

# The STORY CHURCH

## Summer Bible Study: The Book of Daniel

### Session 4: Chapter 5

#### Exegesis (the critical analysis or explanation of a text)

#### Daniel 5:1-31

Daniel 5:1 - "King Belshazzar..."

The events of Daniel 5 take place in 539 BC, a full 23 years after the events recorded in the previous chapter. King Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 BC, forty-five or so years after his first armies began conquering Jerusalem and transporting Hebrew exiles into Babylon. He was succeeded on the throne by King Nabonidus who, according to several ancient sources, chose to "work remotely" by ruling Babylon while living in modern-day Saudi Arabia. Twenty-three years into his reign, he appointed his son Belshazzar as "coregent" or "King Consort" over Babylon.

5:2 - "...the gold and silver goblets...taken from the temple in Jerusalem, so that the king and his nobles, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them."

Such artifacts were commonly seized by the victors and claimed as the spoils of war. While the seizure of these objects would have been considered standard operating procedure for conquering royalty, partying with the cups that belonged to defeated, foreign deities was intentionally insulting and humiliating.

5:4 - "...they praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone..."

All these gods are represented in lifeless, elemental substances. They have no unique identity, and no real power, will, or life of their own.

5:5 - "...fingers of a human hand..."

In the days of the Babylonian Empire, it was quite common for an army, after winning a battle, to keep track of their enemy's casualties by severing the hands of their dead. They would collect the dismembered hands as trophies and/or reminders of how many of the enemy's soldiers they killed, and how many remained alive. Thus, the image of a severed hand was meant to represent the apparent defeat of Babylon's enemy (presumably Israel).

5:5 - "...and wrote on the plaster of the wall..."

The reanimation of this severed hand could symbolize/foreshadow the Resurrection.

5:7 - "clothed in purple...gold chain...third highest..."

As is typically the case, this shallow, worldly ruler's incentives are shallow and worldly. Purple was the color worn by royalty. Gold chains were indicative of great wealth and power. "Third highest" probably meant "highest in authority" after King Nabonidus and Belshazzar.

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5:11 - "There is a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods in him."

Secular/pagan/polytheistic people will often attribute the true power of the true God to their lesser conceptions of gods.

5:17 - "Keep your gifts..."

Daniel knows corruption and pride when he sees it, and refuses to so easily conform to Belshazzar's ways. This line also harkens back to Daniel's refusal of Nebuchadnezzar's food and wine in Ch.1.

5:21 - "...until he acknowledged that the Most High God is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and sets over them anyone he wishes."

At the end of his life, Nebuchadnezzar apparently professed his faith in the one true God.

5:22 - "But you, Belshazzar...have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this..."

In his arrogance, Belshazzar did not learn from Neb's mistakes (or from his turnaround).

5:25 - "...MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN..."

These words appear to carry multiple meanings. First, they sound a lot like the most common units of weights and measures (MINA, SHEKEL, PERES), which also were known to be forms of currency. A *mina* was far more valuable than a shekel, and the word "parsin" could also mean "half," leaving us with the phrase "*Mina, Mina, a Shekel, and a half*" which may have been God's way of foretelling Babylon's coming decline. Finally, the word "Mene" sounds a LOT like "Mede" while "Parsin" sounds quite similar to "Persian", and we know the Medes and the Persians were the two kingdoms that would soon conquer the Babylonian Empire and divide it in half.

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### Modern Day Belshazzars

This chapter reminds us that "not everything that glitters is gold." Although Belshazzar possesses all the wealth and power that this world can afford, God's judgment on him is severe. Belshazzar's deeds were weighed by God and he was found "wanting," although he had everything going for him according to this world's standards, God finds him corrupt. It's a great reminder of 1 Samuel 16:7, when God sends Samuel on a quest to anoint the next king of Israel. David's dad expected Samuel to anoint his more handsome and gifted sons, but God chose the most unlikely prospect, David. Samuel proceeds to remind David's father that God doesn't choose according to the world's standards, but he chooses according to what he finds in our hearts. Two key passages to remember:

"People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." 1 Samuel 16:7

"I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward each person according to their conduct, according to what their deeds deserve." Jeremiah 17:10

Beshazzar also has a great ability to ignore reality in order to pursue pleasure, and that is something that is still relevant to us today. In chapter five, he continued to feast while the armies of his adversaries were encamped right outside the palace. To make matters worse, he also brought sacred goblets from the temple to continue his drinking feast and worshiped false gods while drinking the wine.

Sadly, we are also prone to turn a blind eye to the need for God that exists all around us. We've also all been tempted to forsake our calling from God in order to pursue leisure or pleasure. Belshazzar's story should serve as a reminder that we're called to put God first in our own hearts, and to let God's light shine through us, even when it is inconvenient. Also, it should remind us that we should never give into peer pressure in the same way as the noble men and women of this story. In contrast to Daniel and his friends, the nobles easily give into the king's requests. These words from Timothy Keller's book *Counterfeit Gods* are an important reminder for us:

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"Whatever controls us is our lord. The person who seeks power is controlled by power. The person who seeks acceptance is controlled by the people he or she wants to please. We do not control ourselves. We are controlled by the lord of our lives." (15)

Who are some of the modern-day Belshazzars that we idolize in our culture?

What makes us idolize these people, is it their wealth and glamor?