

# The Writing on the Wall

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[ 0 : 00 ] Daniel chapter 5. 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. 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 legs became weak and his knees were knocking. The king summoned the enchanters, astrologers and diviners.

Then he said to these wise men of Babylon, Whoever reads the writing and tells what it means will be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed around his neck and he will be made third highest ruler in the kingdom.

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

[ 1 : 23 ] His nobles were baffled. The queen, hearing the voices of the king and his nobles, came into the banquet hall. May the 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.

Your father, King Nebuchadnezzar, appointed him chief of the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners. He did this because Daniel, who 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. So Daniel was brought before the king and the king said to him, Are you Daniel, one of the exiles my father, the king, had brought from Judah?

I've 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 to me to read the writing on the wall and tell me what it means, but they could not explain it.

[ 2 : 37 ] Now I've heard that you were able to give interpretations and to solve difficult problems. If you could read this writing and tell me what it means, you'll be clothed in purple and have a golden chain placed around your neck and you'll be made third highest ruler in the kingdom.

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.

Your majesty, 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 nations and peoples 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 disposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory. He was driven away from people and given the mind of an animal.

[ 3 : 49 ] He lived with the wild donkeys and ate grass like the ox. And his body was drenched with the dew of heaven until he acknowledged that the most high God is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and sets over them anyone he wishes.

But you, Belshazzar, his son, 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, parson. Here is what these words mean. Mene, God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end.

[ 5 : 09 ] Tekel, you have been weighed on the scales and found wanting. Pires, 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 62. This is the word of the Lord. Amen. Well, thanks so much, Katrina and Emma and Simon and Andy for reading that for us.

And you can find an outline inside the notice sheet if you'd find that helpful as we look together at this chapter of Daniel. It's our custom at St. Silas to work through books of the Bible, chapter by chapter as our regular diet, so that we let God set the agenda and we don't miss out the bits that we find difficult.

We just look to hear God, week by week, speak to us. But we need God's help to respond rightly to him.

[ 6 : 18 ] So let's bow our heads and I'll lead us in a prayer, asking for God's help as we turn to his word. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your promise that the unfolding of your word brings light.

And we pray that you will give us light this morning, a lamp for our feet as we go through life, that where we are foolish, you will give us wisdom.

Where we feel low, you would bring us life and encouragement. Where we have strayed and taken a wrong turn, would you draw us back to you?

Where we feel doubtful, would you give us assurance? We ask in Jesus' name. Amen. So it's a few weeks since we were in Daniel, the book of Daniel.

Let's just reorient ourselves about that. In the 6th century BC, followers of God were not scattered all over the world like Christians are today. They were gathered in one nation state, living around Jerusalem.

[ 7 : 18 ] That was home for them. That was where God was in the temple. But in 587 BC, the Babylonian Empire went into Jerusalem and destroyed it and took people in exile.

So the people of God are living far from home in Babylon. Daniel and his friends are part of that group of exiles. And their lives, the book of Daniel really, is a tale of two cities.

There's Jerusalem, where they've come from, that's to be home, where God is. There's Babylon, the world without God, where they now live, where they feel far from home and far from God.

And for us as we read Daniel, what's critical is to understand that our lives are a tale of two cities.

The Bible describes what we might call today heaven, or what the Bible would call the new heavens and the new earth, the place where we'll be with God forever.

However, it describes that as Jerusalem, the new Jerusalem that we're waiting for. And the world today, Glasgow, Hillhead, the world is Babylon.

[ 8 : 20 ] That's where we live, far from home. And as we read Daniel, Daniel and his friends teach us how to live in Babylon, faithful to God.

And they teach us what we should believe while we wait for God and trust him. So together this morning, we're transported back to Babylon on the 12th of October, 539 BC.

Other historians have written about this. That's how precise we can be. It's the 12th of October, 539. And it's a sensational chapter, isn't it? It starts with the most lavish decadence, the most sensual, hedonistic, self-centered human luxury.

And it ends with the spectacular fall of what at that time was the greatest empire the world had ever seen. It's also a chapter so influential to us today that even if you haven't heard that story yourself before, you may have picked up that there are phrases in this chapter that have still left their mark on our language today.

