



“Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain” (Exodus 20:7).

Desecration and Devastation

L566. Date: July 1980. **Text:** Daniel 5:18-30.

Topic: Belshazzar; Judgment: Of Men; Sin: Of Men.

Central Truth: It is a fearful thing for one to be weighed on God's “balance scales.”

The feast of Belshazzar, with the surprising events which concluded it, is one of the well-known events recorded by the prophet Daniel. The time was thirty years after the events of chapter 4. Daniel was an old man by then, probably about eighty-one. Belshazzar is introduced as the ruler of the Babylonian empire. He was the eldest son of Nabonidus, who was the true king. However, Nabonidus enjoyed travel and archeological work, so Belshazzar was made co-regent with his father and actually governed the kingdom during his father's absence. (There was one period of several years in which Nabonidus did not even visit the capital city of Babylon.) Therefore, Belshazzar is spoken of as the “king.”

Belshazzar was the grandson of King Nebuchadnezzar. A series of weak kings had followed the great Nebuchadnezzar to the throne of the Babylonian empire. There were four kings which sat on that throne in a period of seventeen years. The mother of Belshazzar was Nitocris, daughter of Nebuchadnezzar and wife of Nabonidus.

Today's lesson deals with the problem of irreverence toward God and disrespect of people. It warns of the judgment God will bring for such sins.

I. LEARN THE LESSONS OF HISTORY

It has been wisely said that history is “His-story,” the record of God's

work among men. Therefore wise men should be able to interpret history and see an example of the way God deals with mankind. Belshazzar made the fatal mistake of ignoring the work of God in history, and thus brought destruction to himself and his kingdom.

A. History teaches the sovereignty of God (verse 18). Daniel was brought before the king to read and interpret the writing which miraculously appeared on the wall of the palace. The prophet did more than that. He used the occasion to tell King Belshazzar that he had ignored the truth of the sovereignty of the Lord God as shown in the history of Babylon.

The true God is called “the Most High God,” because He is greater than all those who are called “gods” in the world. It was He who had given Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar's grandfather, the kingdom. It was He who had added greatness (ability to rule), honor (recognition and praise), and glory (fame) to the administration of the former great king. Nebuchadnezzar was an absolute monarch — having power of life and death over all his citizens. But all his power and authority were subject to the greater sovereignty of God.

B. History teaches the subjection of kings to God (verses 20, 21). Nebuchadnezzar became too obsessed with his sense of personal importance. It became necessary for God to discipline him and teach him humility. Therefore, “When his heart was lifted up and his spirit grew strong with pride, he was deposed from the throne of his kingdom and his honor was taken from him. Then he was driven away from the sons of men, his heart was made like the beasts', and his dwelling was with the wild asses; they fed him herbage like oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven; until he knew that the Most High God rules over the kingdom of men and that He establishes over it whomever He will.”

It matters not how powerful a ruler may be, there is One who is his ruler. It matters not how wide his dominion might extend, there is a God in heaven whose dominion is even greater. He is King over all kings and Lord over all lords.

C. History warns against forgetfulness of God (verse 22), Belshazzar had studied the history of his kingdom. He knew what had happened to his grandfather. (His mother must have told him, if he received it from no other source.) Yet, he did not heed what he heard. He forgot God in his devotion to the religion of his ancestors, the affairs of state, and the lusts of the flesh.

Daniel warned, “You have not humbled your heart, although you know all things; but against the Lord of heaven you have exalted yourself . . . the God, in whose hand is your breath and to whom are all your ways, you have not honored.”

II. BEWARE OF THE SINS OF SENSUALITY

The revelation of God came to Belshazzar at a time when he and his lords were engaged in drunken revelry. Reckless abandon was the spirit of the feast of Belshazzar (even though the invading Persian army was just outside the walls of the city).

They were “tasting” the wine — feeling the drunken effect it produced — when he commanded that the gold and silver vessels taken from the temple of God in Jerusalem be brought in. He thought they would add luster to his feast and bring reproach on the God of the Hebrews. Such a spirit (carried further by their drinking wine from the vessels as they praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze and iron, wood and stone) was nothing less than open defiance and blasphemy against God.

The vessels from the house of God in Jerusalem had been brought to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar. That great king had stored them “in the temple of his god” and kept them set apart for sacred use. Not so with Belshazzar. He committed sacrilege by the sensual use of those vessels which had been dedicated to sacred use only.

Who drank of the vessels? The king, his lords, his wives, and his concubines drank from them. Women commonly did not attend the great feasts of those days, so they were brought in for the drinking portion of the festivities. It is most likely that the event had turned into a sensual brawl.

