* in the kingdom.” In other words, he’ll be the third highest ruler in all of Babylon. Beneath Nabonidus and Belshazzar, this man would be third in authority in the entire empire.

Now understand, that’s a reasonable reward in light of the situation. Your armies have suffered defeat. Your city is surrounded and under siege and you’ve just received a message from the deity. He understands the seriousness of this situation. In verse 8, “all the king’s wise men came in, but they could not read the inscription or make known its interpretation to the king.” Once again, the wise man, the wise men rather, failed. Honestly, I don’t know how these guys kept a job. Every time we meet them in the book of Daniel, they are absolutely clueless. “Do you know what it means?” “I don’t know what it means.” It’s a bit comforting to know that bureaucracy is this old because only bureaucracy could create a situation where people are paid so well to be so unhelpful.

Verse 9, when they can’t help him, Belshazzar becomes even more afraid: “greatly alarmed, his face grew even paler, and his nobles were perplexed.” In verse 10, it says, “The queen entered the banquet hall...” This is not one of Belshazzar’s wives. We know that because verse 3 tells us that his wives were already present. This is probably Nebuchadnezzar’s daughter and Belshazzar’s mother. She greets him as would be appropriate in such an august occasion as this annual feast. She says, “O king, live

forever! Do not let your thoughts alarm you or your face be pale.” Thanks, mom. Notice verse 11:

“There is a man in your kingdom in whom is a spirit of the holy gods; and in the days of your father [your grandfather], illumination, insight and wisdom like the wisdom of the gods were found in him. And King Nebuchadnezzar, your father, your father the king, appointed him chief of the magicians, conjurers, Chaldeans *and* diviners. *This was* because an extraordinary spirit, knowledge and insight, interpretation of dreams, explanation of enigmas [untying of knots literally], and solving of difficult problems were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Belteshazzar. Let Daniel now be summoned and he will declare the interpretation.”

It’s interesting to note, isn’t it, that she has this sort of glowing respect for this man. And it’s also interesting as she refers to Daniel not by his Babylonian name Belteshazzar - she only mentions it in passing - but she refers to him throughout this section by his Hebrew name. It’s very possible that this woman knew Daniel personally.

Verses 13 - 16, Belshazzar greets Daniel. He’s summoned. Belshazzar greets Daniel and sort of summarizes the evening’s events. Daniel’s point in this section we’ve just covered is that there are no untouchable earthly rulers. No matter how high the walls, how deep the bunkers, how destructive the weapons, every earthly ruler lives within the reach of Almighty God. Lesson number two: no matter how powerful or protected, no earthly ruler is beyond God’s reach.

That brings us to lesson number three: God will hold every earthly leader accountable for his actions and his response to God. God will hold every earthly leader accountable for his actions and his response to God. Daniel has now been in Babylon, by the time we come to chapter 5, Daniel has been in Babylon sixty-five years. He’s at least eighty years old. No doubt he has prayed for an opportunity like this his entire life. Picture the scene. This crowd, who’s gathered for the annual festival, is now absolutely dead silent. You can hear a pin drop in this great hall as this old prophet is ushered in and brought before King Belshazzar.

Verse 17. After the king has recounted the events that have occurred and has made the offer of the reward in verse 16, in verse 17, “... Daniel answered and said before the

king, 'Keep your gifts for yourself or give your rewards to someone else; however, I will read the inscription to the king and make the interpretation known to him.'"

Now Daniel's not being disrespectful here. He's simply saying, "Look, I want you and everyone else to know that my delivery of the message that this handwriting delivers to you will not be in any way tainted by personal reward." After he delivers his message, he accepts them, but he's not going to allow personal gain to change his message, and he wants everyone to understand that. He says, 'I will read the inscription, and I will make the interpretation known.' Daniel has no doubt in his mind. It's very possible that God has already revealed to him what's written on the wall and what its meaning is. We don't know. We're not told.