So we say today of people, don't we, that their days are numbered when time is running out for them. It's from Daniel chapter 5. Last night, Kathy and I switched on James Bond, Spectre.

[ 9 : 37 ] We're a movie behind in James Bond. And the first song, the James Bond theme tune, Sam Smith, the writing is on the wall. Daniel chapter 5. We maybe hear that phrase when a company is losing money and the accountants look at the figures and they say, you know, for Burton or Dorothy Perkins, wherever it is now, the writing is on the wall.

Time is running out for them. What we mean is, the day of reckoning is coming. And there's another phrase here that people use today. You have been weighed, you have been measured, and you've been found wanting.

I don't know if you've ever heard that phrase before. It's a phrase we would use as a verdict on somebody's life. And I don't know whether you've thought before how much we all want our lives to be measured.

We want our lives to count for something. We live our lives as though they are examined. We have a deep desire within us that our lives would have meaning.

And of course, if there is no God, then our lives don't count for anything. The universe doesn't care and doesn't know how we're living our life.

[ 10 : 50 ] And eventually, we'll all just die out. And how we've lived won't matter at all. And my friends who don't believe in God take consolation in thinking, well, I'm going to die.

But it's okay because how I've lived will be remembered by the people who come after me. Those who are close to me. But we have to remember that ultimately, no one will remember.

And how we've lived just won't last. And it won't matter. Just out of interest, just put your hand up if you know the names of all of your great-grandparents. One or two.

One or two of us know the names of our great-grandparents. How we've lived, what our lives counted for, is going to be forgotten if there's no God. The good news of Daniel chapter 5 is the assurance that our lives can have meaning.

That there is a God interested in weighing and measuring how we've lived. He will weigh our lives on his scales. But it also raises a very alarming point for us.

[ 11 : 56 ] Because here we have the story of a great king. An emperor who was ruling over land that stretched right up into the middle of Turkey. Right through Iraq.

And across to modern-day Iran. And down into Egypt, across the River Nile. And south into what's now Saudi Arabia. His empire. He was breathtakingly powerful.

In the world's eyes, he was an extraordinary success. But by the end of the chapter, we find out what God's verdict was on his life. And it was, you were weightless.

You weigh nothing to me. You've been weighed. You've been measured. You've been found wanting. Why? What sort of a life does God approve of? What sort of a life could look so full in the world's eyes, only to find that God's verdict on that life is, it was weightless.

So let's get into the story. And our first point is, Belshazzar throws a defiant party. Last chapter, we looked at Nebuchadnezzar. We called him Nezzar. This time, it's Belshazzar.

[ 13 : 03 ] Let's call him Shazah. He throws a defiant party. It's a party as big as parties can get. Did you notice that in verse 1? He gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine with them.

He's hosting a party for a thousand nobles. There's wine everywhere. And you see the kind of man he is at the end of verse 3. That his wives and his concubines are all there together.

We don't need 21st century morality to think badly of that. What's going on? This is a defiant show of money and sex and power. It's the sensual pinnacle of the ancient world.

Now, why is that? It's because he's defiant. First, he's defiant against the Medo-Persian army that was closing in on the city. We know from historians that they just won a great victory.

We find out at the end of the chapter they stormed the city. But that didn't happen overnight. And it's as though Shazah knows that. But he wants his nobles to join him in pretending that their days are not numbered humanly.

[ 14 : 13 ] There's no real problem. If they can distract themselves with wealth and sex and human power, then maybe they can forget about the danger. Death is approaching the city.

But you can forget about death if you distract yourself with decadence, with hedonism. And that might look foolish to us. But there is a sense in which that's going on all around us in the world today.

You know, we're all going to die. We know that. But we can distract ourselves. We can amuse ourselves to death. But in verse 2, we see there's another way that Shazah's party is defiant.

It's defiant against the living God. So have a look with me again at verse 2. 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.

And in verse 3, that's what they do. He takes what was given precious sacrificial giving to the temple to give goblets to serve the Lord with in Jerusalem.

[15:23] Brought from the temple, he uses them to serve up wine for the women he treats as property and the nobles he wants to impress. And as they drink, he raises a glass to pagan gods.

