

Two Kings – Belshazzar. Daniel 5

As we looked at the Daniel 4, we saw that a good king made some bad mistakes. But his heart was basically in the right place, and God worked with him until Nebuchadnezzar showed his loyalty to Jehovah.

I honestly expect to talk with him when we are in heaven together.

It was a rough road, but the road led to a blessed ending.

Our story in Daniel 5 has no such happy ending.

The background for the story: The Medes and Persians were at war with Babylon. Nabonidus the king, was defending his nation on the battlefield.

His son, Belshazzar, was holding down the fort, so to speak, in Babylon. And some of the Medo-Persian army was actually surrounding the city.

And how was he holding down the fort? He was having a banquet, with a lot of alcohol.

Now it is no secret that drinking alcohol affects judgment. We have all experienced that in some way.

Now to us this might look a bit overconfident. But Belshazzar had a lot of reason for to feel relatively safe.

Babylon was protected by 2 sets of walls, and both were double walls. The 2 inner walls were 12 and 22 feet thick respectively. The outer walls were even larger, 24 and 26 feet thick. In some places you could actually ride a chariot on the walls of Babylon.

So anyone who would take the city would have over 80 feet of heavily defended walls in 4 sections to transverse. That was enough to make Belshazzar confident.

We are also told, that when the city was besieged that the Babylonians stood on those walls and threw food at the enemy as a way of saying, "You can never starve us out."

Besides the stored supply of food within the walls, there was room for some agriculture, so they could also grow food in the city, thanks to the abundant water supply that flowed in the Euphrates River as it went under the city walls.

If a traveler were to come to the palace, he would pass through the great Ishtar gate, go down the processional way and take a right turn to enter the palace area.

The buildings of the palace were arranged around a square courtyard: The building on the south side was the one where the king held audiences, and it was probably the one where the banquet was taking place.

The outside of the building was made of colored enamel bricks. Many of the figures displayed there would have been lions, which just also happened to the first beast in Daniel 7.

The walls on the inside would have been plastered white. As the party went on, things began to deteriorate, as they usually do. In the midst of the hilarity, the sacred vessels from the temple in Jerusalem were brought out of the storage where king Nebuchadnezzar had put them. Then they were used in the debauchery that was going on.

Now why would Belshazzar have done this? Well, when my country conquered your country, in those days that meant my god is better than your god.

The gods of a foreign country would not have been dishonored, but brought to the temples and storehouses of the conquering nation.

As Jehovah was not a statue, the vessels used in his service were brought instead.

We are not that much different today. In WW2, the Japanese were fighting in the name of their divine emperor. The western nations often invoked the name of their God in their discussions and reasoning. And need I mention the ongoing struggle between Islam and Christianity?

Back to Belshazzar.

The festivities are moving towards a grand and cataclysmic finale.

Suddenly the chatter, laughter, and boasting faded out. One by one people became silent. The revelers watched in astonishment as the form of a hand began writing on the palace wall. Then all eyes turned to the king to see what his reaction was.

Belshazzar's face was pale, and his knees were shaking. You could feel the fear in the room. The armies surrounding the city were totally forgotten for a moment.

The king's eyes looked around the room for his wise men. The call went out that the king wanted them quickly.

I can see them rushing to the king, their eyes on him, trying to read his thoughts.

I can see Belshazzar, mouth dry, pointing to the writing on the wall, hand shaking.

"What does it mean? Tell me and you will be clothed with purple and have a gold chain around your neck, and be the third ruler of the kingdom."

This was a incredible offer.

But why 1/3 of the kingdom?

Belshazzar's father, Nabonidus was also a Babylonian king. He reigned from 556–539 BC. He was not really enthusiastic about being king. He was more of a scholarly type. And he angered the priests and commoners of Babylon by neglecting the city's chief god, [Marduk](#), and elevating the moon god, [Sin](#), to the highest status.

One of the issues the Babylonians had with Nabonidus was that when the king was not in the city, the special celebrations to Marduk could not take place. In fact, Nabonidus left the capital for ten years to build and restore temples – mostly to Sin – leaving his son in charge. While leading excavations for the restoration effort, he initiated the world's first archaeological work.

