

Faithful Under Empire

Daniel 5 - "When God Weighs an Empire"

INTRODUCTION:

One of the most striking photographs of the 20th century shows passengers relaxing aboard the RMS *Titanic*. They are dressed elegantly, dining, reading, laughing, and listening to music. The image is haunting because modern viewers know what they did not: the ship had already struck the iceberg. The orchestra still played. Conversations continued. Fine china still clinked. Yet the fate of the ship had already been sealed.

Daniel 5 presents a similar scene. While Persian soldiers were preparing to enter Babylon, Belshazzar hosted one of history's most extravagant banquets. The wine flowed, idols were praised, and sacred vessels from God's temple became drinking cups. The king believed he was celebrating Babylon's invincibility. In reality, he was presiding over its funeral. Before the night was over, God Himself would write the verdict on the wall.

The lesson is timeless: people often mistake God's patience for God's approval. Judgment may seem delayed, but when God declares that the days have been "numbered," no empire, no ruler, and no individual can postpone the appointed hour. Daniel 5 reminds us that the safest place is not inside the strongest earthly kingdom, but within the eternal kingdom of God.

Earthly empires appear permanent until God enters the courtroom. Human pride may ignore God's warnings, but His judgment always arrives on time.

This chapter is the climax of the Babylon section of Daniel. Daniel 2 showed Babylon's future. Daniel 3 showed God's superiority over Babylon's gods. Daniel 4 humbled its greatest king. Daniel 5 demonstrates that a nation which refuses to learn from God's discipline eventually falls.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

- Date: Approximately 539 B.C.
- Babylon had ruled the Near East for about seventy years.
- Nebuchadnezzar had been dead over twenty years.
- The final ruler of Babylon was Nabonidus, who spent much of his reign in Arabia.
- His son Belshazzar ruled Babylon as co-regent, explaining why Daniel could only become "third ruler in the kingdom" (5:7, 16, 29). The first two positions were occupied by Nabonidus and Belshazzar.

For many centuries critics claimed Belshazzar never existed because Greek historians mentioned Nabonidus as Babylon's last king. Modern archaeology vindicated Daniel through the discovery of the Nabonidus Cylinder and other cuneiform texts identifying Belshazzar as crown prince and co-regent.

This is another example where archaeology eventually confirmed Scripture rather than corrected it.

International Situation

The Persian armies under Cyrus had already conquered much of the empire.

Outside Babylon's walls:

- Persian armies surrounded the city.
- Babylon believed itself unconquerable.
- Massive walls.

- Huge food supplies.
- Euphrates River through the city.
- Confidence bordering on arrogance.

While the enemy prepared for battle... Belshazzar held a drunken feast. The contrast is deliberate.

THEME within the Book:

Daniel 2: God predicts Babylon's fall.

Daniel 4: God humbles one king.

Daniel 5: God removes an empire.

The lesson grows larger. God is not merely King over individuals. He governs nations.



I. THE FEAST THAT DEFIED GOD (5:1-4)

Historical Background

Thousands of nobles attended. The vessels taken from Solomon's Temple (2 Kings 25) were brought out for drinking. This was far more than drunkenness. It was deliberate blasphemy. Belshazzar symbolically declared: "Babylon has defeated Israel's God."

Law of Moses

Temple vessels were holy. Numbers 4; Leviticus 10. Only authorized priests handled holy objects. Using them in pagan worship openly violated God's holiness. This resembles Nadab and Abihu treating holy things carelessly.

"They praised the gods..." Not merely compliments. This is covenant language. They publicly attributed victory and blessing to idols.

Jeremiah

Jeremiah predicted Babylon would drink the cup of God's wrath. Jeremiah 25
Ironically... Babylon is literally drinking from God's cups when judgment arrives.

Discussion

How does prosperity tempt people to mock what God declares holy?



Christian

Cultures often celebrate rebellion against God. Christians must never confuse popularity with divine approval.

II. THE HAND THAT INTERRUPTED THE PARTY (5:5-9)

Immediately... A hand appears. No body. Only fingers. The king's confidence disappears instantly.

"Knees knocked together." Ancient idiom describing overwhelming terror.

"Loin joints were loosened." Complete loss of strength. The fearless king becomes helpless.

God needs no army. No earthquake. No angelic army. One hand. One sentence. The greatest empire trembles.

Discussion

Why do people ignore God's warnings until they become impossible to ignore?

Christian

God often interrupts human arrogance unexpectedly. No person controls tomorrow.

III. THE FORGOTTEN PROPHET RETURNS (5:10-16)



Daniel has largely disappeared from public life. Empires forget faithful servants. God never does. The queen remembers Daniel's reputation from Nebuchadnezzar's reign.

Faithfulness outlives popularity. Daniel remained faithful even when ignored.

NT

The forgotten servant resembles faithful Christians whose labor seems unnoticed. Compare: Matthew 25:21 & Hebrews 6:10.

Discussion

Can Christians remain faithful when their influence appears forgotten?

Application

God's timing often restores opportunities for faithful servants.

IV. DANIEL REBUKES THE KING (5:17-24)

Daniel refuses payment. Truth cannot be purchased. Nebuchadnezzar becomes the sermon illustration. Daniel reviews chapter 4. The issue is not ignorance. Belshazzar knew. "You knew all this." (5:22) This becomes the chapter's turning point.

What God Wanted Pagan Rulers to Learn:

Power belongs to God. Humility preserves kings. Pride destroys kingdoms. History itself becomes revelation.

What Daniel Learned

Faithfulness includes confronting power. The servant of God must tell the truth regardless of consequences.

What Later Jews Learned

Exile did not mean God lost. Babylon fell exactly as God promised. God still ruled history.

