

Daniel
When Empires Fall (Part 1)

Daniel 5
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We turn our hearts now to the worship of God and the study of His Word. I invite you to turn with me to Daniel 5. We became very familiar with the country of Iraq over the last couple of decades because of the turmoil in that portion of the world. In southern Iraq, about 90 minutes' drive south of Baghdad, lies the ruins of the ancient city of Babylon, a city built originally by Nimrod. This great city reached the height of its splendor during the reign of Babylon's greatest king, Nebuchadnezzar II.

Interestingly enough, Nebuchadnezzar was the greatest hero of Saddam Hussein. And the ancient city of Babylon was his obsession. Because of his love of Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon, at the height of the Iraq-Iran war, Saddam Hussein actually committed 60,000,000 dollars to build a simplified replica of Nebuchadnezzar's 600-room palace in the ancient city.

By 1990, in the Gulf War, millions of bricks inscribed with his name rested on top of the very bricks that Nebuchadnezzar had laid. Many of those bricks that are of modern origin bear this imprint: "At the era of President Saddam Hussein of Iraq, the protector of great Iraq and reproducer of its wakening, and the builder of its civilization." Well, his good plans went down just as ancient Babylon did.

Nevertheless, he was very interested in this city. In fact, each year during his reign, Iraqis celebrated the ancient civilization of Babylon with a Babylonian festival in which, even lasers lit up the skies, and the lasers would project into the sky images, side by side, of Saddam Hussein and Nebuchadnezzar II. Well, the Bible has much to say about both the city and the empire of ancient Babylon. Daniel records a number of those important events that occurred there in the land we call Iraq, and tonight we come to another one of those, one of my all-time favorite stories in the Scripture.

When we come to Daniel 5, understand this, that for almost 70 years God's people had lived captive in Babylon. Babylon was an enormous Gentile empire under a succession of pagan kings, and each of those kings seemingly demonstrated limitless power. It was the darkest of times; and in those dark times for the people of God, as they lived in a strange land under the domination of

a ruthless regime, God gave them hope for the future. God told them what the future would bring. He mapped out the history of the world in a succession of increasingly powerful and increasingly profane world empires that would dominate world politics.

Daniel, as we've discovered, provides us with a divine philosophy of history, and that history and that philosophy simply says this: God is sovereign over all of the affairs of nations, and kings, and empires. God rules. Regardless of how the world looks to us, God has a plan and He is in absolute control, and I think that's why Daniel resonates with so many of us. Let's be honest, the current worldwide political situation can be unsettling and, for some people, even frightening. But Daniel reminds us not to be fearful because there is limitless Power behind the politics.

As the song says, "While earthly kingdoms rise and perish, our God endures unchanging on." Or as Martin Luther put it in his great hymn, "...that word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them, abideth." Daniel makes that point powerfully here in Daniel 5. Now the theme of this chapter, Daniel 5, is very specific. We're looking at the large theme of Daniel, which is God's sovereignty over all of the affairs of kings, and nations, and empires in all of human history. But Daniel 5 gives a very specific look at that theme. We could reduce it to this: God is completely sovereign over the rise and fall of the empires of men.

We are going to look at a single night of the world's history; just one night. And on that night, one of the great world powers, and a mighty empire that ruled that portion of the world, falls; and another comes into its place. And in the middle of that, as one falls and another rises, is our sovereign God. That's the message of Daniel 5. Through Daniel's own experience we see this timeless principle fleshed out in the life of a powerful but wicked king, and one of history's greatest empires. Now in chapter 5, and in this incredible account, we're going to discover together over this week and the next time we study Daniel together, four crucial lessons about God's sovereign control of political leaders and their empires.

Let's look at those lessons together. The first lesson that we come to in verses 1 to 4 is this: let's call it the defiance of Yahweh; and the principle is, no government, no matter how defiant, is beyond God's sovereignty. No government, no matter how defiant its leaders may be against the God of heaven, is beyond His sovereignty. Let's look at it together, verse 1: "Belshazzar the king." We suddenly meet a man that we have not met before. We are, in just a few words, dumped in the middle of a historical setting that has fast forwarded from chapter 4, and we meet

this man who rises and falls in one chapter, Belshazzar means 'Bel -' (referring to one of Babylon's gods) '- protect the king.' Who is this man?

