

# HANDWRITING ON THE WALL

## *SERIES: FORTIFIED FOR FAITHFULNESS*

By Steve Zeisler

Daniel 5 begins with this statement: “King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles...” This banquet turned out to be perhaps the most famous party in all of history, but not for the reasons that King Belshazzar was hoping. The story that has become known as “Belshazzar’s feast” has been set to classical music, referred to in great works of literature, and depicted in one of Rembrandt’s most famous paintings. This account is memorable, powerful, and very sad.

The story of Belshazzar’s feast ends thus: “That very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain, and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom, at the age of sixty-two.” These words also describe the end of the Babylonian Empire. Other historical documents, especially the work of the Greek historian Herodotus, tell the story of how this great city was captured in October, 539 BC. Belshazzar and his officials assumed that the city of Babylon could never be taken. It had been built as an impregnable fortress with massive walls, and with vast stores of food, water, and other supplies to withstand a siege. Though the Babylonians were in a weakened state militarily and the Persian army was advancing, they assumed that their fortress would protect them. However, the Persians had an effective strategy. They diverted the Tigris River, then marched along the dry riverbed under the supposedly impregnable wall and into the city. They found the people of the city much like their ruler, drunk and dissipated--easy prey.

The account of Belshazzar’s feast is out of chronological sequence. It took place after the events described in chapter 7. But Daniel placed this story about the end of the empire here for literary reasons. He intended for us to read about Belshazzar’s demise immediately after the story of Nebuchadnezzar’s conversion, because we are supposed to see a contrast between them. As you will recall from chapter 4, Nebuchadnezzar praised himself at the height of his accomplishments, and he was made insane for a period of seven years, as had been predicted. He declared afterward, “Now, I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the God of heaven... those who walk in pride he is able to humble.” The story that immediately follows in chapter 5 is, sadly, about a very different sort of man from Nebuchadnezzar.

You will recognize when we get into this account that there are similarities between it and the accounts of both chapter 2 and chapter 4. In both of those chapters the disturbing actions of God required Daniel, the servant of God, to interpret them. He will do so again in Belshazzar’s case, though with a twist.

A final word of background concerns the references to Nebuchadnezzar as the father of Belshazzar. It is clear, however, that Belshazzar was not Nebuchadnezzar’s son. Belshazzar’s actual father was a man named Nabonidus who seized the throne in the chaotic years after Nebuchadnezzar died. Some critics claim this is an inaccuracy due to the book’s having been compiled much later by someone who was not sufficiently acquainted with the facts.

It is wiser to give Daniel credit as the storyteller. Belshazzar’s references to Nebuchadnezzar as his father are hopeful, while Daniel’s are ironic. It’s true that elsewhere in Scripture an individual may be spoken of as the son of someone even though he is not of direct descent. Sometimes generations are skipped over, and claiming sonhood of a great forebear was not unusual in those times. There are other ways in which the language of “father” and “son” is malleable, too. In this case, though, I am convinced that Belshazzar longed to be seen as Nebuchadnezzar’s son, and that he took up the name “son of King Nebuchadnezzar” in order to exalt himself.

Daniel, on the other hand, uses this language deliberately to make us see the inadequacy of the man who was claiming Nebuchadnezzar's title and name. Belshazzar's claim to Nebuchadnezzar's status was a sham, and the effect was to highlight his failure and hypocrisy.

Now let's examine the text of this dramatic tale.

## **A pretender on the throne**

Verse 1-2:

**King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine with them. While Belshazzar was drinking his wine, he gave orders to bring in the gold and silver goblets that Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken from the temple in Jerusalem, so that the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines might drink from them.**

In those two verses there are three references to drinking. Since it was a great banquet we can already safely assume they would be drinking wine. The repeated references to drinking therefore tell us something about this man and his nobles. He was someone who needed alcohol. He was socially inadequate apart from it.

Verses 3-4:

**So they brought in the gold goblets that had been taken from the temple of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines drank from them. As they drank the wine, they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone.**

They praised idols, attempting to put gods in place to protect their city, no doubt the gods of Babylon, and dared to deliberately ridicule and dishonor the Lord whose temple was in Jerusalem.

Verses 5-6:

**Suddenly the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall, near the lampstand in the royal palace. The king watched the hand as it wrote. His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his knees knocked together and his legs gave way.**

One commentator surmises, I think rightly, that this writing was scratched into the plaster of the wall with a fingernail. It probably sounded like a fingernail on a chalkboard. Imagine the eerily flickering oil lamp illuminating this terrifying, disembodied hand forming a message. It was abrupt and very frightening.

