

## Daniel 5 The Writing on the Wall

The writing on the wall is not a warning, it's a sentence. It's not an invitation to repent or make an appeal. It's a solemn issuing of a judgement and its consequences. The heavenly Court has already sat, the evidence has been examined and a verdict reached, guilty as charged. Sinning against God is a capital offence so it's death, now, tonight!

We may not like this. It seems harsh, unforgiving. Isn't God supposed to be loving and merciful? Don't we like to think everyone will somehow be alright in the end?

Perhaps in our minds we have a stereotype picture of a 'hellfire preacher' making us feel embarrassed and uncomfortable and we don't like that so we try and be selective with our Bibles and read only the parts that sound nice and reassuring. Privately we might want to tear this page from our Bibles.

One problem with that is that in Luke 13 *Jesus Christ* says people who don't repent of sin will perish. So we would need to tear Jesus out too, that's Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and Acts, in fact the whole New Testament. The prophets, they're pretty strong on sin, Moses and the Commandments too, that's a fair bit of the Old Testament. In fact there's not much left when we start editing God's Word to please ourselves!

It would be better to humbly acknowledge the fact that the Bible teaches consistently that God our Maker is holy and will not tolerate human sin indefinitely. Not everyone repents like Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4. Not everyone is saved and goes to heaven. Some people like Belshazzar die unrepentant and unforgiven and they perish irreversibly!

Let's consider Belshazzar's sin. One of Nebuchadnezzar's successors, coming just a few years later, Belshazzar would have known of Nebuchadnezzar's humbling and conversion recorded in ch 4. He would have been no stranger to the changes and social reforms that had followed in Babylon. But far from respecting the God Who had humbled his predecessor Belshazzar decided to mock and insult the Lord.

It's well documented how people do stupid things when they're drunk. The king was drunk and in his state of diminished responsibility thought it would be cool to defy Daniel's prim Goody Two Shoes God with an act of hedonistic bravado. This was deliberate sacrilege, to defile something sacred, using the Temple vessels to celebrate his arrogant, self-indulgent, immoral lifestyle. As if to say, 'Stuff you God! Look at me! I don't need you, I can make up gods to please myself and you can't stop me!'

God *was* looking and none of Belshazzar's pathetic idols could stop the real Sovereign Lord from condemning and punishing this proud individual.

What should concern us is how common this sort of attitude is today. We live in a culture that is selectively 'pc' but harshly disrespectful of traditional values. Listen how popular TV shows regularly mock all that was once held sacred. Witness how our families and friends and neighbours disregard God's moral standards and use our Master's name as an expletive. Look how church members' bibles gather dust and the sacraments are treated with contempt as of little significance.

The writing could be on the wall for many in our generation!

Note here the prophet's responsibility. Daniel must have been greatly encouraged by the changes initiated by a reformed Nebuchadnezzar and equally dismayed by the backward change of direction with Belshazzar. God's servant kept trusting in the Lord and doing good and was faithful and courageous in declaring God's Word of truth, even when it was one of solemn judgement.

The lesson for the Church today could be stated like this: the writing is plainly visible on the wall, God's truth is right here in black and white in the Bible, but it needs to be carefully translated and explained in all its fulness to each new generation. Part of our calling as followers of Jesus is to share the messages of Scripture every way we can.

What was the message in this particular instance? And what are the abiding principles?

Mene. Numbered. Time limited. For Belshazzar time is up. It will be up for everyone sooner or later but there may yet be grace so we must urge people to seek the Lord while he may be found.

Tekel. Weighed. Belshazzar was found morally and spiritually lacking. Insufficient righteousness. All human beings have a sinful falling short of what God has set and the New Testament tells us the wages of such sin is death.

Parsin. Divided. The Persians were already in the streets of Babylon and would have power by morning. A sober reminder that all the material things we gather in this life will be divided among others when we die. It's a true saying that we take nothing with us. Jesus taught His listeners not to treasure the passing things of this earth but to invest in heavenly treasure, seeking as of first importance the kingdom of God and His righteousness. This is what will matter when we pass from this world to stand before God's throne.

Now some might say we're being gloomy in church today and there is much here that is serious and sobering. There's no hope for Belshazzar but is there a sliver of light and comfort for others in Daniel ch 5? There is, in the fact that God preserves a witness in Daniel himself and the prophecies he records. Despite the blasphemous rebellion of people like Belshazzar God is not finished with His creation. He is working out His purpose through Daniel, through His peoples' exile in Babylon, through all the peoples and kingdoms on earth, the dramatic events of history and the days and years when nothing much seems to be happening.

600 years after Daniel, as the prophet predicted, God set up his eternal kingdom by sending His Son to live and die and rise victorious. The Word of the Lord yields its fruit in due season, judgement on those who rebel, salvation for those who turn and trust. It's all here, in writing, promising life and every reason to give thanks and praise.

I'm thinking again of the writing on the wall and that reminder that all the things we gather here will soon be divided, leaving us to stand empty handed before God's throne. No gold or silver, no credit card, worldly position or prestige to help us gain entry. All we might carry with us on that day would be a name, a name to enter as our plea. The hymn writer expressed it well:

'Nothing in my hand I bring  
Simply to thy cross I cling  
Naked look to Thee for dress  
Helpless look to Thee for grace  
Foul, I to the fountain fly  
Wash me, (Jesus) Saviour, or I die!'

When we trust in that name, the name of Jesus, we find the most amazing, redeeming love and grace, all the plea that is necessary and so are filled with gratitude.

'Were the whole realm of nature mine, that would be an offering far too small.  
Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all!'