

Daniel – Chapter 5

New International Version of the Holy Bible

In our studies of the Book of Daniel we have seen the dark clouds of a growing storm. We have seen the kingdom of Babylon teetering on the very verge of destruction time and again. We have watched and wondered how long the patience and mercy of God would endure. When the end came at last, it came as it usually does – swiftly, as the lightning flashes from its cover in the low-hanging clouds. God waited until it was night. In spirit let us live through that night again before it descends upon our generation. For it was not only an earthly night when Belshazzar, king of the Chaldeans, was slain and Darius the Mede took the kingdom - but a spiritual night as well. It was the end of grace and the beginning of eternal judgment. Such a night comes daily upon thousands of human beings when the words of a final verdict are spoken upon them personally in the hour of death. **“God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end. You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting. Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.”**

Daniel 5:26-28

I

It had been dark enough in the kingdom of Babylon while Nebuchadnezzar sat upon the throne. The shadows of idolatry, ignorance and unbelief lay upon the land like a velvet blanket and enveloped the heart of the king. The Word of the Lord comes to him by

Daniel the prophet, and Nebuchadnezzar strains to listen. He learns in a hard way about the majesty of the true God and bows before it. Yes, the Word of the Lord was abroad in the land and the Name of the Almighty was proclaimed even by the king himself. It was a time of darkness, but of hope as well. For while men listen to the voice of God and heed the works of his hands, there is hope.

But the judgment of God is fair and just. The hand that wrote the fateful words of doom upon the wall in the brightly lighted palace of Belshazzar, Nebuchadnezzar's son and successor, wrote nothing new. For must this not also have been the divine verdict upon Nebuchadnezzar: **"You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting." Daniel 5:27** Was he a better king? Was he less vile and ugly?

Years ago you could walk into a drug store and watch the skilled pharmacist weigh out the grains of medicine carefully upon his delicate scales. Oh how fine those balances were. How they trembled and tilted when the smallest grain of powder fell upon one side against the other. Such scales are fabulously accurate - yet not as exact as the scales of God's judgment. It takes very little sin, not more than a tiny lawless thought in our innermost heart, to put us out of balance with the Lord's holiness. And how shall we, of ourselves acquire so much as a speck of the massive righteousness required by God's law? In this respect there is no difference whatever between any one of us and Nebuchadnezzar or Belshazzar. **" . . . for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. . ."** Romans 3:23 **"There is not a**

righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins.”
Ecclesiastes 7:20 “All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.”
Isaiah 64:6 All of us are in equal condemnation.

But let not that judgment, true as it is, commit any heart to despair. For even in the time of Nebuchadnezzar the star of hope shone. God was revealing himself to Nebuchadnezzar. God had a word to speak, an offer to make, to the king and to his people, all those condemned under God’s law yet greatly loved in God’s heart. Nebuchadnezzar heard that call. It told him to humble himself, to repent. Behind this call was God’s salvation by that promised Savior. No matter that we were weighed in the balances and found wanting - God in his mercy was willing to supply what we lack. All of our sins will be abolished through the suffering of his Son. The needed righteousness will be provided through the obedience of the Christ who lived to keep the law for all people. This offer was ready for Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon just as it is ready for us today. Let the sinner turn from his ways and live, with the Lord there is forgiveness. Where this word resounds and men listen, God waits. The Beloved of God was thrown into the scales on the side of humanity. God threw Jesus in with Nebuchadnezzar, that bloodthirsty tyrant. He threw Jesus into the balance with the inhabitants of wicked Babylon, and waited.

But what did Belshazzar do? He threw Christ off of the scales again! Then it was night, and there was no star anywhere. Belshazzar

had inherited not only a kingdom, but a divine promise of Grace. Belshazzar, who himself was called after the Babylonian name of his pastor (Daniel the prophet), lost all the ground God had gained for him. We find him at a feast for a thousand of his lords along with their wives and concubines - drinking. The offer of peace from the Lord God is gone as though it had never been. The grace that hung over the empire is brushed away. What the father had learned, the son has forgotten and the sins of the father have come back to possess king and country. Belshazzar is drinking the wine of defiance from the vessels from the house of the Lord. The mercy of God has been despised and there is nothing left to throw into the scales. The time has come as it had in the days of the flood, as it did again when Christ wept over Jerusalem, and as it will again when the final shadows close down upon the earth.

Outside, while Belshazzar sat at the banquet, the army of the Medes and Persians were around the city walls. It was this army which broke in on that very night, and the end came. But the king could feast as though there were no danger. Similarly, there are people today who are drunk and merry even though they are surrounded by the troops of the last enemy. But tomorrow they will die out of balance, hopelessly and forever. The last thing they will ever see on this side of the unconsciousness of death will be the white hand of God writing: **“Tekel!” You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting.” Daniel 5:27** And they will understand, but too late.

