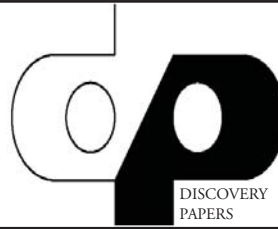


WHEN FORGETTING IS FATAL

SERIES: WHEN KINGDOMS COLLIDE



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Don't you hate it when you forget something? In college, a friend of mine and I drove up to Vancouver, Canada one spring break. We were planning on working with some missionaries up there who ministered among Native Americans.

But someone told us about a Chinese restaurant in the middle of downtown that we just had to try. It was called Foo's Ho Ho. This is what we had to do before Yelp: rely on one person's recommendation. This restaurant still exists and I've looked it up on Yelp. 12 reviews. 3.5 stars. These days I'd never go to a restaurant like that.

But this was before Yelp, so we had to find Foo's Ho Ho. We drove to downtown Vancouver and tried our best to find it. Of course, this was also before Google Maps, so finding it was more difficult too. When we finally saw it, we couldn't find a place to park for a long time. Finally after driving around for a bit, we found a spot in a not-so-nice section of town and walked back to the restaurant.

We had a nice meal. It must not have been extraordinary, but I think it was good. Much less stressful than finding the place. Then we walked back to the car. When we got there, my friend realized that he had locked the keys in the car. He couldn't find them and the car was locked. Looking in the car, we realized they were actually still in the ignition. I happened to be standing near the rear of the car and noticed something hot hitting my leg.

It was the exhaust of the car. Not only had we locked the keys in the car in a bad part of town, but we had left the car running. We counted ourselves very fortunate that the car was still there to be found after our meal.

How many of you have forgotten your keys in the car before? How many of you have actually left the car running and forgotten about it?

We all forget things.

The story we are looking at this morning is about a forgetful man. But his forgetting had severe consequences. It cost him his life. Today we're talking about *When Forgetting is Fatal*.

For the last several weeks, we've been in the book of Daniel as part of a series called *When Kingdoms Collide*. This book talks about two kingdoms that regularly come into conflict. The first is the kingdom of man, where we spend most of our daily energy. The second is the kingdom of God, which we are a part of if we believe in Jesus Christ.

We've been talking about how we manage to live in both kingdoms at once. Faith in Christ doesn't mean you escape all the realities of the kingdom of man. You are still in the world. But living in the world can't mean that we ignore the truth of the kingdom of God. Following Jesus means living faithfully in the kingdom of God while staying present in the kingdom of man.

One of our difficulties is that we forget. We're always forgetting things. And because the kingdom of man is so prevalent, so obvious in our everyday lives, it can be really easy to forget that there is another kingdom which is equally real. In fact, I think one of the biggest hindrances to living well in the kingdom of God is simply that we forget about it. We are prone to forget even the most important things in our life.

For the last five weeks, we've heard about King Nebuchadnezzar: one of the greatest kings of Babylon. Today we are introduced to another ruler: Belshazzar. This king forgets in a massive way. He forgets about the God of Israel.

As we read his story, we're going to think about the reasons that we forget. Not all forgetting is the same. We'll talk about the consequences of forgetting. And we'll think about how important it is to remember. Our hope is that we can figure out why it is that the kingdom of God is so easy to forget and how we can remember it on a more daily basis.

A Feast to Forget

We'll start by reading about what this king did.

Daniel 5:1–4—

King Belshazzar made a great feast for a thousand of his lords and drank wine in front of the thousand.

²Belshazzar, when he tasted the wine, commanded that the vessels of gold and of silver that Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken out of the temple in Jerusalem be brought, that the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them. ³Then they brought in the golden vessels that had been taken out of the temple, the house of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines drank from them. ⁴They drank wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone.

The first verse introduces King Belshazzar. Belshazzar probably never actually held the title of king, but he acted in that role. His actual father was King Nabonidus, who frequently left him in charge of the kingdom while he was off in other pursuits. Throughout this passage he is referred to as the son of Nebuchadnezzar in the sense that he followed after him as a king of Babylon. There is no evidence of any direct blood lineage.

