

Daniel 5:1-31

Introduction

‘My graffiti-artist girlfriend has just split up with me,’ the young man said. ‘I really should have seen the writing on the wall.’ You might well groan. But the point is that even if you haven’t heard this story before, you almost certainly *will* have heard the saying that comes from it. It’s something we hear in sport. A football team has a run of bad form, and pundits start saying, ‘The writings on the wall’. They expect the manager to get the sack. Or perhaps it’s the kind of thing we might hear at work. The company starts making losses, and ‘The writings on the wall’. There are going to be redundancies. Or we might hear it in politics. After a loss of public support, ‘The writing’s on the wall’. A letter of resignation is coming. And this is where that saying’s from. It’s one of many sayings from the Bible that we hear in everyday speech, even if we’re not familiar with the original story. For Belshazzar, the writing was quite literally on the wall. And it was ominous. It announced a time of reckoning.

Someone has said that most of us can read the writing on the wall; we just assume it’s addressed to someone else. Well, as we read this story, we need to see that the writing on the wall isn’t only addressed to Belshazzar; it’s also addressed to us. But unlike Belshazzar, it needn’t be the final word. That’s what I want us to see this morning. Let’s look at the story, and then we’ll think about the implications. Firstly then, the king who mocked God.

The king who mocked God

Verse 1.

King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine with them.

That sentenced troubled historians for many years, because there was no record of a king of Babylon called Belshazzar. But then, in 1854, an archaeologist called J. G. Taylor uncovered four cuneiform cylinders that had been inscribed by King Nabonidus. This is one of them, which you can find in the British Museum. And in them, King Nabonidus refers to his son, Belshazzar. He explains that he left Belshazzar in charge of Babylon while he went away on an extended trip to Arabia. That trip lasted ten years. And during that time, Belshazzar was in charge. He was the second highest ruler in Babylon, under his father Nabonidus. And that explains why he could only offer Daniel the third highest position in the kingdom, should he interpret the writing. It was the highest honour he could give. All of that just reminds us that what we’re dealing with here is real history.

As the chapter begins, the city of Babylon is under attack and just hours away from being captured. And what is Belshazzar doing? He’s throwing a party and getting drunk. We’re not told why he’s doing that. Perhaps he’s overly confident in the city’s defences. The ancient Greek historian, Xenophon, records the taking of Babylon in his writings. And he gives the impression that the city was extremely well protected against a siege. He says that it had stores of food that would last for years. So, perhaps Belshazzar is feeling overly

secure. And as the wine flows, he calls for some gold and silver goblets to be brought to him. They're the goblets that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple in Jerusalem. (And incidentally, where Nebuchadnezzar is described as his father, here, that simply means his ancestor, which you can see if you look down at the footnote.) These were beautiful goblets that had been made for one purpose only: the worship of the one true God. Belshazzar clearly knows of Nebuchadnezzar's experience of God. He knows that Nebuchadnezzar had eventually come to worship God as the Most High God. Yet he thinks it's funny to use these goblets to toast the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone. It's pure theatre. He's enjoying being the centre of attention. And as he raises the goblet to his lips to drink himself under the table, he's exalting himself over the God these goblets were made for. He's saying that this God is nothing to him. It's foolish bravado; the result of an inflated ego. He's mocking God.

As he does so, a human hand appears, supernaturally, and writes on the wall. And unsurprisingly, at that moment, the party atmosphere is shattered. Rembrandt famously painted the scene. Verse 6 describes Belshazzar's reaction: **His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his legs became weak and his knees were knocking.** He must surely have made the connection between the writing on the wall and his blasphemy. And he's terrified. He calls his wise men but they're no help. The queen hears the commotion and comes into the banquet hall. The fact that she hadn't been at the party suggests she might have a bit more sense than the others. She tells Belshazzar to pull himself together and then informs him about Daniel. He's probably in his eighties by now. And whilst he'd once held a position of prominence under Nebuchadnezzar, it seems as though he'd since been forgotten about and sidelined. Clearly, in Belshazzar's day, Daniel's God is no longer valued in Babylon. But the queen still remembers him. She speaks of him with respect. And she tells Belshazzar to send for him, which he does. He offers Daniel fine clothes, a gold chain and third place in the kingdom, if only he can tell him what the writing means. Daniel isn't interested in a reward; he's not motivated by financial gain. But he does agree to tell Belshazzar what the writing says.

First though, he reminds Belshazzar what had happened to Nebuchadnezzar, whom we read about last week. It's a very brief history lesson. And if you were with us last week, you may remember how it goes. Because of the high position God had given him, Nebuchadnezzar had been dreaded and feared by peoples of all nations. He had absolute power to do as he pleased. But when he surveyed the great city of Babylon from the roof of his palace, his heart had become hardened with pride. He had claimed all the glory for himself. And then, just as he had been warned in a dream, God had deposed him from his throne, stripped him of his glory and given him the mind of an animal. And this had lasted until Nebuchadnezzar had acknowledged that the source of his greatness and splendour wasn't himself but God. He had finally understood that everything he had was a gift from God. And at the end of chapter 4, he praised, exalted and glorified God for it.

But even though Belshazzar knew all this, he had failed to learn the lessons of history. He had refused to humble himself before God or to acknowledge that all he possessed had come from God, as Nebuchadnezzar had done. In fact, he had set himself in direct

opposition to God when he had sent for the goblets from the temple and used them to praise the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which, Daniel adds, can neither see nor hear nor understand. He had mocked the God who holds his life in his hand and gives him every breath he takes. And he had celebrated inanimate objects instead.

It's worth pausing to note that this is still the foolishness of the world around us today. People are quick to announce that they don't like the God of the Bible. And that they have no need of him. They treat him as though he's nothing, while worshipping all kinds of things that aren't gods at all: money, possessions, celebrity, relationships. They're only too happy to celebrate their successes and claim the glory for themselves, without a thought of God.