It's interesting, for almost 2,000 years there was absolutely no mention of this man to be found anywhere in secular history or in the study of archaeology. In fact, his name and how it's described here in this chapter, was used by liberals left and right (I have read some of their comments) to say, "See, that shows that the Bible, and particularly Daniel, is not reliable, and is not historical; because we know the last king of Babylon was a man named Nabonidus, and here the Bible calls him Belshazzar. But from the 1860's until today, the liberals have stopped laughing; because now there are more than 37 texts that prove his existence, and those texts date from the first year of his reign to the 14th year of his reign. They are contemporaneous with him, and prove, in fact, that he is a historical person.

Now let's put him in context. Let me give you the final kings of Babylon. After Nebuchadnezzar's death, more than 20 years before the events of chapter 5, there was an immediate scramble for the throne. And, in fact, in the six years after Nebuchadnezzar's death there were four different kings of Babylon, the empire of Babylon. It was a very difficult time for Babylon and for the people of God who were there. Here's how it looked. First of all, of course you had Nebuchadnezzar, who reigned for 43 years.

A lot of stability; when you're in a monarchy you pray the king lives, if he's a decent king at all, because there's where your stability comes. But he died in the year 562 B.C. He was followed by his son Amel-Marduk, who ruled for only two years, from 562 to 560. He was murdered by his brother-in-law Neriglissar, who reigned from 560 to 556, when he died. Then his young son, a man by the name of Labashi-Marduk became king in 556 B.C., but he was assassinated the same year that he became king by a group of courtiers led, some scholars believe, by Belshazzar. Belshazzar, likely the leader of this assassination plot, then was instrumental in seating his father, a man named Nabonidus, on the throne. So Nabonidus came to power through a bloody coup, very possibly led by his son Belshazzar, and he reigned from 556 to 539 B.C. He was the last king of Babylon.

He was also co-regent with his son, Belshazzar; that's why we meet him here. Now, why isn't Nabonidus, the official last king of Babylon, mentioned in the biblical record? Well, Babylonian sources tell us that for various reasons Nabonidus lived in Tayma, Arabia, some 500 miles south of Babylon, for most of the 17 years of his reign. In fact, (and this is remarkable), for one period

of 14 years he didn't even visit the capital city of Babylon, although he was its king. Why is that? Well, history is a little bit nebulous on this, but we know this; he was a worshipper of the moon god Sîn, and he wanted to exalt the moon god as the chief deity of Babylon, and he met a lot of resistance because the chief deity of Babylon had been Marduk, and many wanted that to continue. And so either to avoid conflict, or because of the nervous priests of Babylon encouraging him to “relocate”, he spent most of his time in Arabia where the worship of the moon god Sîn was more prominent. And in his absence, largely for 17 years, 14 years without even coming back, in his absence, Nabonidus appointed his oldest son Belshazzar as his co-regent.

Now Belshazzar's evil character is legendary. He is probably the one, as I've already told you, who was an assassin. He led the assassination plot that put his father in power. We also learn (and this man will come back to figure in the story in the next chapter or in the next message) but he, in a fit of jealousy, murdered the son of one of his father's governors during a royal hunting trip. He was grossly immoral, and, as we will see, he added blasphemy to his crimes in this chapter. He was a wicked man.

Now the events of chapter 5 occur about 30 years after chapter 4. With that set up, let's look at it together. Verse 1: “Belshazzar the king held a great feast for a thousand of his nobles.” Now, if that seems like a huge party, it was; but it was not uncommon in the ancient world for kings to show off their wealth, and to express their extravagance in such banquets. One Persian king fed, history tells us, 15,000 people every day. Alexander the Great hosted a wedding to which he invited 10,000 guests. Imagine how many toasters and blenders that couple got! In Esther 1, Xerxes I held a feast for a large number of people, we're not told how many, but a large number, for 180 days.

So what is this feast about? Well, there were two historians who wrote in the 4th and 5th century B.C., one by the name of Xenophon, the other Herodotus, and both of those historians tell us that this feast was actually held in conjunction with an annual festival that happened to fall at this time. But understand this; this was no ordinary celebration of that festival because the date, mark it, the date was October 12th, 539 B.C. One of the cuneiform inscriptions from that time, the Nabonidus Chronicle, describes what had happened. Just before this day, the Persian ruler Cyrus the Great, whose Medo-Persian Empire stretched from the Aegean Sea to India, slowly marched toward the capital city of Babylon, defeating city after city, simply absorbing them as his massive army marched toward the city of Babylon.