Jeremiah

Jeremiah 27; Babylon would rule only for God's appointed time. Jeremiah 50-51. Babylon would suddenly fall. Daniel records fulfillment.

Ezekiel

Ezekiel repeatedly warned that nations rise and fall under God's sovereignty. Daniel provides the historical fulfillment.

Discussion

Why is remembering God's past judgments essential for avoiding future ones?

Christian

Knowledge increases responsibility. Belshazzar sinned against known truth.



V. THE WRITING EXPLAINED (5:25-28)

Mene - Numbered. God finished Babylon's days.

Mene (repeated) - Certainty. The decree is fixed.

Tekel - Weighed. Ancient commerce depended upon accurate balances. God pictures Himself as Judge weighing character. Not appearance. Reality.

Peres - Divided. Babylon would be divided and given to Medes and Persians. Wordplay: Peres sounds like Persia.

God's scales. God's accounting. God's courtroom. Everything points toward divine judgment.



Discussion

What standard does God use when weighing people?

Christian

God evaluates every life. Success is not God's measurement. Faithfulness is.

VI. JUDGMENT FALLS THAT NIGHT (5:29-31)

Belshazzar rewards Daniel. Then dies. Exactly as predicted. Babylon falls in one night. Jeremiah fulfilled. Daniel 2 fulfilled. History confirms prophecy.

What God Was Teaching Pagan Rulers

God grants authority. God removes authority. No empire is permanent.



Faithful Jews

Do not judge by appearances. Babylon looked invincible. It was already finished.

Later Jewish Readers

Trust prophecy. God fulfills His word precisely. The exile would also end.



Christians

Christ rules over every government. Every nation answers to Him. No earthly kingdom is ultimate.

New Testament

Luke 12:16-21 - Rich Fool - Celebration before sudden death. Very similar structure.

Luke 17:26-30 - Judgment comes during ordinary life. People are eating and drinking.

Then destruction comes.

Acts 12 - Herod accepts divine honors. Immediately judged. Pride followed by sudden judgment.

Hebrews 12:28 - Christians receive "A kingdom which cannot be shaken." Babylon fell. Christ's kingdom remains. Direct contrast to Daniel.

James 4:6 - God opposes the proud. Daniel 4 and 5 illustrate this principle.

Revelation

Daniel 5 becomes one of Revelation's major background passages. Revelation 17-18. Babylon symbolizes arrogant world power. Luxury. Blasphemy. Sudden destruction. Kings drinking. Judgment in one hour. Temple imagery appears again. Babylon misused holy things. Revelation portrays Babylon corrupting what belongs to God.

The writing on the wall becomes the divine verdict against “Babylon the Great.” Daniel gives the historical pattern. Revelation applies the pattern to Rome and every arrogant empire opposing God.



Major Lessons

1. Pride blinds nations.
2. Privilege increases responsibility.
3. God's patience has limits.
4. Judgment often comes unexpectedly.
5. History belongs to God.
6. God's kingdom alone survives.



Questions

- What warning signs did Belshazzar ignore?
- Why is forgetting history spiritually dangerous?
- What does it mean to be “weighed” by God?
- How should Christians respond when cultures mock holiness?
- Why do powerful nations often assume they are untouchable?
- How does Daniel model courage before political power?
- Why is God’s kingdom fundamentally different from every empire?

CONCLUSION

Daniel 5 is not merely the story of Babylon’s collapse. It is the story of every civilization that mistakes God’s patience for God’s approval. Nebuchadnezzar learned humility and found mercy. Belshazzar learned nothing and found judgment.

The chapter asks every generation: When God weighs us, what will He find?



Two other opening anecdotes...

"The Hotel That Never Evacuated"

In 1985, the Nevado del Ruiz volcano in Colombia had been showing signs of activity for months. Scientists repeatedly warned that if it erupted, nearby towns would be in grave danger. Emergency plans were discussed, maps were drawn, and warnings were issued. Yet as the days passed and nothing catastrophic happened, many people assumed the danger had been exaggerated.

On the evening of November 13, life went on as usual. Families gathered for dinner. Businesses stayed open. People went to bed expecting tomorrow to be just another day.

Late that night, the volcano erupted. The heat melted massive glaciers on its slopes, sending walls of mud and water racing down the valleys. Entire towns were buried. One community, Armero, lost more than 20,000 people in a matter of hours.

The tragedy wasn't that there had been no warning. The tragedy was that the warnings had become familiar. People mistook delayed judgment for the absence of danger.

Belshazzar's feast was much the same. God had already humbled Nebuchadnezzar. God had already spoken through Daniel. God had already announced Babylon's future decades earlier. Outside the city walls, the Persian army was already in position. Yet inside the palace, the king raised another cup, convinced Babylon was untouchable.

Then a hand appeared.

One sentence changed the course of history.

Daniel 5 reminds us that God's patience should never be mistaken for God's approval. The warnings of God are acts of mercy—but they do not last forever.

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"The Inspection Notice"

Imagine owning a business and receiving an official letter stating that inspectors will arrive to examine your building. You know the wiring is unsafe, the exits are blocked, and the records have been falsified. Instead of making repairs, you throw a lavish party. You invite your friends, turn up the music, and mock the inspectors for ever thinking they could shut you down.

Then, while the celebration is at its loudest, someone quietly walks in and says, "They're here."

In an instant, laughter turns to silence. Confidence becomes panic. Nothing changed about the building in that moment—the only thing that changed was that the verdict had arrived.

That is Daniel 5. Babylon wasn't destroyed because the handwriting appeared on the wall. The handwriting simply revealed that God's verdict had already been rendered. The kingdom had already been *numbered*, *weighed*, and *divided*. The feast continued only because the king did not yet know what heaven had already decided.