The passage begins by describing a great feast. One thousand guests is a lot of people, even by contemporary standards. He brings out the temple vessels that were stolen from Jerusalem and uses them to party and praise every other god he can think of except the God of Israel.

This is a quite a party. But when you understand the context, you know something important about this party. It was a good-bye party. From other Jewish writings, we learn that Belshazzar's feast probably occurred on the day that Babylon was taken by the Persians. A few days earlier Nabonidus had surrendered on his way back to the city. This was the day that the Persians arrived and took over. So this party is probably happening while the enemy armies that are about to conquer Babylon are at the gates of the city.

It's curious that Belshazzar chose the God of Israel to blaspheme on this night. In a way, it's kind of an honor. He praised all the other gods, but blasphemed this one. In a weird way, it almost validates that the God of Israel is powerful. In fact, when things fall apart, people often do one of two things. They beg God for help or they curse him in anger.

I think Belshazzar knows that the God of Israel is powerful. That's why he's thumbing his nose at him on his last night. He throws a party and spits in God's face. He surrounds himself with wine and concubines and tries desperately to impress a thousand of his colleagues before he faces the music. Belshazzar is trying to forget. His world is falling apart, so he's trying to distract himself in order to forget all about it.

This is a common thing to do. In fact, there is a hit song right now called "Habits" by Tove Lo that describes the same exact thing. In the song, she has just broken up with someone and she wants to forget. She says,

*You're gone and I gotta stay
High all the time
To keep you off my mind
I spend my days
Locked in a haze
Trying to forget you babe.*

The look on this woman's face in her music video as she's trying to forget is all too familiar. Desperately trying to do anything to push away the painful situation that she is facing.

This is what Belshazzar is doing. Trying to forget and making some bad decisions as he does so. Do we ever do this? Turn to questionable things to avoid dealing with the things in our lives that need to be dealt with?

Belshazzar tried to create a kind of alternate reality to forget about the one that he was living in. In real life he was about to die, so he made himself a new version of reality where he was a god. He was the life of the party. He was drinking out of goblets meant for a god. He was surrounded by concubines. He indulged himself in every kind of pleasure.

Of course, we can use many of the same tools to forget. Alcohol can be abused as a way to forget what's real and live in a false reality. It has the power to carry us away into something else. It's easy to go from having

a beer to relax after a long day to drinking a six-pack as an escape from your painful life.

Pornography has the same appeal. Instead of dealing with the insecurities and all the complexities of real relationships, pornography offers the chance to be powerful. For sex to be simple. To escape the painful limitations of real life.

There are other things we can use that might not be as inherently dangerous, but can become so if we use them with this kind of goal: video games, Facebook, our smartphones, romance novels, the list goes on. We're such creative people; we can find a way to turn anything good into a way to forget what we don't want to deal with. What do you try to forget? How do you try to forget it?

The problem, of course, with all these things is that when you use them to forget, you are living a lie. And lies eventually unravel. This is what Belshazzar found out.

An Ominous Reminder

Belshazzar is trying to forget the fact that his kingdom is falling apart. But he makes the mistake of sticking his middle finger up to God in an effort to forget. That's never a good idea. God shows up to remind him.

Daniel 5:5–9—

Immediately the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace, opposite the lampstand. And the king saw the hand as it wrote. ⁶Then the king's color changed, and his thoughts alarmed him; his limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together. ⁷The king called loudly to bring in the enchanters, the Chaldeans, and the astrologers. The king declared to the wise men of Babylon, "Whoever reads this writing, and shows me its interpretation, shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around his neck and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom." ⁸Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or make known to the king the interpretation. ⁹Then King Belshazzar was greatly alarmed, and his color changed, and his lords were perplexed.

This is an ominous scene. It's the source of a well-known phrase in our culture. Someone might say to you, "the writing is on the wall" and you know that it means the end is about to come. It would be frightening to watch a human hand appear out of nowhere and write on the wall in the middle of a dinner party.

When the king sees this, he is scared. The phrase translated *his limbs gave way* literally reads, his bowels were loosened. It probably means our king had a little accident in his pants. It's the same word used later in verse 12 when Daniel is described as being able to solve or literally *loosen* problems.