Two days before, on October 10th, Cyrus had badly beaten Babylon's army under the leadership of Nabonidus, Belshazzar's father, at a place called Sippar. The night of this feast, two days later, the night of this feast, Nabonidus had fled, Belshazzar and his forces had withdrawn within the great city of Babylon, and the city was under siege by one of Cyrus's generals, Bartuk, who we will learn more about next time. That's what's going on.

Verse 1 says, "Belshazzar the king held a great feast for a thousand of his nobles, and he was drinking wine in the presence of the thousand."

Normally, in such a setting, the king would have been hidden from the view of his guests. In fact, Athenaeus tells us that usually, Persian kings would dine in a separate room from their guests. But on public holidays, like apparently this one was, they would sometimes dine together with their guests in a great hall; which appears to be what's happening here. Belshazzar deliberately sat in the full view of his subjects and he proceeded to show his bravado in a drinking bout, basically drinking himself under the table.

By the way, the word 'drinking' in verse 1 is an Aramaic participle that implies continually drinking. It's not surprising one ancient historian tells us that the Babylonians were addicted to wine. Shortly, the king and all of his guests were drunk. By the way, verses 2 and 3 tell us that the women were there, and they were drinking as well. Sadly, and I'm not going to go into any of the details, but as was typical for such events, the alcohol relaxed all of the inhibitions, and probably resulted in some form of a drunken orgy.

What was the purpose of this feast? Well obviously, partly it was simply an annual festival that happened to fall on this day. But beyond that, Belshazzar probably had two reasons for this drunken celebration. First of all, to build morale among his people, and to show contempt for the Persian armies outside the walls.

You say, that seems a bit arrogant in the middle of these circumstances, and it was. But you have to remember the city of Babylon. Babylon was a magnificent city, and the most impressive thing about the city was its defenses. If you study some about the city you will learn that it was protected by two double-wall systems.

The outer wall - let's talk about the outer wall. It was at least (and this is staggering, done in the ancient world without the equipment we have) but the outer wall was at least 12 to 14 miles in circumference. Some credible reports say it may have been at one point in the empire's history as high as 42 miles in circumference. You say, the wall was not that big; it was massive. It was 84 feet thick; it was a huge wall, with the equivalent of a two-lane road on top. It was at least, and here we can't be exact, but it was at least 50 to 75 feet high, and every 125 feet there was a guard tower, and the guard towers rose another 25 feet above that 50 to 75-foot high wall. That's the outer wall.

And then there was the inner wall, and the inner wall was almost as impressive. It was 55 feet thick, but it was likely higher than the outer wall for defensive purposes; much easier to defend. In addition, you had the Euphrates River that ran under the walls through the heart of the city, providing a constant supply of water. And they even diverted a portion of the Euphrates River around the city to frame a kind of small moat; and there was a small wall sealing in that moat, again, as a protective measure before you even got to the main wall.

The palace was no less impressive. The palace itself was protected by a system of an additional six walls. None of those walls were shorter than 20 feet in height. According to Xenophon, Babylon had anticipated a siege. This was the normal way military warfare was done in the ancient world. They had anticipated a siege and they had stockpiled 20 years of supplies, more than enough to outlast any siege. So you can understand something of what Belshazzar is thinking. "This is an impregnable city. No one's taking Babylon. Yes, they're out there, but we have 20 years' worth of supplies. We will outlast them."

By holding this feast Belshazzar was showing utter contempt for the Persians, and I think he was also desperately trying to convey to his own people a sense of calmness, and confidence, and even normalcy in the middle of what clearly were not normal times. A second purpose behind this feast possibly, and we can't be sure of this, may have been to celebrate his own coronation as king; because some historians of Belshazzar believe that after his father's defeat two days before at Sippar, 50 miles to the north, Belshazzar took the opportunity to proclaim himself king of the empire. So this annual festival may well have become an occasion to celebrate his coronation.

