THE WRITING ON THE WALL

Daniel 5:1-31
Key Verse: 5:5

“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.”

Last week we studied Nebuchadnezzar’s first Bible testimony, in which he confessed that the Most High God is sovereign over the kingdoms of men. Nebuchadnezzar had spent all his life seeking to gain authority over others. But having authority over all men only made him anxious and violent. When he opened his spiritual eyes and saw that God is reigning over the world from heaven, he became really, really happy, and he glorified God from his soul. True happiness and peace come to those who repent their pride and acknowledge that God alone is sovereign over heaven and earth. In today’s passage, we see that the spiritual lessons learned by Nebuchadnezzar were forgotten by his grandson, Belshazzar. How nice it would be if only each generation would truly learn from the mistakes and successes of the previous one. May God bless us to humbly learn from God and from others, so that we might repent before it is too late!

I. The despairing party (1-17)

First, The goblets of gold (1-4). King Belshazzar was the grandson of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. During the forty-three years of his reign, Nebuchadnezzar had tirelessly worked to build up his kingdom, both through ruthless conquest and vigorous construction. None of Nebuchadnezzar’s sons were able to match his vision and leadership. Finally, the kingdom passed on to Nabonidus, a man who was related to Nebuchadnezzar only through the marriage of his daughter to Belshazzar. But Nabonidus was not interested in Babylon at all. He spent the majority of his time in Tema, an Arab city, where he pursued an interest in the moon god, leaving Belshazzar in charge as regent and second in command.

There was a growing threat to the Babylonian empire. Nebuchadnezzar had vigorously pursued expansion to the east and then the west. But he had secured peace with the northern kingdoms of the Medes and Persians through marriage. This policy had worked well as long as Nebuchadnezzar remained vigilant to the potential threat. But under Nabonidus and Belshazzar, Babylon became a rudderless ship, and so caught the attention of the Medes and Persians. They began to encroach on Babylonian territories. Still, Nabonidus pursued his religious quest, and didn’t return to the city of Babylon in spite of the growing threat. And what was Belshazzar doing?

Look at verses 1 and 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.” As the armies of the Medes and Persians drew closer and closer, Belshazzar had many things he had to do. Most of all, he had to learn the determination and spirit of his grandfather, and fight to save
his people and his empire. Instead, Belshazzar threw a huge party for over a thousand of his nobles, plus his wives and concubines. They drank wine and laughed and acted cruelly in the face of their mounting fear. Finally, Belshazzar gave the order to have the goblets taken from the temple of God in Jerusalem brought in, so that he and his nobles, his wives and his concubines might drink from them. And while they drank from them, they boldly praised their gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and clay. They looked like mindless partiers. But it was a calculated act of rebellion and defiance against the God of Heaven on the part of Belshazzar, in order that he might build up his empty pride, even as he faced imminent defeat. Similarly, many people who have become helpless before the power of sin and death seek to build up their pride by defying the Creator God. They look bold and powerful in their sins. But they are in fact crying in despair at their hopeless situations.

Second, The writing on the wall (5-6). For a time, it seemed that the party was helping to build up the courage of the nobles and the king in the face of their enemies. But it was an illusion. Look at verses 5 and 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.” The sudden appearance of the hand totally changed the mood of the party. By defying the God of Heaven, the party goers felt powerful and triumphant. They felt they could do anything they wanted. Then the hand came and wrote on the plaster of the wall. They could not read the writing. But they understood immediately that the party was over. Especially Belshazzar was so gripped with fear that he turned as white as a ghost and collapsed on the ground because of his shaky legs.

Belshazzar and his party are the picture of sinful human beings before the judgment of God. Luke 17:27 says, “People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark. Then the flood came and destroyed them all.” Like the people of Noah’s time, Belshazzar and his nobles were not caught unaware by the appearance of the hand and its message of judgment. They knew judgment was coming, in the form of the Medes and Persians, and that they could not stand before it. But they deliberately suppressed the truth in order to pursue their wicked desires. In fact, they denied God and defied God, and so invited God’s judgment on themselves. And when God’s judgment came, they were speechless, because they knew all along what they deserved as payment for their actions. But, like Cain who killed his younger brother Abel, until the very moment that judgment was revealed they acted as though they were the smart ones, while all those who humbled themselves before God and sought to please him were the fools.

Such brazen sinners and rebels are a snare to weak Christians. They paint a picture of mankind free from judgment and free to pursue the desires of their sinful nature, in order to entice others to do the same things they are doing. But it is a lie that only leads them and others to destruction. Psalm 73:12-17 says, “This is what the wicked are like—always carefree, they increase in wealth. In vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence...When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me, till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.” We don’t have to be sorry that we do not live the carefree lives of the godless. We must remember the judgment of God, and stand on the side of God’s truth, rather than hold on to the desires of the sinful nature. Those who remember the coming judgment
of God can serve as witnesses to this wicked generation of the salvation that is in Christ Jesus and lead others to repentance and life.