Why does God appear to Belshazzar? He didn't have to. Sure, Belshazzar had blasphemed him, but he was about to die anyway. Why does God do this?

Here we get our first indication that when man forgets, God reminds.

God likes to remind people of who he is. He isn't trying to scare Belshazzar or to rub anything in his face. He's showing up to remind him who he's dealing with. And more importantly to remind the people that will survive of who he is. Think about the thousand people at this party. God shows up for them to remember that God is more than Belshazzar is making him out to be.

God is always giving people reminders. He gave Noah the rainbow to remind him of God's mercy. He gave Abraham circumcision to remind him of God's choice. Incidentally, Abraham probably felt like Noah got the better treatment there. And then God gave his people the Law—the ultimate reminder of who God is and how his people were to treat him.

Do you remember how the Law was written? Exodus 31:18 says, *He gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.* God wrote his Law using his finger to remind his people of something important. The Law was a way for God's people to remember how to live as God intended them to live.

Then God writes a message to Belshazzar on the wall, using his finger. This writing is a way for the people gathered there to remember that forgetting God has consequences. When Belshazzar tries to forget, God reminds.

A Forgotten Friend

So God sends this message to Belshazzar, but he also sends him someone that can help him interpret it. Belshazzar hasn't just forgotten God, he's also forgotten about Daniel.

Daniel 5:10–12—

The queen, because of the words of the king and his lords, came into the banqueting hall, and the queen declared, “O king, live forever! Let not your thoughts alarm you or your color change. ¹¹There is a man in your kingdom in whom is the spirit of the holy gods. In the days of your father, light and understanding and wisdom like the wisdom of the gods were found in him, and King Nebuchadnezzar, your father—your father the king—made him chief of the magicians, enchanters, Chaldeans, and astrologers, ¹²because an excellent spirit, knowledge, and understanding to interpret dreams, explain riddles, and solve problems were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Belteshazzar. Now let Daniel be called, and he will show the interpretation.”

The queen here is probably the queen mother. It's probably the wife of Nabonidus: Belshazzar's mother. So first the king has an accident in his pants, then his mommy needs to remind him of someone who can help. You know that feeling: when your mom reminds you of something you forgot. Mothers are great at reminding us. That's why we can't live without them, and sometimes feel like we can't live with them.

The queen mother reminds Belshazzar of Daniel. Years earlier, Nebuchadnezzar had made Daniel chief of the advisors, but apparently his status had diminished in recent years. By now, Daniel has almost been forgotten.

Sometimes our lives are difficult so we do things to forget what is going on. But other times, those things that we used to hold important just kind of fade from view. We don't necessarily mean to forget them. They just drift further and further into the background of our lives. That's what happened with Daniel. He was just gradually forgotten.

A few years ago, I came across a backup file from the computer that I used in college. I started looking

through some of the files and it jogged a bunch of memories. But it also failed to jog some memories. I came across several papers that I had apparently written for some of the religious studies classes that I took to fulfill my minor. A few were on topics that I still find very interesting, like how Martin Luther and John Calvin's views on the authority of Scripture differ.

But as I read these papers, it was like I had never seen them before. For all I knew, someone else wrote them. Some of their ideas were really helpful and interesting. But I had absolutely no recollection of writing them. I'm quite sure that when I did write them, they were at the top of my list. I probably stayed up late to get them done. They were the most important thing in my life at the time. But now, almost 20 years later, I couldn't remember them at all.

The same thing can happen with the kingdom of God. We go on a retreat or attend a Bible study or listen to a sermon and the kingdom of God can feel like it is the most powerful thing in our lives. But then time goes on and we move on to other things and those feelings fade. We can hardly remember them anymore.

Does the kingdom of God ever seem to drift away for you? In the middle of a busy week with all the activity of the kingdom of man, does God fade into the distance? I thought that wouldn't be the case for me when I changed from working in technology to working in full time ministry. But I've been surprised at how easy it is, even as a pastor, to forget about God. I can easily just go about my work and allow God to fade until he is just a distant voice. We need to remember.