Those are the circumstances of this remarkable feast. Verse 2 says, "When Belshazzar tasted the wine..." That doesn't mean when he had his first taste, it means when the wine had begun to taste good, when he had begun to come under its influence. At this point we're talking about a

king who is drunk, whose judgment is impaired. And “he gave orders to bring the gold and silver vessels which Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken out of the Temple.” Notice, Daniel refers to Nebuchadnezzar as his father. Now understand that the Aramaic word translated ‘father’ is a generic word. It can mean ‘father,’ it can mean ‘grandfather,’ or it can even just mean ‘ancestor.’ It probably is ‘grandfather’ here. In fact, there is no Aramaic or Hebrew word for ‘grandfather,’ interestingly enough. It’s just ‘father,’ and that stands for the previous generations. ‘Grandfather’ is likely here because Nabonidus, Belshazzar’s father, apparently married one of Nebuchadnezzar’s daughters in order to strengthen his hold on the throne. Remember, he’s a usurper. He’s the one who took over by a coup, a bloody coup, and so to cement his leadership he apparently married one of Nebuchadnezzar’s daughters. That officially made Nebuchadnezzar Belshazzar’s grandfather by marriage. Now again, Nabonidus is not mentioned in the story because, remember, he has fled, and he is literally and figuratively out of the picture.

Verse 2: “He gave orders to bring the gold and silver vessels which Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken,” notice this, “out of the Temple.” And the word that is used is the word for the Temple proper, which was in Jerusalem. What an incredible sacrilege and blasphemy. These were the sacred vessels that the priests had used in the Temple, in Jerusalem, in the worship of Yahweh, Israel’s God. Nebuchadnezzar had taken them some 50 to 70 years before. 50 years before he had taken them from Jerusalem, and they had been apparently kept in a kind of national museum connected with one of the temples, until this time, until this night, they had remained there.

Now why did the Babylonians keep these Temple vessels? I mean they were gold and silver, why not melt them down and have the money and the proceeds, or use them for some other purpose? Because in the ancient world, when you captured another nation, it meant, in their thinking, that your gods were stronger than the gods of that nation. And so they took the implements from the Temple, they put them in the national treasury and the national museum, as evidence that the gods of Babylon were stronger than Yahweh, the God of Israel.

By drinking from these on this night, Belshazzar was really doing a bit of propaganda. He was basically saying to his people the gods of Babylon would protect them from the Persians, just as the gods of Babylon had protected them from the gods of other nations, including Judah, but that’s not all that was going on here. Belshazzar’s purposes were far more sinister.

Have you ever wondered this - why out of all of the nations that Babylon had captured, on this night with the Persians outside the walls, why would he call for the vessels from the house of Yahweh in Israel, a relatively small, unimportant nation? What was going on?

Well, as we'll see according to verses 22 to 24, this was absolutely deliberate. Belshazzar knew that Yahweh had humbled Nebuchadnezzar his grandfather, and this was, in part, a statement that He would never humble him. But there's another reason, and it's even more interesting. In the third year of Belshazzar's reign, Daniel had made a prophecy that Babylon would fall to the Persians. Go over to Daniel 8:1.

In the third year of the reign of Belshazzar ” - so this is years before the king – “the reign of Belshazzar the king a vision appeared to me, Daniel, subsequent to the one which appeared to me previously. I looked in the vision, and while I was looking I was in the citadel of Susa, which is in the province of Elam; and I looked in the vision and I myself was beside the Ulai Canal. Then I lifted my eyes and looked, and behold, a ram which had two horns was standing in front of the canal. Now the two horns were long,” - meaning this animal was powerful, is the idea, horns represent strength - “but one was longer” - that is more powerful - “than the other, with the longer one coming up last. I saw the ram butting westward, northward, and southward, and no other beasts could stand before him nor was there any one to rescue from his power, but he did as he pleased and magnified himself.

What is this? Well, go down to verse 15.

When I, Daniel, had seen the vision, I sought to understand it; and behold, standing before me there was one who looked like a man. And I heard the voice of a man between the banks of Ulai, and he called out and said, “Gabriel, give this man an understanding of the vision.” So he came near to where I was standing, and when he came I was frightened and fell on my face; but he said to me, “Son of man, understand that the vision pertains to the time of the end.”

And of course he's overcome by all of this. But you have the interpretation in verse 20. “The ram which you saw with the two horns represents the kings of Media and Persia.” So understand what's going on here. This is before Cyrus and the Medo-Persian Empire shows up on the

doorstep of Babylon. This is in the third year of Belshazzar's reign. And Daniel has a prophecy that eventually the Medo-Persians, and particularly the Persians, are going to rule the world until they are overrun by someone else, and that's Alexander the Great. We'll see that when we get there. This chapter is incredible in its detail, but this was early in Belshazzar's reign.