Late, late, so late; and dark and night and chill.

Late, late, so late. But can we enter still?

Too late, too late. Ye cannot enter now.

Not so light, late; and dark and chill the night.

O let us in, that we may find the light!

Too late. Too late. Ye cannot enter now.

“As he (Jesus) approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, ‘If you even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace – but now it is hidden from your eyes.’ ” Luke 19:41-42

II

How is it with us? In our age the day is far spent. How dark will the night be? No darker, surely, than the night in which Belshazzar weighed in before God and could not tip the scales in his favor. But it is noteworthy that even in the blackness of the brightly lit banquet hall in Babylon a voice was heard, resounding for anyone who might yet listen.

We are told that as the letters of divine judgment stood there, glittering on the wall, the king and his thousand nobles heard a voice from the past, but of another and better age. The queen came into the house of feasting. What a remarkable and meaningful moment! Outside, in the quiet chambers of the palace a regal old lady heard from the servants of the shattering fear that had suddenly silenced the drunken shouts. This woman was the queen-mother, the mother or

grandmother of Belshazzar. Of Nebuchadnezzar's former greatness, only she was left – she and her memories. She lived in the “good” days, though they were bad enough. She recalled how (when sin and shame were at their worst) the voice of God rang out and was heard and understood.

The queen-mother came, in this last hour, to try to save her offspring and her nation. Powerfully, sternly, she addressed the drunken young fool with the words: **“There is a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods in him. In the time of your father he was found to have insight and intelligence and wisdom like that of the gods. King Nebuchadnezzar your father - your father the king, I say - appointed him chief of the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners. This man Daniel, whom the king called Belteshazzar, was found to have a keen mind and knowledge and understanding, and also the ability to interpret dreams, explain riddles and solve difficult problems. Call for Daniel, and he will tell you what the writing means.”** Daniel 5: 11-12 With great force she persuaded the young ruler to turn to a forgotten man, to the man of God. Belshazzar did not even know Daniel anymore but the royal mother brought him back to the attention of the court. It was a last-ditch fight to revive the truth and the hope of God.

We know that it failed. Belshazzar was so hardened that he believed not a word. In the most affable manner he decorated Daniel with the title of third ruler of the kingdom - and this after God had written: **“Peres: Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes**

and Persians.” Daniel 5:28 It is so often the case that the younger generation, the last one, which will lift up its proud and lustful heart against the message of God and bring upon itself the final judgment. Thus our young people have need to consider this story, especially those young people of our day who have behind them the record of glorious past when the Word of God was richly made known. Mark the words of Daniel to Belshazzar: **“But you his son, O Belshazzar, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this.” Daniel 5:22** Daniel told Belshazzar the history of his father and then exclaimed: **“But you his son, O Belshazzar, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this. Instead, you have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven . . . You praised the gods of silver and gold . . . But you did not honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways. Therefore he sent the hand that wrote the inscription.” Daniel 5: 22-25** Here is the trademark of tragedy to which our Lord also referred in speaking to Jerusalem. To her also it could be said: “Thou knowest all this.”

When Belshazzar stared at the four words written on the plaster, why did he not understand them? For the same reason that some of the younger generations of today no longer understand their catechism - because they have put its doctrines out of their minds. They were not mystic symbols unintelligible to the king and his wise men. Students of Aramaic, Babylonian and Hebrew understand them today. But for Belshazzar their message was so old-fashioned, so lacking in “relevance” that he cannot guess the significance. All that God said here was far from his way of thinking. He had put God and his

balances out of his mind. He was having a good time. The old mother could have told him, and did try to tell him what implications lay in that writing. His old pastor told him explicitly. Their speaking was the last echo of hope departed.

It seems that this experience is beginning to repeat itself in our day. God has been very good to us. In the days of our fathers and in our tender youth he made known to us in fullest measure the mercy of his dealings with us in Christ Jesus. We were shown the way to salvation, the way of Truth and Righteousness. It is not the way of the world, but the way of being separate from this world and holding to Christ who tips the balances in our favor and makes us acceptable to his Heavenly Father.

But there are signs that this knowledge is becoming old-fashioned. Churches are reveling in theological celebrations at which liberalism and a lack of concern for the true meaning of God's revealed word given in the Bible. The Bible is no longer sacred and inviolate. Where this develops, the armies of destruction already lie encamped outside the walls; there the finger of God moves in to write. And then it is time to call in those who did not sit at the banquet table. It is time to call in the old folk and listen to them as they tell of the past and speak the Word of the Lord. Indeed, it is almost past time. But for those who will listen with penitent hearts there is yet an hour for turning back to the gracious face of God. Lord, help us all, young and old, so that we turn to our gracious God and live.