He uses the Lord's goblets to worship the gold and silver that they were made from. It's mockery of God because he's using what was made for God and set apart for God to worship pagan gods, made-up gods.

And folks, it's just a picture of what Romans chapter 1 in the New Testament tells us that we all do as humanity. That when Romans chapter 1 is explaining that we all need forgiveness from God, we need a saviour.

And he says, Paul who wrote it says, we've exchanged the glory of God for created things. All the time we're taking things that were created for God and his glory and we use them to worship other things instead.

We build our lives on other things. We turn good things into God things. And instead of using them for God's glory, we worship them. So we're not as far from Belshazzar as we might like to think as we hear about his party.

[16:38] That's our first point. Belshazzar throws a defiant party. But it doesn't last. So our second point, Belshazzar is petrified by the finger of God. It is a magnificent moment, isn't it?

It is a wonderful moment. If you have a look at verse 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. His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his knees knocked together and his legs gave way.

And Daniel wants us to see here that when you brush away all the bravado under the surface in Babylon, there is fear, isn't there? It was the same in chapter 2 with Nebuchadnezzar, where he looks out at the hanging gardens of Babylon and he looks out at his magnificent city walls and then he has a dream that leaves him terrified.

And Shazzar is the same here. He's deeply afraid. And it's good to remember that because sometimes in life we're tempted to think, if only I had a bit more money and a bit more power, I would feel secure and confident and it would solve my problems.

[17:55] And Belshazzar has it all and he's afraid. And is he right to be afraid? Of course he is. Of course he is. The writing on the wall he can't avoid is from the living God.

And suddenly it doesn't seem such a good idea to be playing drinking games with your mates using his golden goblets. What does he learn from seeing the finger of God writing on his wall?

He learns God is real. God is interested in him. And God has a message for him that he can't understand. Isn't that quite scary to learn that?

He is right to be afraid. So the wise men of Babylon are assembled, but none of them can tell him what it says or what it means. The message on the wall.

And the result is panic, even worse than before. But it is a good panic in a sense. If you think about the basic worldview of people around us today in Glasgow about God, what is it?

[18:57] What do your mates essentially think about God? Either they would say something like this. They might say, God is probably not real, so don't be afraid of him.

Just get on and enjoy life. Or they might be religious and they might say something like this. God is probably real, but don't be afraid of him.

There might be some religious stuff that you really probably should do. But most of all, God just wants you to enjoy your life and get on with it. But the truth is what Belshazzar discovered that very night.

The truth is, God is real. He's profoundly interested in how we're living. And he is speaking to us words that we need to hear. He has a word of revelation for us.

So we're not as different from Shazza as we might like to think. For all of us, in a sense, the writing is on the wall from God. He has a message for us. What Shazza needs next is someone who can clearly explain this message from God to him.

[ 20 : 06 ] And he gets it from the exiles. The queen, who must be the queen mother, all his wives are with him. It must be the queen mother who comes in. She hears the commotion going on in the banqueting hall.

So she walks in. And at the end of verse 12, she says, get Daniel. That's who you need. She remembers Daniel. He was the man who used to run the country, run the empire for her husband. Call for Daniel. He'll tell you what the writing means. So they bring Daniel in. And the king patronizes him. Aren't you one of those exiles that my father brought from Jerusalem? But he promises him, verse 16, you will be clothed in purple and have a gold chain around your neck. And may the third highest ruler in the kingdom, if you can help. He's going to share the reign with Daniel, if he can help.

But Daniel says, verse 17, you can keep your gifts for yourself. You can give your rewards to someone else. Nevertheless, I will read the writing for the king. And tell you what it means.

[ 21 : 06 ] Daniel here demonstrates how God's people, far from home, in exile, can bring the truth about God to the world. And if you've come here today with a Christian friend for Back to Church Sunday, they can do that for you.

You can open the Bible with them. Just open the gospel. Open John or Luke's gospel, their account of Jesus' life, with your friend. And talk with them. And let them explain God's message to us today. Daniel has done that for two different kings. In chapter 4, he did it for Nebuchadnezzar. And it was a message that got him saved. It got him made right with God. But for Belshazzar, his pride will be his downfall.