A Forgotten Lesson

This is where Daniel shows up on the scene. He begins by reminding Belshazzar about the story we heard last week. Nebuchadnezzar, the king whose power was unmatched, was humbled by the Most High God by living like a beast in the woods. But in the end, he learned that the “*Most High God rules the kingdom of mankind.*” Nebuchadnezzar learned to respect God.

But Belshazzar forgot that lesson. Before Daniel interprets the writing, he rebukes Belshazzar for forgetting.

Daniel 5:22–23—

And you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this, ²³but you have lifted up yourself against

the Lord of heaven. And the vessels of his house have been brought in before you, and you and your lords, your wives, and your concubines have drunk wine from them. And you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which do not see or hear or know, but the God in whose hand is your breath, and whose are all your ways, you have not honored.

This is a scathing rebuke. Daniel tells Belshazzar that he should have known better. He should have remembered the lesson that Nebuchadnezzar learned. But he didn't. Instead, Daniel fires off accusation after accusation. *You have not humbled your heart; you have lifted up yourself; you have desecrated the temple vessels, you have not honored God, and you have praised false Gods.*

Daniel does not mince words at all. He tells it straight to Belshazzar. *You should have known better. You knew who God was; you knew the right thing to do; and you did the opposite anyway.*

Daniel accuses Belshazzar of intentionally forgetting God—shutting God out and pushing him away. Sometimes we want to forget things in our life as a way of escaping. Sometimes we forget because things gradually fade away. But sometimes, we know something to be true and we forget it because it's more convenient to forget than to remember.

It's not easy to live in two kingdoms at once. Living in the reality of the kingdom of God can take its toll on us. We get tired. We forget. And we decide that it's easier to forget. It's easier to turn our backs. Our fathers may have learned humility and worship. Maybe we've learned it as well. But pride and independence seem like the easier route most of the time. So we forget.

Deciding to forget often starts with simple decisions. I'm too tired to go to church. It's too hard to confront that person that annoys me. Understanding the Bible is too complicated. I'm sick of people thinking I'm crazy for believing in God.

The way to stop that process is to remember. All it takes is one time of remembering to wipe out a bunch of forgetful moments. I can forget where I left my keys for hours, but as soon as I remember, it's all good. Remembering wipes out forgetting.

I've talked to a lot of people who believe in Jesus. I've also talked to a lot of people who don't believe in Jesus. There's something interesting about both groups. For the most part, they all have the same questions. It's not what you might expect.

If you ask people who don't believe in Jesus why they don't believe, they'll list off a set of questions. So you might think that people who do believe don't have those questions. But you'd mostly be wrong. Even after you believe in Jesus, most people are still asking some of those questions.

Do you know what that means? It means that evidence is almost never the issue.

I used to wish that God would just show up to me. That he would just make himself real in some incredible way. Write on my wall with a scary looking hand. Show up in person and speak to me. Let me put my fingers in the sides of Jesus and know for sure that he rose from the dead.

But I've since realized that God has shown up to me. He has revealed himself. It may not be as dramatic or obvious, but it has been enough. It's not more evidence that I need; it's a better memory.

When God led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, he stopped the flow of a huge river to allow them to walk through on dry ground. That's pretty good evidence. A short while later, they built a statue and claimed that it led them out of Egypt.

We forget because sometimes it's easier to forget. It was easier for the Israelites to think that a golden statue led them out of Egypt. It's easier for us to forget about God so we can do whatever we want. Often, people don't need more evidence. They just want to live their lives on their own terms: sleep with whomever they want, spend their money however they want, and be their own god.

We don't need more evidence. We need to remember.

Forgetting is Fatal

We have to remember because forgetting has consequences. That's what Belshazzar found out. Listen to Daniel's explanation of the warning and what happened next.

Daniel 5:24–28 and 30–31—

“Then from his presence the hand was sent, and this writing was inscribed. ²⁵And this is the writing that was inscribed: Mene, Mene, Tekel, and Parsin. ²⁶This is the interpretation of the matter: Mene, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; ²⁷Tekel, you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting; ²⁸Peres, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.”

³⁰That very night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was killed. ³¹And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old.