Now Belshazzar had undoubtedly heard about this prophecy. Can you imagine this prophecy not being circulated, with the Persians capturing city after city in Babylon, and then coming to the city itself? And so it makes perfect sense. Why on this occasion, as he's thumbing his nose at the Persians, as he's saying "Babylon will never be taken, the city will never be captured, we are safe in this magnificent city," he says in his drunken state, "Bring the goblets from Yahweh's house. I'll show you what I think of Yahweh and His prophecy. He said we would fall to the Persians."

And so he orders the goblets from the Temple of Yahweh brought as a deliberate act of defiance. It was a personal challenge to Yahweh who had predicted that Babylon would fall to the Persians. Now that makes what's going to happen make a lot more sense doesn't it? Let's look at it together. Verse 3: "Then they brought the gold vessels which had been taken out of the Temple, the house of God which was in Jerusalem."

His soldiers and those around him were eager to comply. They bring the vessels from the Temple there, in the city of Babylon where they had been displayed, "and the king, and his nobles, and his wives, and his concubines," his entire harem, "and a thousand of his nobles drank from them. They drank the wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone."

Notice, as they drank from these vessels dedicated to the service of Yahweh, they praised the gods. Notice how Daniel refers to them, "the gods of gold, the gods of silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone." He refers to them as the gods of those materials because that's the only substance they had. They didn't really exist.

Nabonidus preferred the moon god Sin, but scholars tell us that Belshazzar was devoted personally to the gods of Babylon. It's possible that on this occasion, by bringing these goblets to the feast, he's trying to further curry the favor of his people, hoping that they will appreciate his enthusiasm for the gods of Babylon. They're praising the gods of Babylon; gaining further support through religion (there's a new idea). They toasted the gods of Babylon with the vessels

of the house of God. That further makes the point, by the way, that this is deliberate. He is deliberately, intentionally, taunting Yahweh. And as I said, verses 22 to 24 will make that crystal clear when we get there.

Can I say, this also reminds us that God takes the contempt of His things as the contempt of Himself? Show contempt for His Word, show contempt for His church, show contempt for those things that matter to Him, for His Son, and it's showing contempt for Him. He takes this very personally.

Now the point of these first four verses is very clear, and that is that even in the case of a profane ruler like Belshazzar who defiantly sets himself against the God of heaven, God is still on His throne. God and His eternal plan is still at work. It also reminds us that he holds every human ruler accountable. God here is unmoved, undeterred, unchallenged.

That brings us to the second lesson that we learn in this chapter. It's the writing on the wall, and the lesson is this: no empire, no matter how powerful or protected, is beyond God's reach, verses 5 through 16. Because at the height of Belshazzar's drunkenness, his immorality, and his blasphemy, suddenly the party stops and the band stopped playing. The throne room, which just a moment earlier had been filled with loud talking, and music, and singing, and laughter, and who knows what, became deadly silent, and fear literally sweeps across the room.

Verse 5 records the reason. It's a man's fingers. Verse 5: "Suddenly the fingers of a man's hand emerged and began writing opposite the lampstand on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace." Notice the hand apparently seems to appear from within the wall, to emerge from within the wall, and it does so in the best-lit portion of the room, opposite the lamp stand, the great candelabra; probably near the king, because the lighted portion of the room would have been closest to him. And it began writing, notice how he puts it, "...on the plaster." That word means either chalk, or lime, of the wall of the king's palace.

Now don't misunderstand what's going on here. This is not a vision; Belshazzar is not having a vision. This is a miracle, a divine miracle, because this handwriting is still there when Daniel shows up some time later. It's possible that the fingers of this hand grasped a pen, or a stylus that's not mentioned here, or it's possible that the finger wrote as you and I would write in the sand. We're not told.

Where did all this unfold? I find this fascinating; last century, a German archaeologist named Koldewey discovered the throne room of Nebuchadnezzar in the southern palace. The southern citadel, his palace proper, covered 350 x 200 yards. And in that citadel was this magnificent palace. Off the largest of the palaces' five courtyards, was a massive room that the archaeologist identified as the throne room, and probably where this event occurred. That room is 56 x 170 feet. And guess what? It has white gypsum walls; plaster walls. On one of the long walls, it's a rectangular shape, on one of the long walls is a niche opposite the entrance where the king's throne probably stood.