But at this point, Daniel has a captive audience. He has the king. He has all the king's wives and concubines. He has the queen mother and a thousand, or the thousand I should say, of the most influential people in all the empire of Babylon. And so he does what any good prophet would do. He preaches a sermon. He begins by recounting the story of Nebuchadnezzar that's recorded in full in chapter 4. In verses 18 and 19, he makes the point that Yahweh, the Most High God, not the gods of Babylon, is the one who has granted to Nebuchadnezzar, his grandfather, the power and position that he enjoyed. Notice verse 18:

"O king, the Most High God (that by the way is Daniel's favorite phrase for the God of Israel, the Most High God) granted sovereignty, grandeur, glory and majesty to Nebuchadnezzar your father. Because of the grandeur which He bestowed on him, all the peoples, nations and *men* of every language feared and trembled before him; whomever he wished he killed and whomever he wished he spared alive; and whomever he wished he elevated and whomever he wished he humbled."

Those words don't describe capriciousness, but absolute, unhampered, unrestrained power. You understand why. Nebuchadnezzar in chapter 2, that image of world empires, is the head of gold – absolute, unrestrained power. He could do whatever he chose. There were no political handlers, no focus groups and no surveys that enabled him to determine what he wanted to do. He could do whatever he chose.

This description of Nebuchadnezzar also highlights the folly of Belshazzar's actions because Nebuchadnezzar had submitted and humbled himself before the God of Israel.

But Belshazzar, who hardly deserved to be mentioned in the same breath, had not. Verse 20: “But when his heart was lifted up and his spirit became so proud that he behaved arrogantly....” Literally, his heart was lifted up and his spirit was hardened so that he acted proudly. Because his heart was hardened toward God, he acted proudly toward men.

So, what were the consequences of his arrogance? Look at the second half of verse 20:

“... [so] he was deposed from his royal throne and *his* glory was taken away from him. He was also driven away from mankind, and his heart was made like *that of* beasts, and his dwelling place was with the wild donkeys. He was given grass to eat like cattle, and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven until he recognized that the Most High God is ruler over the realm of mankind and *that* He sets over it whomever He wishes.”

Nebuchadnezzar was utterly debased until he acknowledged that the God of heaven is the one who rules. And He rules over the realm of mankind, and He places in authority over it whomever He chooses.

Verse 22: “Yet you....” In the Aramaic, this is emphatic. The contrast is obvious. Here’s what, how Nebuchadnezzar responded. “Yet you, his grandson, Belshazzar, have not.” Notice the charges that Daniel brings in this public setting against Belshazzar the king. First in verse 22, he accuses him of willful disobedience: “Yet you, his grandson, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, even though you knew all of this.” You knew all of this.

It’s an interesting reference because we know that the events of chapter 4 when Nebuchadnezzar was humbled occurred about thirty years before this incident in chapter 5. Belshazzar would have been about fourteen years old when Nebuchadnezzar died. And there are records that indicate that just two years after Nebuchadnezzar’s death, Belshazzar served in the royal court under Nebuchadnezzar’s son. In addition, you remember that Nabonidus, his father, served in the royal court of Nebuchadnezzar.

And so, this man grew up in the city of Babylon. If he hadn’t witnessed the events firsthand, he had definitely heard about them. He knew about it, that’s what Daniel’s saying. “You knew this story. You knew what God did in the life of your grandfather and yet you have not humbled your heart.”

The second charge is deliberate defiance of the true God. Notice verse 23: “but you have exalted yourself against the Lord of heaven; and they have brought the vessels of His house before you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines have been drinking wine from them; and you have praised the gods of silver and of gold and bronze and iron and wood and stone, which do not see, hear or understand.” Belshazzar was actually issuing a challenge against the Lord of heaven.

The third charge is found in the rest of verse 23: “... But the God in whose hand are your life-breath and your ways, you have not glorified.” Belshazzar had failed to do what is the chief end of every man – to glorify the God who held his very life’s course in His hand. Verse 24 tells, tells us that the hand was sent because of Belshazzar’s blasphemous, defiant actions.