That had the Babylonians so unsettled, that Nabonidus came back and had feasts and celebrations not just for Marduk, but for all the gods, trying to win back the public.

Because Nabonidus was unpopular, Belshazzar was probably not very popular, and the most he could offer as the greatest bestowment he could give was 1/3 of the kingdom, since he and his father reigned together.

Meanwhile, the Persians to the east, led by [Cyrus the Great](#), had been gaining strength. King Cyrus had become popular among the residents of Babylon by posing as the one who would restore Marduk to his rightful place in the city.

As the Persians advanced to Babylon, Nabonidus left the city, and acting as a field commander, fought with them and was defeated on October 12, 539 B.C. He was captured by the Persians in 539 BC and Babylon was occupied and Belshazzar was killed 2 days later on October 14, 539, thus ending the Neo-Babylonian Empire.

Cyrus was welcomed into the city, where he performed the rites of Marduk. Nabonidus' fate is uncertain, though it is believed he was exiled to Iran and allowed to occupy a government post.

Back inside of the palace, Belshazzar is standing, looking at the writing, and trying to find out what this all means.

But none of his wise men could give an answer.

The queen mother, perhaps Nebuchadnezzar's wife, was in attendance. She speaks in....**Daniel 5:10-12 (NKJV)**

¹⁰ The queen, because of the words of the king and his lords, came to the banquet hall. The queen spoke, saying, "O king, live forever! Do not let your thoughts trouble you, nor let your countenance change.

¹¹ There is a man in your kingdom in whom *is* the Spirit of the Holy God. And in the days of your father, light and understanding and wisdom, like the wisdom of the gods, were found in him; and King Nebuchadnezzar your father--your father the king--made him chief of the magicians, astrologers, Chaldeans, and soothsayers.

¹² Inasmuch as an excellent spirit, knowledge, understanding, interpreting dreams, solving riddles, and explaining enigmas were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Belshazzar, now let Daniel be called, and he will give the interpretation."

Daniel 5:13-16 (NKJV)

¹³ Then Daniel was brought in before the king. The king spoke, and said to Daniel, "Are you that Daniel who is one of the captives from Judah, whom my father the king

brought from Judah?

¹⁴ I have heard of you, that the Spirit of God *is* in you, and *that* light and understanding and excellent wisdom are found in you.

¹⁵ Now the wise *men*, the astrologers, have been brought in before me, that they should read this writing and make known to me its interpretation, but they could not give the interpretation of the thing.

¹⁶ And I have heard of you, that you can give interpretations and explain enigmas. Now if you can read the writing and make known to me its interpretation, you shall be clothed with purple and *have* a chain of gold around your neck, and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom."

Daniel spurns the king's gifts. He knew what was coming. He had read Jeremiah's prophecy about the return to Jerusalem. He had also no doubt read Isaiah's prophecy about the fall of Babylon. He had to know the Medo-Persians were standing outside of the walls, and he knew the mood of the people in the city.

He agrees to read the writing, and to give the king the interpretation.

However, Daniel gives some background.

Daniel 5:18-20 (NKJV)

¹⁸ O king, the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father a kingdom and majesty, glory and honor.

¹⁹ And because of the majesty that He gave him, all peoples, nations, and languages trembled and feared before him. Whomever he wished, he executed; whomever he wished, he kept alive; whomever he wished, he set up; and whomever he wished, he put down.

²⁰ But when his heart was lifted up, and his spirit was hardened in pride, he was deposed from his kingly throne, and they took his glory from him.

Then he retells the story of Nebuchadnezzar's insanity.

Belshazzar knew this well, but he had chosen not to pay any attention to the obvious lesson that it taught. He was haughty. He praised deaf, dumb, and blind gods and ignored the God of Israel, who was the very one who had the king's life in his hand.

For this reason, Daniel said, the message was given.