Larue describes the throne room and, by the way, this is a reconstructed panel from Nebuchadnezzar's throne room there on the left; this is in the Pergamonmuseum in Berlin. So this would have been a panel along the wall of the throne room. But here's how Larue describes the throne room. He says, "On the external façade, against a background of dark blue glazed bricks, were tall columns of yellow glazed bricks, topped with bright blue iconic capitals, linked by palmettoes. A frieze of white rosettes ran above the columns, and the entire pattern was framed with a border of glazed squares of alternating yellow, black, and white. The interior of the throne room appears to have been relatively simple. The roof was constructed of cedar, and the windowless walls were whitewashed. The doorways had thresholds of bronze, and traces were found of cedar doors, covered with bronze." And as we just saw, there were also bricked panels separating the walls of that room.

Now notice verse 5:

..And the king saw the back of the hand that did the writing. Then the king's face grew pale and his thoughts alarmed him, and his hip joints went slack and his knees began knocking together.

As the hand finished writing, sheer terror overwhelmed this drunken king. It says in verse 6 "the king's face grew pale." Instead of the rosy face he had had a moment before, caused by both the wine and the emotion of the night, his face turns ashen white. "His thoughts alarmed him." His thoughts frightened him because, even in his inebriated condition, he has to connect this divine message with the act of desecration that has immediately preceded it. He was likely thinking something like, "I've done it now. I have offended Israel's God."

“His hip joints went slack.” The Aramaic idea here is, he lost the physical strength even to stand; and “his knees began knocking together.” Of course, that's still a common way to describe someone who's terribly frightened.

Verse 7: “The king called aloud to bring in the conjurers, the Chaldeans and the diviners.” We've met this crowd before. “Called aloud” sounds like a man who's under control. But literally translated, the text says something like this: “he screamed for them.” All decorum, all dignity is gone. Panic, sheer panic, has set into this man.

When the crowd of wise men are quickly assembled, he offers them an amazing reward. Verse 7 says, “The king spoke and said to the wise men of Babylon, any man...,” and notice he's asking for two things “...who can read this inscription and...,” two, “...explain its interpretation to me shall be clothed with purple.”

In the ancient world purple was extremely rare, and therefore expensive, because it was hard to find a way to dye the cloth that color. It came from a special kind of snail, and only the richest of people could afford it, and so royalty wore purple. He will receive “a necklace of gold.” At that time a chain of gold was worn only by persons of rank, and usually the gold reserves belonged to the king, and so you only got a gold chain, or whatever, if the king bequeathed it on you. And he will “have authority as third ruler in the kingdom.” He would become the third highest ruler in Babylon behind Nabonidus the king, Belshazzar his son, the co-regent, then would come this man. Wow! That's impressive.

When you think about it though, this was a reasonable reward in this situation. I mean, remember: the army has been defeated, his father has fled, the Persians are outside the city walls, and he has just received a message from a deity. Verse 8: “Then 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 men show up and prove that their name is a misnomer. Honestly, I don't know how these guys kept their jobs, because every time we meet them in Daniel they are completely clueless. I have to say, it's strangely comforting to know that bureaucracy is that old, because only in bureaucracy are people paid to be this unhelpful. If they lived in Charles Dickens' time they would have worked at the Circumlocution Office. Some of you get that.

Now, why does the king need them to read the inscription? I mean, when Daniel interprets the writing it's clear that it was in Aramaic, a language these men spoke, so why couldn't they read

it? Well, there are a couple of possibilities. It's possible the characters were written in an older script, or in some unique style. I have, in my office, a page from the first printing of the 1611 King James, and even though we read English, and read it well, it's hard to recognize those letters because of the older script.

Some say maybe this was written in Old Phoenician, a kind of script that would have been hard for them to recognize. Jewish tradition holds that the letters were not written horizontally from right to left, but rather vertically, and that's what made them confusing. They were written, by the way, just as Hebrew, with only consonants, no vowels. That made it hard too.

If you ever, (don't admit it here), but if you ever tried to play Wheel of Fortune, you know it's hard with just consonants. In addition, these words, as we will see, could be either nouns or verbs, and so there was a lot of room for confusion. They couldn't read it. They couldn't read the inscription, and they didn't know what it meant.