Third, Looking for wisdom (7-17). King Belshazzar was desperate to understand the writing on the wall. He called for all of his wise men to come and he promised to reward the one who could read and interpret the writing with fine clothes and jewelry and the third highest position in the kingdom. Unlike Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar had no confidence to threaten his wise men with dismemberment or destruction of their houses. He was a man who avoided judgment, rather than face up to it. The wise men were eager to claim their reward and prove themselves cleverer than all the others. But when they came in to the banquet hall, they could not read the writing, nor offer a clue as to what it meant. Belshazzar became even more terrified, and grew more pale. The nobles were thrown into an uproar.

The Queen, probably the queen mother, heard the noise and came into the banquet hall. Look at verse 10b-11. ‘‘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.’’ Of course, the queen was speaking about Daniel. In Nebuchadnezzar’s time, Daniel was honored as chief of the magicians. How could they have forgotten about him? Anyway, they called Daniel in to speak with the king.

When Daniel came, Belshazzar flattered him and promised to reward him handsomely if he could read and interpret the writing. But what did Daniel say to Belshazzar? Look at verse 17. ‘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.’’ Unlike Belshazzar or the wise men of Babylon, Daniel was not motivated by material rewards or by fear. Daniel was a man of God’s truth and spirit. Nebuchadnezzar liked him, because he was a shepherd and a faithful servant of his God. And Daniel was happy to serve Nebuchadnezzar, because of God’s hope for Nebuchadnezzar to repent. But Daniel was not happy to serve the godless man, Belshazzar, or to receive his rewards. To Daniel, receiving a gold chain or recognition from Belshazzar was like eating the fine food and drinking the wine from the king’s table. As he had resolved not to defile himself then, so he resolved not to defile himself now. He would tell the king the meaning of the writing. But he would do so as a servant of the Most High God, not as a wise man or servant of the king. Likewise, as shepherds of God’s flock, we must be clear that we are servants of God’s truth, first. We must proclaim the message of judgment from God’s point of view, so that sinners might repent and believe.

II. A sense of history (18-31)

First, A proud man humbled (18-21). Before Daniel told Belshazzar the meaning of the inscription, he reminded Belshazzar of the history of God’s work in the life of his ancestor, king Nebuchadnezzar. It was to teach Belshazzar the importance of having a sense of history and a learning mind. Look at verses 18-21. ‘O king, the Most High God gave your father Nebuchadnezzar 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 was 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.” As we have studied, God used Daniel to plant faith in the sovereignty of God in king Nebuchadnezzar’s heart. God had built him up, and God could bring him down. When Nebuchadnezzar repented of his pride and believed in God’s sovereignty, he was so happy and praised God to the ends of the earth. It was a hard lesson because his pride was enormous, like a dazzling statue of gold. But it was the truth of God that set his heart and mind free. Submitting to God’s truth that he alone is sovereign over kingdoms and over men is never easy and involves facing up to God’s judgment. Those who do so, however, become “more than conquerors” through their faith in God’s good purpose for their lives.

Second, A lesson forgotten (22-24). Nebuchadnezzar’s spiritual struggle to submit to the sovereign will and authority of God was a precious spiritual lesson for all of the kings of Babylon that followed. But Belshazzar had deliberately forgotten what God had showed him through Nebuchadnezzar. Look at verses 22-24. “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 gold and silver, 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.” The pride of sinful human beings is that we are smarter, more able and cleverer than anyone else. Therefore, in our illusion, we don’t have to listen to anybody, or learn from anyone. The mistakes of others are not warnings to us, but reasons for us to despise them and their weaknesses. But the truth of God is that we are all the same sinners, prone to the same failings and mistakes as everyone else. Therefore, the spiritual struggles of others are not irrelevant or trivial. They are the testimony of history given to us by God, so that we might learn and overcome ourselves, with God’s help. We must have a sense of history that appreciates the good qualities and decisions of those who came before us, as well as acknowledges their weaknesses and failings. Most of all we must remember that we are indeed the same sinners facing the same judgment of God. Then, we can learn from everyone, and we can share in their struggle to come out from the darkness of sin and into the marvelous light of God’s truth and grace. Belshazzar was a pitiful man, not because he was a sinner, but because he had deliberately rejected God’s grace to him and to Babylon through the spiritual lesson of Nebuchadnezzar’s repentance.

Third, The end of an empire (25-31). The message of the inscription to Belshazzar was not encouraging. Look at verses 25-28. “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.” As God had promised through his servant Jeremiah, Babylon, after bringing about God’s judgment on the surrounding nations, would itself be judged in the time of Nebuchadnezzar’s grandson (Jer. 25:12-14). God had given the Babylonians authority and power to do his work, but they had failed to learn from
God’s judgment or repent before God’s sovereignty. Now, God’s authority would be taken from them and given to others. Belshazzar rewarded Daniel for his interpretation, but it was a meaningless gesture, for that very night Belshazzar was slain, and the Medes took over the Babylonian kingdom.

May God help us to humble ourselves before the sovereign will and good purpose of God. May God bless us to learn from the spiritual struggles of others, so that we might be ready to face the judgment of God. May God give us the faith of Daniel to teach about judgment from God’s point of view, so that we can help our sheep to repent and believe.