Now there is a very interesting occurrence on the night that Babylon fell. The Persian assault began on the night of the 15th of Tishri and was completed by the morning of the 16th. On the night of the 15th, it was a full moon. So Babylon fell when Sin, the moon god, was at it's fullest.

Nabonidus had elevated the moon god to prominence in Babylon. But his god could not save him.

Another detail is that Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, or day of Judgment, occurred just 5 days before.

That is interesting because the message on the wall was Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsen.

Mene: You have been judged. God has numbered your kingdom and finished it.

That is repeated twice. In the Bible, repeating something twice makes it absolutely true. Two witnesses.

Another reason that it may have been repeated twice is that there were two rulers: Nabonidus and Belshazzar, who ruled together.

Tekel: You have been weighed in the balances and found wanting.

A fairly common thought about the afterlife in the Ancient Near East was that at death your heart was weighed. Based on the outcome of that weighing, you either went to bliss or darkness. It is another way of describing judgment.

And Babylon was being judged as Daniel spoke.

But by whom was it being judged? Well, we might say by God. But in essence, each of judges our self. Belshazzar had judged himself by not paying attention to the words of his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar, who left behind a story that should have had anyone turning his heart towards Jehovah. Instead Belshazzar mocked Him.

And by whom was the judgment to be executed?

Peres: The Medes and the Persians. They were knocking at the door. They were coming under the wall. They were God's agents for judgment against Babylon, just as Babylon had been God's agent for judgment against Jerusalem.

We find the story of how the Medo-Persian army conquered Babylon prophesied many decades before it happened.

Isaiah 44:27-28 (KJV)

²⁷ That saith to the deep, Be dry, and I will dry up thy rivers:

²⁸ That saith of Cyrus, *He is my shepherd*, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid.

Isaiah 45:1-5 (NKJV)

¹ "Thus says the LORD to His anointed, To Cyrus, whose right hand I have held-- To subdue nations before him And loose the armor of kings, To open before him the double doors, So that the gates will not be shut:

² 'I will go before you And make the crooked places straight; I will break in pieces the gates of bronze And cut the bars of iron.

³ I will give you the treasures of darkness And hidden riches of secret places, That you may know that I, the LORD, Who call *you* by your name, *Am* the God of Israel.

⁴ For Jacob My servant's sake, And Israel My elect, I have even called you by your name; I have named you, though you have not known Me.

⁵ I am the LORD, and there is no other; There is no God besides Me. I will gird you, though you have not known Me,

This prophecy was filled remarkably. Cyrus diverted the Euphrates river, marched under the walls, where the inner gates to the river were either left open by conspirators, or breached by the Persians.

They flooded into the city and killed at least Belshazzar. This might have been revenge because Nabonidus had previously killed the son of Gobryas who was to have been the general the night Babylon was overthrown.

What might this say to us? First, prophecy is fulfilled. Second as we continue we will find that the fall of Babylon echoes down through time to prophetic Babylon which is destroyed when the Euphrates is dried up. More on that later.

Third, have we as individuals been shown truth by God that we ignore? Have we been dodging the guidance of God's spirit who wants to lead us into the heavenly kingdom?

Fourth, I guess we could say that this story is the ultimate story of judgment. Babylon was judged, though she remained a little longer. Belshazzar was judged, and that judgment was final.

Unfortunately God's professed people often try to evade moral responsibility and escape judgment at the same time. It does not work.

But how about Daniel? Daniel's trust was in God, not in a worldly power. Dreams and visions made it clear that earthly powers are transitory. Daniel did not get worked up about what power was ruling for the moment: He constantly served God, as we will be seeing soon.

Next, it confirms the Word of God to us. It put Belshazzar in the temple that night, and many scholars had said that the Bible had that wrong. But ancient documents prove that the Bible is right. And they verify what Daniel says that he saw that night. He must have seen what happened.

There is part of that message that is for us today. Regardless of what happens in the world, the Christian is part of a different kingdom.

Finally we have the message that it does not matter where you start with God: It only matters where you end up.

And perhaps that is the greatest lesson from the stories of two kings.

Our Gospel text:

Ephesians 6:12 (KJV)

¹² For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high *places*.