Verse 9: "Then King Belshazzar was greatly alarmed, his face grew even paler, and his nobles were perplexed." When his best hope is dashed and these men couldn't help him, Belshazzar becomes even more afraid. The way the text words it, it appears that from the time he first saw the handwriting and turned ashen white, until all the wise men get there, he's calmed himself and his color has somewhat returned to his face, but now his face goes white again. He's terrified again; and his nobles were baffled. They had no idea what to do.

I love what Dale Ralph Davis writes about this; listen to this. He says, "This is sometimes God's pattern, to aggravate our helplessness by exposing the uselessness of our favorite props, even our favorite religious props. You may have your own paganism of choice: occultism, pluralism, machoism, feminism, agnosticism, moralism, and they will prove as petrifyingly useless as the Babylonian variety. God has frightened Belshazzar. Religion has failed him. He is reduced to a shivering, sniveling mess, with no supports whatever. He is therefore on the edge of the abyss of hope. Whenever God brings a man to the end of himself, smashing all his props and wasting his idols, it is a favorable moment indeed if he will but see it."

That brings us to the next part of the story. After the man's fingers, comes the queen mother in verses 10 through 12. Verse 10 says, "The queen entered the banquet hall because of the words of the king and his nobles..." Word of this miraculous, divine message written on the wall of the

throne room spreads quickly through the palace, and it's not long before the queen heard and entered the banquet hall.

Here is another one of those amazing providences, just like the king with insomnia who couldn't sleep, and God works His plan. Here is another one of those; because everything else in this account hinges on, and depends on the council this woman gives. And guess what? On cue, she shows up. Now this was not one of Belshazzar's wives. According to verse 3, they were already present. And yet she's clearly a person of prestige and importance, to enter and to offer advice to the king in this moment, completely uninvited. Who was this woman?

From the time of Josephus, most commentators and scholars believe that she was the queen mother, not the wife, of Belshazzar; and not the mother of Nabonidus, the grandmother of Belshazzar; she had died eight years before. This was one of two people; this was either Belshazzar's grandmother, the wife of Nebuchadnezzar, or it was more likely Belshazzar's mother, the wife of Nabonidus, and probably Nebuchadnezzar's daughter.

Notice how she greets him. "The queen spoke and said, 'O king, live forever! Do not let your thoughts alarm you or your face be pale.'" Moms are always the same. Thanks Mom. Then she reminded Belshazzar about Daniel. It's interesting to note here her glowing respect for Daniel, and even her use of his Hebrew name. It seems that she knew Daniel personally, and many believe, and I would be one of them, that she had come, like her father Nebuchadnezzar, to trust in Israel's God.

Verse 11: "There is a man in your kingdom in whom is the spirit of the holy gods..." Or, as I noted before in chapter 4, it could be the Spirit, capital 'S', of the holy God. "...And in the days of your father," (that is your grandfather), "illumination, insight and wisdom like the wisdom of the gods were found in him."

Now why does Belshazzar not seem to know Daniel? Well, first of all, it's been 23 years since Nebuchadnezzar had died and Daniel had had significant influence. Babylon was a large city, a huge population, and a huge bureaucracy. So it's possible, just the distance in years. Also, although Daniel still had some role in government, according to 8:27, it's not the same high position that he had previously held. Why is that? Typically, in that part of the world, when there's a change of dynasties, and that's what this was, there is a complete turnover in the men

and leadership at the top. So probably 17 years before, when Nabonidus had seized power by a coup, he had replaced all the wise men, and Daniel was relegated to some unimportant desk job.

At the time of this incident Daniel was probably about 80, and it's likely that he'd been semi-retired since the death of Nebuchadnezzar some 20 years before. And then, in addition to all of that, Belshazzar was obviously a self-consumed man and he may simply have forgotten Daniel.

Verse 11: "And King Nebuchadnezzar, your father..." (that is, your grandfather) "...your father the king, appointed him chief of the magicians, conjurers, Chaldeans and diviners." He had a huge role in Babylon. She implies that this is no longer his role.

"This was because an extraordinary spirit, knowledge and insight, interpretation of dreams, explanation of enigmas 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."