"His knees knocked together and his legs gave way." The Aramaic word translated "legs" in the New International Version (and "hip joints" in the New American Standard Version) really means "loins," the midriff or the center section of the body. There is a fairly good chance that this is not a reference to legs or joints, but to the bowels and bladder. Belshazzar was staggering around half-drunk, white-faced, with his knees knocking, his clothing soiled, and wine spilled down his front, while a disembodied hand scratched a message on the wall.

Verse 7:

**The king called out for the enchanters, astrologers and diviners to be brought and said to these wise men of Babylon, "Whoever reads this writing and tells me what it means will be**

**clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed around his neck, and he will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom.**

This would turn out to be a very hollow offer, because the kingdom was going to last only about three more hours, but Belshazzar didn't know that yet.

Verses 8-12:

**Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or tell the king what it meant. So King Belshazzar became even more terrified and his face grew more pale. His nobles were baffled.**

**The queen, hearing the voices of the king and his nobles, came into the banquet hall. "O king, live forever!" she said. "Don't be alarmed! Don't look so pale! 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 Belshazzar, 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."**

We are told in verse 1 that the wives, concubines, and nobles of Belshazzar were already present at the feast. But there was one queen who was not there, and most commentators agree that this was a dowager queen. She was either the mother or grandmother of Belshazzar, or one of the younger queens of Nebuchadnezzar (he had been dead for some time). This older woman, whoever she was, arrived and gave a grandmotherly lecture to this failure of a king. "Get a grip! The Persian army is outside the gate right now, and what we need is somebody who can strengthen and lead these people! You're drunk! Your knees are knocking, your shorts are soiled, and you are a sad excuse for a king, which this nation needs right now!" She was trying to stir Belshazzar to royal leadership. Her references to Nebuchadnezzar were surely intended to inspire and fortify him.

Pathetically, Belshazzar was a hollow man. His life was based on a series of bad assumptions about himself. He had a facade of royalty, a name and title that he held on to for dear life. He threw parties that suggested regal authority, he issued commands, spoke of gods, and used religious implements as articles of ridicule and dishonor. He acted as if he were someone important and substantial, but he was none of those things. He was a man who imagined that because he sat on a great throne, he was a great person. He imagined that because thick walls surrounded him, he was safe from harm. He imagined that because he spoke with bravado when drunk, he was brave. But none of those things were true.

The lesson taught in the story of Nebuchadnezzar's fall was that a man or woman at the highest point of human accomplishment is nothing in comparison to the Lord God. The most successful, bright, and capable human beings owe everything, even their breath and their sanity, to God. The lesson taught in the story of Belshazzar's feast is different. This account regards a person who was pretending to be successful and needed to learn the truth. You could make a case that Nebuchadnezzar, in his own time, was probably the most successful man who ever lived. But Belshazzar dissipated everything. He was lying to himself, lying to others, surrounded by sycophants who told him stories to support his illusions.

**Numbered, weighed, finished**

Verses 13-16:

**So Daniel was brought before the king, and the king said to him, “Are you Daniel, one of the exiles my father the king brought from Judah? I have heard that the spirit of the gods is in you and that you have insight, intelligence and outstanding wisdom. The wise men and enchanters were brought before me to read this writing and tell me what it means, but they could not explain it. Now I have heard you are able to give interpretations and to solve difficult problems. If you can read this writing and tell me what it means, you will be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed around your neck, and you will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom.”**

Daniel was in retirement when he was summoned to speak to Belshazzar. He had begun his career of speaking truth to the king of Babylon when he was a very young man. He was too insignificant in his youth to have anything to offer, yet God had thrust him into the presence of the king and enabled him to interpret the king’s dream. In his middle years he had been the king’s counselor. In his older years (he was certainly in his eighties by now) he had been set aside by Nebuchadnezzar’s successors. But as the dowager queen did, the old man soberly spoke the truth.