The actual inscription that the hand wrote out is very interesting. The Aramaic words are simply measures of weight. They were normally used for monetary weights to indicate value. It would translate to “mina, mina, shekel, and a half.” That would be similar to me saying, “ton, ton, pound, and an ounce.” But because these were monetary weights, it’s almost as if he is counting out a price. Like he’s laying down a 20 dollar bill, another 20, a one, and a quarter.

But then Daniel takes those words that refer to monetary weights and he re-translates them to mean something different for Belshazzar. He goes back to the roots of the words and applies them in a different way. *Mene* comes from the root word for numbering, so he says that God has numbered his days. *Tekel* comes from the root word for weighing, so he says that God has found Belshazzar lacking. *Peres* is the root for half, so he says that God has decreed that his kingdom be divided.

This is a very strong thing to say to a king. Daniel says that God has decided Belshazzar’s kingdom will be numbered, weighed, and split. That it is short, weak, and divided. That’s not the kind of kingdom that any king wants to have.

At the end of the story from last week, we heard Nebuchadnezzar describe God’s kingdom in exactly opposite terms (Daniel 4:34-35). After being humbled and turned into a beast, he concluded that God’s kingdom would last forever, that it was unbreakably strong and that it was completely unified under the authority of God—an eternal, powerful, unified kingdom.

This is the kind of kingdom that every king wants. Nebuchadnezzar realized that the only way to get it was to be a part of God’s kingdom. Belshazzar forgot that and so his kingdom became exactly the opposite. Short. Weak. Divided.

The writing on the wall was meant to tell Belshazzar and all those with him one simple truth: Forgetting God doesn’t get you what you want.

That very night, Belshazzar was killed. Forgetting cost him his life. The cost that we face is not quite as dramatic, but it isn’t all that different either. Forgetting God may not mean that we are killed by an enemy king, but it does mean that we miss out on the life that we were meant for. Forgetting God destroys our spiritual life.

It doesn’t matter how we forget. The consequences are the same. Maybe we abuse alcohol or use pornography to push away the difficult things in our lives. But the king of Persia is still at the gates. We can’t change reality.

Maybe God just drifts away. The cares of this world or the promises of recreation and entertainment make him fade away. There will come a day when we look around and wonder how we got there.

Or maybe we’re tired of following God, so we forget him on purpose. We’ve had enough. We’re tired and we’re done. It won’t be long before we realize that those decisions have consequences.

We forget God because we think we don’t need him. We forget God because we think that other gods will give us what we want. We forget God because we want to be God. We want to be in control. But we’re not. If we try to forget that, it will all eventually come crashing down. Forgetting God is a dangerous thing to do.

The only way to an eternal, powerful, unified kingdom is to be a part of God’s kingdom. The only way to the life that we want is through God. When we forget him, we put that at risk. Forgetting the kingdom of God really can be fatal.

Conclusion

My friend and I were lucky that forgetting the keys in the car, while it was running, didn’t have any consequences. Belshazzar wasn’t so lucky. His forgetting the kingdom of God ended the Babylonian kingdom

and ended his life. His example is a warning to us that we should be careful about doing likewise.

But for the people of God, this story is also an encouragement. The fall of the Babylonian empire set the stage for them to return to their land. The Persians who took over were the ones who eventually would allow them to go back to the land of Israel and start to rebuild their cities.

So for them, this story was a reminder that God didn't forget his people in exile. He remembered them and he saved them. When man forgets, God remembers.

And God reminds us. I'm so thankful for that.

If our relationship with God was entirely up to us to remember, we'd be in trouble. But this story gives us hope that even when we forget, God reminds us. After all, God went through a lot of trouble to remind Belshazzar, the ruler of an empire opposed to him. How much more will he help us to remember and live in his kingdom?

We forget because of difficult things going on in our lives. We forget because God fades into the background. We forget because it seems easier to forget than to remember. But remembering is important. It's one of the most repeated commands in the whole Bible. Remember. Remember. Remember. We need to be careful not to forget.

But we can also trust that God will remind us. He will not forget and he will help us remember. Let's pay attention to when he does. Read the writing on the wall and turn back to him. Remember the kingdom of God.