Now in verse 25, Daniel finally gets to the interpretation of the handwriting. This is the heart of his message. And I’m sure by this time Belshazzar’s just sitting there itching, saying, “Would you get to the point? What does the writing mean?” Verse 25, the message is: “Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin.” The “U” by the way in Aramaic is just the word “and” so it’s “Mene, Mene, Tekel, Pharsin.”

Why didn’t anyone else understand the meaning of these words? I mean, they seem pretty straightforward. If you knew Aramaic, you should be able to interpret this. But Aramaic, like Hebrew, was written without the vowels. This may have made this very short inscription sort of hopelessly ambiguous even if you understood the language. If you’ve ever seen “Wheel of Fortune” and are willing to admit it, you understand this problem. A couple of times I’ve come across that program, I’m always left wondering about the woman whose only job it is to touch the letters. Now there’s a woman who earns her money. Undoubtedly, as the wise men sort of, sort of stared helplessly at these consonants on the wall, they wished they could have bought a couple of vowels.

But even if they had recognized the words, these words are nouns describing various units of money. Something similar in English would be “dollar, dollar, dime and pennies.” So, making sense of them would have been near impossible. But while those Aramaic words are nouns representing money, Daniel understands them to be acting like the verbs from which those nouns were formed, and that’s how he interprets it. “Mene” – it’s repeated twice to stress its certainty. It simply means “numbered”. Belshazzar’s evil rule in life would soon be over. Literally, God has caused your kingdom to be completed. In the vernacular, we would say “Belshazzar, your number’s up.”

“Tekel” – it simply means “weighed”. God had placed Belshazzar on the balances to see if he conformed to the divine standard and found him to be seriously lacking. As one commentator describes it, “God’s moral laws were placed on one side of the scales and the king’s wicked life on the other. Belshazzar did not measure up to God’s standard of righteousness, and the proud king had never repented of his sins and humbled himself before God and asked for His forgiveness.”

This message is throughout the Scriptures. First 1 Samuel 2:3 says, “The LORD is a God of knowledge, And [by] ... His actions are weighed.” Proverbs 21:2 – “Every man’s way is right in his own eyes, But the LORD weighs the hearts.” Proverbs 24:12 – “If you say, ‘See, we did not know this,’ Does He not consider *it* who weighs the hearts? And does He not know *it* who keeps your soul? And will He not render to man according to his work?” You can fool some of the people some of the time, but you can never fool God. He weighs the hearts. And He tells Belshazzar, “I know exactly what you’re made of, and you’ve been found deficient.”

The final word “peres” – by the way, “peres” is the singular form of the word “pharsin” - means simply to be divided into pieces, to be destroyed or dissolved. Belshazzar’s kingdom, the great Babylon, would be destroyed and parceled out to the Medes and the Persians. It’s also interesting that this word “peres” is a word play in Aramaic. It has the same consonants as the word for “Persians”. Your kingdom has been divided, alright. It’s been divided to the people who are just outside the walls.

As Daniel finishes, I’m sure that there’s only deathly silence in the great hall where there had just a few minutes before been this drunken celebration. You see, Belshazzar had discovered in vivid, living color a lesson that is true for every man including the world’s most powerful and influential rulers. God will hold every earthly ruler accountable for his actions and his response to God. In the case of Belshazzar, it happened clearly in this life; in the case of all others, if not in this life, certainly as they stand before God.

That brings us to lesson number four: God’s providence always accomplishes His will in the affairs of leaders and nations. God’s providence always accomplishes His will in the affairs of leaders and nations. Notice verse 29: “Then Belshazzar gave orders, and they clothed Daniel with purple and they *put* a necklace of gold around his neck, and they issued a proclamation concerning him that he now had authority as third *ruler* in the kingdom.” It’s interesting to note that Belshazzar, like Nebuchadnezzar, honors Daniel. But unlike Nebuchadnezzar, he refuses to honor Daniel’s God.