Belshazzar tried to buy him off, saying, “I’ll exalt you to third-highest ruler in the kingdom--robes, gold chains, the whole thing!” But Daniel said, as he always had, “I don’t want what you have to offer.” Daniel’s convictions are well described in the simple gospel song:

*I’d rather have Jesus than silver or gold,  
I’d rather be His than have riches untold;  
I’d rather have Jesus than houses or lands,  
I’d rather be led by His nail-pierced hand  
Than to be the king of a vast domain  
Or be held in sin’s dread sway;  
I’d rather have Jesus than anything  
This world affords today. (1)*

Verses 17-30:

**Then Daniel answered the king, “You may keep your gifts for yourself and give your rewards to someone else. Nevertheless, I will read the writing for the king and tell him what it means.**

**“O king, the Most High God gave your father Nebuchadnezzar [note Daniel’s sarcasm] sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendor. Because of the high position he gave him, all the peoples and nations and men of every language dreaded and feared him. Those the king wanted to put to death, he put to death; those he wanted to spare, he spared; those he wanted to promote, he promoted; and those he wanted to humble, he humbled. But when his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory. He was driven away from people and given the mind of an animal; he lived with the wild donkeys and ate grass like cattle; and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, until he acknowledged that the Most High God is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and sets over them anyone he wishes.**

**“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 had the goblets from his temple brought to you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines drank wine from**

**them. You praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or understand. 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.**

**“This is the inscription that was written:**

**MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN**

**“This is what these words mean:**

***Mene:* God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end.**

***Tekel:* You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting.**

***Peres:* Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.”**

**Then at Belshazzar’s command, Daniel was clothed in purple, a gold chain was placed around his neck, and he was proclaimed the third highest ruler in the kingdom.**

**That very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain, and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom, at the age of sixty-two.**

The center of Daniel’s indictment was this: “You knew better! You saw what happened to Nebuchadnezzar. God taught him a hard lesson and he learned it well. But even though you knew that, you have purposefully dishonored the God of heaven.” The affront to God was clear and calculated.

The words written on the wall, translated into English, read: “Numbered. Numbered. Weighed. Divided.” They mean, “Your days have been numbered. The number is up. The kingdom is over. Your life is forfeit.” Or put another way, “You have come to the end of yourself and your reign. Your life has been analyzed--placed on a scale to see what it’s worth. And it doesn’t weigh anything!” Nebuchadnezzar was symbolized by a head of gold, but Belshazzar’s life amounted to a speck of dust. “Your life has been found wanting. Therefore, the city (and empire) you had imagined impregnable has been taken away from you and given to another nation to rule.”

What are we to make of a story like this? Again, it is important to have the perspective of the previous story of Nebuchadnezzar, a man in his greatness made to humble himself before the surpassing greatness of God. The highest person is made nothing by the hand of God, yet he is also the recipient of the grace of God. Then what of a lesser soul like Belshazzar whose greatness was only in his own imagination, who made claims about himself that weren’t true? The best place to go for answers is the book of Romans.

## **Reconciliation and restoration**

The first three chapters of Romans, specifically the end of the first chapter, are an indictment of human inadequacy, of those who knew of God but refused to acknowledge or thank him. That leads up to 2:1: “You, therefore, have no excuse....” Paul declares, “You have nothing to offer. You have no claim on God. You must see who you really are.” What did God do to make plain human inadequacy? It says in 1:24, “God gave them over.” That is, he took his hands off, removed himself. He gave them their own way. “Act out who you are. Display yourself in clear fashion.” In summary we read, “Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools....” Belshazzar in the book of Daniel is “People’s Exhibit A.”

What is Paul's point in rendering humanity without excuse in his indictment? We must come to the end of ourselves, have our balloon burst, in order to cry out for mercy to the One who can help. That's why the rest of the gospel story is so important. Having no excuse, we were enemies of God and rightly called to account. And how does God treat his enemies? "For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!" (5:10). We come to the end of ourselves so we can find a Savior who will take our place and offer us life!

And what if Christians are weak and fail? Paul cries out, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God--through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (7:24). There is a great summary statement (to a complex, brilliant argument) in Romans 8:31: "What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us?" We are brought to the place where we have no excuses left so we can thankfully march under this banner: God is for us! In the end it is not our lives that are forfeit, but only our faithlessness.

The story of Belshazzar's feast has fascinated readers for centuries. It has done so because it vividly illustrates the human predicament: we have only bravado to cover inadequacy and useless defenses in the face of judgment. May we therefore believe and preach the gospel: Thanks be to God--through Jesus Christ our Lord!

## Notes

1. Rhea F. Miller, *I'd Rather Have Jesus*. © 1922, 1950.

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Steve Zeisler  
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