The purpose of the feast was to give a show of confidence in view of the crisis facing the nation. The Medo-Persian armies had already invaded the kingdom. They were outside the walls of Babylon at that very hour. King Belshazzar gave the feast as a morale builder and a way to forget their troubles for a season. How differently it turned out from what he had intended.

III. FEAR THE JUDGMENT OF GOD

When the revelry was at its height, it was suddenly stilled. All the music, loud talk, and boisterous laughter suddenly ceased. The fingers of a man's hand seemed to come out of the wall and began to write a message upon the plaster. It wrote on the smooth surface of the wall, on a space lighted by a great candlestick, so that all could see it distinctly.

An archaeologist named Koldewey, who excavated Babylon, found a room in the palace about 55 feet wide and 169 feet long. A niche in one of

the long walls, opposite the entrance, was probably the place where the king sat. It was near there that the writing appeared.

The king turned pale with fright. He may have thought the God of the Hebrews was about to retaliate against him for his defiance, and probably thought of the Persian invaders outside the city walls. His strength left him. His knees knocked together as his muscles trembled in terror.

The wise men of the kingdom were called to come immediately. The writing must be read and interpreted. They came (all except Daniel, that is), but were unable to read the writing or give its interpretation. That only increased the king's fear. He promised great rewards to anyone who could read and interpret the writing on the wall.

God had communicated with Nebuchadnezzar through dreams which were interpreted. Why did He communicate with Belshazzar by writing on the wall? (1) He wanted the message to be witnessed by all who were present. (2) He wanted the writing to remain on the wall to impress the message the more on the spectators as well as the king. (3) He wanted to manifest himself and His prophet superior to the "wise men" of the pagan kingdom. The handwriting on the wall was the best way to accomplish those purposes.

Why could the wise men not interpret the writing? It was written in the Aramaic language, which they spoke. (1) It may have been written in a different script (the old style in which the language was written), or (2) it may have been that they could read the words but did not know their meaning since they did not form sentences.

At last, Daniel was brought it. He was an old man by this time, probably about eighty-one. He was called because the queen-mother reminded Belshazzar of how he had shown interpretations which the wise men had not been able to show Nebuchadnezzar. He was invited to appear before the king and the same rewards were offered to him as had been offered to the wise men of the kingdom.

Daniel began with a lecture to the king. He reminded him of what he knew concerning Nebuchadnezzar's pride before God, and how God humbled him. He rebuked Belshazzar because knowing that, he had not humbled himself before God. Then, he turned to an interpretation of the message.

The message was but three words: "*MENE* (repeated), *TEKEL*, *UPHARSIN*." (The "*Peres*" mentioned in verse 28 is a form of "*upharsin*," not another word.) The brevity made it more impressive. The three words mean "numbered, weighed, and broken." 'What was the message conveyed in those words?

“Numbered” (*mene*) meant, “God has numbered (the days of) your kingdom and brought it to an end.” “Weighed” (*tekel*) meant, “You have been weighed in the balances and found to be too light, found lacking.” “Broken” or “divided” (*upharsin*, or *peres*) meant, “Your kingdom is broken (divided) and given to the Medes and Persians.”

Only the inspiration of God could make that meaning known from those three words. Daniel's message was that Belshazzar's kingdom was about to be destroyed (because he had been found deficient in moral and spiritual values) by the invading armies of the Medes and Persians. The message of God was plain and painful to the vain and idolatrous king.

IV. NOTE THE REWARD FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS

It took a great deal of courage for Daniel to speak in such a manner before the king. Kings in those days were absolute monarchs with the power of life and death. He was taking his life in his hands as he spoke the message of God. And yet, he spoke. His concern was for the communication of the true message of God, not for protection of his own person.

Daniel was honored because he read and interpreted the message. He was made a member of the three-member board which governed the land (Nabonidus, Belshazzar, and Daniel) as a triumvir. The glory did not last long, however, for that very night Belshazzar was slain and the kingdom fell. But God let no harm come to His prophet. The new rulers recognized Daniel as a man of surpassing ability. They set 120 satraps over the kingdom and three presidents over them. Daniel was one of those three presidents. The Babylonian empire fell, but the prophet of God continued to prosper.

The lesson has interesting historical facts, but it has much more than that. Look back over the lesson for spiritual truths which are applicable today. Look for illustration of this truth: “Irreverence toward God and impurity toward people leads to destruction.”

1. Who were Belshazzar and Nabonidus?
2. How does this lesson teach the sovereignty of God?
3. What was the great sin of Belshazzar?
4. How would sins of sensuality be expressed today?
5. How did God give His message to Belshazzar?
6. Why was an interpreter needed?
7. How does God give His message today?
8. How is His message interpreted today?

9. What is the reward for righteousness today?

10. How can you put the truth of this lesson to practical use this week?