So that's our third point. Belshazzar learns that even his days are numbered. So in verses 18 to 21, Daniel retells the story of Nebuchadnezzar that we had in chapter 4.

He was a phenomenal figure of the ancient world. One of the greatest emperors who's ever lived. With sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendor, all given from God. Everyone from every nation dreaded and feared him, Daniel says.

[ 22 : 15 ] And he lost everything. And we saw in chapter 4, as we looked at it together, that he loses everything. And he's rejoicing. He's glad he lost everything. Because of what he gained. That he was made right with God.

He came to know God. Because he realized it's God who'd humbled him. And he lifted his eyes to God in heaven. So the chapter ended with Nebuchadnezzar praising God. Then Daniel turns to Belshazzar.

And verse 22 is devastating. Have a look. But you, Belshazzar, his son, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this.

Instead, you've set yourself up against the Lord of heaven. And then at the end of verse 23, he says. But you did not honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways. Therefore, he sent the hand.

They wrote the inscription. And then he tells us what the words mean. Mene, Mene, Tekel, Parsing. They're measures of currency at the time. So it's a bit like saying a pound, a pound, a penny, and a half penny.

[ 23 : 19 ] But based on the roots of those words, God has inspired Daniel to know what they mean to Belshazzar. Mene comes from the root of the word numbered. Because God has numbered the days of Shazah's reign.

And he's bringing it to an end. Tekel comes from the root of the word weighed. Because Shazah has been weighed on God's scales and found wanting. And Perez comes from the root of the word divided.

Because Shazah's kingdom will be divided. It's going to be given to two new superpowers. The Medes and the Persians. And the judgment of God comes in verse 30.

That very night, Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain. And Darius the Mede took over the kingdom at the age of 62. It's the deserved judgment of God on an arrogant man who wouldn't acknowledge him.

The world says his life was full. Full of power. Full of pleasure. The Lord says it was empty. Weigh it on my scales. There was nothing to show.

[ 24 : 23 ] And across these two chapters of Daniel, we've had the same phrase repeated four times. It's in verse 21. That the most high God is sovereign over the kingdoms of men.

And sets over them anyone he wishes. In other words, however it might look to you and me today. The God of the Bible reigns. He is on his throne.

He is sovereign. Anyone with any power has got that power because God has given it to them. Just as Jesus stood before Pilate with his life in Pilate's hands.

And he said to him, You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. So let's just think about two implications for us today. They're on the sheets there, if that would be helpful.

A warning for kings. And an encouragement for exiles. First, a warning for kings. And the warning is that the writing is on the wall.

[ 25 : 18 ] And you and I might not feel too much like a king. But if it's a warning to the powerful, it applies just as much to us as well. However powerless we might feel. Verse 23 is true for all of us.

That God holds in his hand our lives and all our ways. And the haunting words from Daniel for Belshazzar in verse 22 were, Though you knew all this.

Though you knew all this. You wouldn't humble yourself. In other words, you should have known better Belshazzar. He should have known that God is real. And that God is interested in how we live.

And that one day God will hold all of us to account. We will be weighed and measured. And on our own, our lives will be found wanting. Now it looks today as though you can mock God and get away with it, doesn't it?

But here in history with Belshazzar, it's as though what God did was he broke in and gave us a foretaste in Belshazzar's life. Of the judgment that will await everybody.

[ 26 : 22 ] To show us that it's real. And he sends that warning to us because God's desire is that we'll respond rightly to him. He invites us, whoever we are, to come to him and find mercy like Nebuchadnezzar did.

It's a very striking phrase about the writing on the wall in Daniel 5. That what Belshazzar saw was the finger of God writing on the wall. And it's a phrase that Jesus only takes up once in the New Testament.

He takes it up in Luke chapter 11 when his ministry was in full flow with power and compassion. Preaching the kingdom, driving out demons, rescuing people spiritually.

And the religious leaders accused Jesus of demonic power. And he said, if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

So when Belshazzar saw the finger of God, it was a message of condemnation. But for us, when we come to Jesus, his work by the finger of God was a saving work.