In verses 13 to 16 we have the king's charge. Here, Daniel arrives, Belshazzar greets him, and then summarizes the evening's events. Verse 13: "Then Daniel was brought in before the king. The king spoke and said to Daniel, 'Are you that Daniel who was one of the exiles from Judah, whom my father the king brought from Judah?'"

Now, you know it doesn't take much of a sanctified imagination to see a subtle dig at Daniel here. "So is it true that you're just one of those Jewish captives Nebuchadnezzar brought?" It's possible, by the way, that Belshazzar refers to him as Daniel either because he doesn't want to give him any place in Babylon, he's just a Jewish man in Babylon, or because the name Belteshazzar sounds far too much like his own.

Verse 14:

Now I have heard about you that a spirit of the gods is in you, and that illumination, insight and extraordinary wisdom have been found in you. Just now the wise men and the conjurers were brought in before me that they might read this inscription and make its interpretation known to me, but they could not declare the interpretation of the message. But I personally have heard about you, that you are able to give interpretations and solve difficult problems. Now if you are able to read the inscription and make its interpretation known to me, you will

be clothed with purple and wear a necklace of gold around your neck, and you will have authority as the third ruler in the kingdom.

In God's providence, everything is now set for Daniel to interpret the message, but don't miss the main point of this section. The main point of this section about the writing on the wall. The point is, there are no untouchable earthly rulers. Belshazzar thought he was. He thought he had found refuge inside the walls of the great Babylon, an impregnable city designed to withstand a huge army and to endure a siege of 20 years. He was safe.

Folks, it doesn't matter; and this is the message of God to Belshazzar, and this is the message of God to every human ruler, and to every empire, to every kingdom, to every man and woman. It doesn't matter how high the walls. It doesn't matter how deep the bunkers. It doesn't matter how large the armies. It doesn't matter how destructive an up to date your weapons are. Every earthly ruler, no matter how defiant, or how protected, lives within the reach of the arm of Almighty God.

That's true of every leader on this planet today. Belshazzar appears and disappears in one short chapter. Luke 1:52 says of God, "He has brought down rulers from their thrones, and has exalted those who are humble." This is what Isaiah had said would happen. Go to Isaiah for just a moment as we close our time together, Isaiah 47. I won't read all of this chapter but let me just read a portion of it.

Verse 5. This is Isaiah writing now, in the early 700 B.C. We're in the middle 500's. Verse 5, speaking of Babylon:

"Sit silently, and go into the darkness, O daughter of the Chaldeans, for you will no longer be called the queen of kingdoms. I was angry with my people, I profaned my heritage and gave them into your hand. You did not show mercy to them, on the aged you made your yoke very heavy. Yet you said, 'I will be a queen forever.' These things you did not consider nor remember the outcome of them. Now, then, hear this, you sensual one, who dwells securely, who says in your heart, 'I am, and there is no one besides me. I will not sit as a widow, nor know the loss of children.' But these two things will come on you suddenly in one day: loss of children and widowhood. They will come on you in full measure in spite of your many sorceries, in spite of the great power of your spells. 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.' But evil will come on you which you will not know how to charm away; and disaster will fall on you from which you cannot atone; and destruction about which you do not know will come on you suddenly."

This is more than 150 years before the night we're studying in Daniel 5. God said, "Babylon, you have your time on the world stage, and I'm going to use you for my purposes, but then I'm going to judge you for your sins." God holds every ruler, every nation, every empire accountable, and they are always and ever present within His reach, "suddenly, in a day." Let's pray together.

Father, we exalt you as the God who is sovereign over all things. We exalt your Son, the One to whom you have delegated the rule of this world; the stone cut out of the mountain without hands, who one day will crush the kingdoms of this world to powder, and who will rule with a rod of iron. Father, we exalt you, we worship you, we thank you that no matter how defiant, no matter how wicked, no matter how powerful, how protected, no king, no president, no congresswoman or congressman, no ruler of any kind on this planet, is beyond your immediate reach, and you can bring them to an end in a moment, in a day. Father, we are so grateful to know that you are on your throne, and that you have a plan for history, and that you're working out that plan. Help us, O God, to trust you. And Father, I pray that if there is anyone here tonight whose heart is proud like Belshazzar, who has been defiant toward you, who has assumed that they can sin with impunity, who think that no one sees, who has declared "I am and there is no one besides me," oh God, humble them to repentance and faith in your Son, in whose name we pray. Amen.