The fact that Belshazzar conferred these gifts on Daniel shows that he believed the interpretation and that is a sort of indirect acknowledgment of God's power and God's reality, but there's no evidence that Belshazzar ever repented of his sins and called out to God. Even given this solemn warning just hours before his death, he still responded in silent rebellion against God. There were no more warnings for Belshazzar.

Scripture says that God is slow to anger. It's one of those great encouragements. God is slow to anger. I'll remember the first time I came across that phrase I was a seminary student sitting in my room translating Jonah in Hebrew. And as seminary students are prone to do, I got a little tired toward the end of this lesson. It was late at night and I was leaning over my, my Hebrew Bible translating, and I came across a phrase that says, 'The Lord is....' And as I translated the next words, it caught me by surprise and I assumed my translation was wrong because what it said was "God is long of nose." I thought I must, I must have missed that. Let me go back and try that again. That is exactly the Hebrew that underlies the expression you see in the Old Testament "God is slow to anger." Every time you see slow to anger, it's translating a Hebrew phrase that's "God is long of nose." We understand that. We speak of the nose in terms of anger. Someone's snorting mad. It takes God a long time to get hot. That's the point. God is slow to anger.

But God's patience can be exhausted. His Spirit will not always strive with man. Proverbs 29:1 says, "A man who hardens his neck after much reproof Will suddenly be broken beyond remedy." No more chances. No more warnings for Belshazzar. Verse 30, Daniel writes: "That same night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was slain." It's amazing how briefly Daniel includes the death of this king.

Let me fill out a little bit for you what happened that night. Xenophon describes how the Persians penetrated Babylon's defenses. First of all, they deliberately chose the night of this annual festival because they assumed that the people would be drinking and many of the people would be off their guard. Upriver, up the Euphrates River, you remember which flowed under the city of Babylon, the Persians diverted the flow of the water and, at just the proper time that night, they sent the water down this new channel that they had dug. The water level that flowed through the city dropped quickly and allowed the Persian soldiers to wade in under the walls. To their shock, when they got to the center city which was also protected by a system of brass gates, they discovered that those gates were open. Many historians believe it was treason on the part of some Babylonians who had tired of their absent king Nabonidus and his pathetic son Belshazzar.

But there's an even more compelling explanation for the victory of the Persians. One hundred and fifty years before the events of Daniel 5, Isaiah the prophet explained how it would happen. He addressed his explanation to Cyrus by name although Cyrus wouldn't be born yet for a hundred years. Turn to Isaiah 44. Let me show you this amazing prophecy. Remember, Isaiah's writing a hundred and fifty years before the events of Daniel 5. Isaiah 44:28. God, speaking through Isaiah, says,

"It is I who says of Cyrus, 'He is My shepherd! And he will perform all My desire.' And he declares of Jerusalem, 'She will be built,' and of the temple, 'Your foundation will be laid.' Thus says ... [Yahweh] to Cyrus His anointed, Whom I have taken by the right hand, To subdue nations before him And to loose the loins of kings; to open doors before him so that gates will not be shut: I will go before you and make the rough places smooth; I will shatter the doors of bronze and cut through their iron bars. I will give you the treasures of darkness And hidden wealth of secret places, So that you may know that it is I, ... [Yahweh], the God of Israel, who calls you by your name. For the sake of My servant, and Israel My chosen one, I have ... called you by your name [Cyrus]; [and] I have given you a title of honor Though you've not known Me. I am ... [Yahweh]', and there is no other; besides Me there is no God. I will gird you, though you have not known Me; That men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun that there is no one besides Me. I am the LORD, and there is no other."

What an amazing prophecy one hundred fifty years before Cyrus would take Babylon, God says, "I will shatter the gates of bronze and I will open the doors before you though you've not known Me [why?] so that the people of earth may know that I am God and there's no one else." Several hours after the Persians entered the city, Belshazzar the Babylonian king was slain.