[ 27 : 29 ] A liberating work. To rescue us from the power of evil. And bring us into his kingdom. And that offer is for any of us. That if we humble ourselves before God, the Bible promises that trusting him and waiting for him, God will lift us up in due time.

So that's the warning for kings. The writing is on the wall. But as we finish, let's also see in this chapter an encouragement for the exiles. Because as we've already thought, we're exiles if we're following Jesus Christ.

And the encouragement is that the Lord reigns. And that means for every king or tyrant with power in this world, their days are numbered. And that is a precious reality when God's people are waiting for God.

And we get perplexed. And we are wondering, what on earth is God doing in this? What on earth is God doing in giving that man, that woman, that power, as they stand against him and against his people?

We can see in Daniel chapter 5 signs that for the people then, the fortunes for God's people had taken a terrible turn. And they must have been asking, what is God doing here?

[ 28 : 42 ] Under Nebuchadnezzar, the brightest and best Israelites were running the empire for him. And they were in the king's court. And they even saw the king himself get saved. And maybe they thought, this is the moment.

That's what God's doing. He's going to use Nebuchadnezzar to fulfill his promise to us, to get us back to Jerusalem. And then Nebuchadnezzar dies. And the rule gets more and more pagan. Until Daniel, now an old man, now about 80 years old, is out of favor. And Belshazzar and his nobles are swigging wine from the temple goblets.

And Daniel's words to Belshazzar are so terse and cold. There's no relationship there. And maybe it was a season where God's people were starting to wonder, are we really right to keep trusting God?

Is God really real in Babylon? Is he going to keep his promise? And yet it's at that moment that God broke in and showed that this king's days were numbered.

[ 29 : 40 ] Every king's days are numbered. The final blow came suddenly that night. And the historian Herodotus, who writes about what happened, records that the way Darius and his soldiers got into Babylon was they diverted the river, the Euphrates, so that the river level fell so low that they could walk in through the tunnels.

Now, it's just a little point. But if that's right, I like to think about how even while Belshazzar was showing off to his nobles, his decadence, and mocking God, his enemy is already crawling in underneath him in the city.

And the Lord knows that because the Lord did it. And the encouragement is the Lord is good for his promises. He's worth waiting for. I wonder, where do you need to hear that today?

Do we feel very anxious about the way God is mocked or ignored in the media or pushed out of education in Scotland or ignored by the government or just ignored by people around us?

Do we need to be reminded that God reigns and people's days are numbered? I think of the opposition to the gospel in China today. Fifteen years ago, when you spoke to people who were involved in ministry in China, there was real excitement about what God's doing in China.

[ 31 : 10 ] And they were setting up ministries in China for returnees, for Chinese who work or study in the West and hear about Jesus and go back to China so that they can grow as disciples back in China.

And they were seeing emerging leaders trained and raised up. And over the last few years, what we've seen in China is a massive crackdown. And those ministries stopped one by one by the regime there.

And I speak to people who have lived and worked in China who feel perplexed by that and ask, what is God doing there when we worked and labored in China to set up that work?

Well, how encouraging to be reminded that Xi Jinping, his days are numbered. Our own politicians, BBC presenters, their days are numbered.

The Most High is good and he is sovereign over all the kingdoms of the world and he sets over them anyone he wishes. Let's be encouraged that the Lord reigns and we can wait for him.

[ 32 : 15 ] Let's pray together. God Most High and loving Heavenly Father, we thank you that your word to us is a word offering salvation.

That though our lives fall short in your scales, you have sent the Lord Jesus that by his saving work we can come to you and find forgiveness and life.

Lord Jesus, we are sorry for the times that our lives have looked like Belshazzis, that we have lived proud lives and we humble ourselves before you now.

We thank you for your mercy. And Father God, we praise you that you are the sovereign Lord and that the days of the powerful are numbered. Lord, help us to take heart this morning that while we might see all around us people living without reference to you, you are on your throne.

You are all-wise and all-powerful and you are good for your promises for your people that you will one day call us home. Help us with courage to live lives of faith as we wait for you.

[ 33 : 30 ] We ask these things for Jesus' name's sake. Amen.