And it is so easy for us to join them. The evidence of God's existence is all around us in the universe he has made to be our home. But in our sinful pride, we don't like the idea that there's a God who rules over us and holds our lives and all our ways in his hand. Our instinct is to declare our independence from God. So, we too can take the gifts he gives us, then ignore him and push him aside. We can imagine that we're better off without him. And like Belshazzar, we can fail to give him the honour he deserves. To live that way is to mock God. It's foolishness. The warning of these verses is that when we live that way we bring judgement on ourselves. And the remaining verses in the chapter are an announcement of coming judgement.

Coming judgement

Look down again at verse 25.

This is the inscription that was written:

MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN

Here 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.**

And the words in verse 30 are chilling: ***That very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain, and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom, at the age of sixty-two.***

We have accounts from two ancient Greek historians, that are independent of the Bible, which tell us what happened. Herodotus and Xenophon were writing in the fifth and fourth centuries B. C. The work of Herodotus is called *The Histories*. And Xenophon's is called *Cyropaedia*. And both describe how the city of Babylon fell. They both tell how the Persian troops diverted the waters of the River Euphrates, which the city straddled, so they could walk into the city through the riverbed. They report that the inhabitants were holding a massive festival at the time and were drinking and revelling. And that the king of Babylon was slain during the attack.

In other words, the accounts of these two ancient Greek historians are in complete agreement with what we find in the Bible. Once again, it reminds us that these are real events of history that we're dealing with, and we need to take them seriously. Judgement came upon Belshazzar just as the writing on the wall had said it would. It did so with frightening speed. And we too have been warned of coming judgement. Not through an inscription on a wall. But through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. This is what the apostle Paul says, in Acts 17. He says, **'[God] has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.'** (Acts 17:31)

The resurrection is a fact of history. The Bible witnesses to it. The historical evidence for it is compelling. If you haven't yet considered that evidence, there's a little booklet at the back of church, which you're welcome to take, which covers the main details. And for us, it means that the writing is on the wall. It's a warning of coming judgement when Jesus returns.

We don't know when that day will come, but God does. Jesus warned that it will come as a surprise. He said that on that day, people will be eating and drinking, just as they were at Belshazzar's banquet. They will be marrying and giving in marriage. In other words, everyday life will be going on as normal. And then he will return. His return will be sudden. It will take the world by surprise. And for many, it will spell disaster. On that day, those who refuse to honour God will pay the cost. It all sounds very similar to what happened to Belshazzar. And it is. But there is one crucial difference. Unlike Belshazzar, we still have time to do something about it.

In his second letter, the apostle Peter addresses those in his day who were mocking the idea of Jesus' return, as they still do today. He explains that the delay is for our good. He says this: **The Lord is not slow in keeping his promises, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.** (2 Peter 3:9) The writing's on the wall. God has given us warning that judgement is coming because of our rejection of him. But he has given us warning so that we might have a change of heart.

Conclusion

So, what does all this mean for us?

Belshazzar failed to learn the lessons of history. He failed to learn from the experience of Nebuchadnezzar. And these things are recorded here for us so that we might not repeat his mistake.

It's possible to call ourselves Christians and proclaim God's praises on a Sunday morning, and then to live the rest of the week without giving him a thought. It's possible to acknowledge him as God and yet to fail to thank him for the good things we receive from his hand each day. It's possible to call him Lord and yet to refuse to walk in his ways because we think we know best. All these things are possible. But when we live this way, we're on dangerous ground. We're mocking God.

Of course, it's good to celebrate our successes and our accomplishments, but if we do so while claiming the glory for ourselves rather than giving glory to God, we're making the same mistake as Nebuchadnezzar. And we're in danger of allowing our hearts to become hardened with pride.

These stories are here to warn us, so we might acknowledge that there's a God in heaven who rules over us. He holds in his hand all our ways; all that we do and achieve and enjoy. It's all from him. Even the breath we take is from him. We're *thankful* that there is forgiveness, through faith in the cross of Christ, for all the times we fail to acknowledge him as we should. But these stories are here so that we might humble ourselves before him and give him the honour he deserves. We should honour him *now* with the honour he'll receive from his people in eternity. What will it mean for you to do that this week?

And if you wouldn't yet call yourself a Christian, the warning of these verses is similar. Don't make the same mistake as Belshazzar, who thought nothing of mocking God, and elevating himself over God. This story is warning us that God will not be mocked. He is good and loving. He is gracious and compassionate. He shows tenderness and mercy to all who come to him with humble hearts, through faith in his Son, Jesus Christ. But he will not be mocked. And a day is coming when all who reject him and fail to give him the honour he rightly deserves will face his judgement for all eternity. Please use the time he is so patiently giving you to learn the lessons of history before it's too late. God is calling you to repent; to turn away from your pride and your desire for independence from him and to have a change of heart. Acknowledge that he rules over your life with grace and kindness, and that everything you are and have comes from him. Humble yourself before him. Come to him through faith in his Son, Jesus Christ, and receive the forgiveness he has won for you at the cross. And give him the honour he deserves.

That, in part, is what we're doing today, this Harvest Sunday. We're giving thanks to God for his gracious provision to us. We're praising him for all the good gifts we receive from his hand. And it's what we must do, not just today, but with our whole lives.

If you would like to speak with me after the service about what that involves, I would love to do that.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, as we pause in silence, we want to acknowledge that you hold in your hand our lives and all our ways. You rule over us with grace and compassion and fill our lives with good things. And we thank you and praise you for your goodness to us. When we fail to give you the honour you deserve, please assure us of the forgiveness Christ won for us at the cross. And please help us to live new lives, to your glory and praise. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.