You see, there is in the life of every person, every nation and every empire a handful of days that change the entire course of life and history. October 12th, 539 was one of those days. And what God wants us to see, what Daniel intends for us to get in this passage is that on a day when the world turned upside down - one day when the world's greatest city was under siege, when the world's most powerful political figure is killed, when one world empire crumbled and another took its place - even on a day like that, God was in absolute sovereign control. Daniel assures us that history, with all of its nations and rulers, is under the absolute control of a sovereign God.

Regardless how wicked the regime, God is in control. No matter how powerful or protected, no earthly ruler is beyond God's reach. God will hold every earthly leader accountable for his actions and his response to God. And God's providence always accomplishes His will in the affairs of leaders and nations.

How should this amazing chapter affect our thinking this morning? Let me give you just a few practical ways that I want you to consider.

Number one: it should comfort your heart in the midst of war and times of political unrest. We pick up our paper every day and we see these things. It should comfort your heart to know that though the nations may rage, the universe's throne is still occupied. What a comfort to know in our own lives, in the lives of all of those near and dear to us, in the lives of nations, God is in control. Nothing takes Him by surprise.

A second practical application of this passage is: it should affect your view of politics – national, local, international. You should see that there is a power behind the politics. Every time you pick up your paper and you read what's going on in the world, you should remember that you are not on a runaway train headed to an uncertain and unplanned future. God has mapped it out, and He's working His plan. There is a power behind the politics.

Number three: it should affect your response to those who are in political authority. Once you understand that it's God who's placed them there and regardless how wicked they are, God has put them in that position, then it reminds us of how important it is for us simply to fulfill the biblical responsibilities laid on us toward those in authority. What are those biblical responsibilities?

Well, there are basically four. The first is simply: to honor their positions (Romans 13), to pay our taxes (also Romans 13), to pray for their salvation (1 Timothy 2) and to submit to their laws (1 Peter 2). As you understand that God has placed them there, then you eagerly fulfill God's commands toward them. By the way, this attitude is not generally encouraged by many in our culture, including the well-known political commentator who claims to discuss politics with half his brain tied behind his back.

Number four: it should affect your own response to God. You must humble yourself before the God of heaven. Perhaps this morning, you come and you've never really humbled yourself. Like Belshazzar, you've refused to bow your knees before the God of heaven, to submit to His will, to accept His Son. I urge you this morning not to practice

the arrogance that Belshazzar practiced and to suffer his fate. Submit yourself to God. Humble yourself. Acknowledge your sin. Seek His forgiveness.

Number five and finally: it should encourage us to never put our ultimate hopes in any earthly nation or kingdom. No earthly nation or kingdom will endure, folks. In fact, in Daniel 2, we're told that there are these earthly empires and they're laid out in the form of an image. And you remember the end of that dream, there's this huge rock cut out without hands that comes and crushes this statue of human empires and grinds it to a pulp and then that grows up to a great mountain. God explains it this way in Daniel 2:44: "In the days of those kings [that is, the kings that end human history] the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed, and that kingdom will not be left for another people; it will crush and put an end to all these kingdoms, but it will itself endure forever."

Our hopes are not in any human government, however strong or however good. But to borrow the words of Hebrews, we have a kingdom which cannot be shaken. The writer of Hebrews in verse 28 of chapter 12 says, "Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire."

There is a power behind the politics. There is a power above all earthly powers which abides.

Let's pray together.

Our Father, we are absolutely overwhelmed with this demonstration of Your power. Lord, I pray that You would forgive us for all too often looking at the world around us, at being caught up in the turmoil of the world and forgetting that our great God occupies heaven's throne and that He does His will among heaven and on the earth. Lord, I pray that You would help us to keep this wonderful passage and its truths in our hearts and to lean on the confidence that in our lives and in the world around us, You are in complete control.

And Father, I pray that if there's someone here this morning who's not yet humbled himself or herself before You, acknowledged their sin and sought Your forgiveness in the person of Your Son, Lord, help them to do that even this morning before they are broken beyond remedy.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.