

## Sermon – 16/09/2007 pm

### Weighed in the Balance

Study Text: Daniel 5:17-31

*Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin.* These words were supernaturally written on the wall before King Belshazzar as he partied with his friends. The king was terrified, even before knowing what the words meant. He feared the worst as do most people when they are disturbed in their wickedness. Those who are walking in the truth have nothing to fear. *There is not fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear* (I John 4:18).

Belshazzar had taken the golden goblets that came from the temple of God in Jerusalem and was drinking from them with his friends. He was toasting gods of gold, wood and stone with these goblets when the writing appeared. He knew what he was doing. He knew these were holy cups. He was deliberately mocking God but did not think that God would respond. He thought the Most High God was just like the idols in his palace – they did not get upset when carted about or mocked.

Still today people mock God, thinking he is dead. Men write books entitled ‘the God delusion’ and ‘Adams versus God’. They persist in their ignorance; they go on ignoring the word that God has spoken. God is alive, God is sovereign and God will not be mocked by Richard Dawkins or Phillip Adams any more than would be mocked by Belshazzar. One day they will meet their Maker, just like Belshazzar – and it may be sooner than expected. Only fools think they will live forever. Only fools think they can escape the judgment of God.

### Excuses

One of the many attributes of God is that he is just. His judgement is always fair and just. Before interpreting the writing, Daniel made it clear to Belshazzar that he had no excuse for his wicked behaviour. If Belshazzar was the grandson of Nebuchadnezzar he would surely have heard something of the life of his forbear, especially the time when he was afflicted with lycanthropy. Daniel affirmed that he indeed knew all this (5:22).

Nebuchadnezzar had gone down the same pathway of pride and arrogance that Belshazzar was on. He was a great and powerful king, feared by all men (5:19), but when he exalted himself against God, and the people of God, he was deposed from his throne and his glory taken from him (5:20). God told him this in a dream which Daniel himself explained. He lived like a cow until he recognised that the Most High God rules in the kingdom of men.

Belshazzar should have learnt from the history of his own family that God was sovereign over Babylon and all the nations. God raises up one man and puts down another. Belshazzar had no excuse for not humbling himself before the Lord. He knew what he was doing was offensive to God. We might have expected him to make some excuse, but the evidence placed before him was incontrovertible.

In the story of the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man cried out to Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his bothers about hell. He had died and gone to hell having ignored the warnings while he was alive. Abraham told him that they have Moses and the prophets, just as he had

had – *let them hear them* (Luke 16:29). We might think the rich man had not committed any serious sin but he ended up in hell. Why? He lived only for this world, ignoring the truth about eternity. Ignorance is not bliss, it is death and hell.

God will judge justly. God has revealed himself in the creation and on this basis will judge. *God's invisible qualities, his eternal power and divine nature are clearly seen in what he has made, so that men are without excuse* (Romans 1:20). God has also spoken in what we call 'special revelation'. He has given us the Bible so that we are without excuse. Men like Dawkins and Adams, and all the people in our suburb, and our city, have access to the Bible. If they fail to read it, and heed it, they will be without excuse on Judgment Day.

## Exaltation

What was Belshazzar guilty of? What was his sin? He was just having a party with his friends you might say – what is wrong with that? He was drinking wine – is that a sin you might say? So what if they were holy goblets from the temple. So what if he worshipped some deaf and dumb gods. 'After all, he was only human like everyone else'. How easily people try to dismiss sin with this phrase. We should not say 'so what', but 'so what about God'. God forgives sin, but does not dismiss it. And to be forgiven one must ask. And to ask one must repent.

Belshazzar was guilty of the same sin as Nebuchadnezzar. He was proud and exalted himself, not only in the eyes of men, but of God. God is a jealous God and will not give his glory to another. This is what he declared through Moses at Mt Sinai (Exodus 20:5). The God who made all things, and gives men like Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar a kingdom, and glory, and honour will not just watch when men ignore him. He will not remain silent when men worship other gods, or take all the glory to themselves. *The God who holds your breath in his hand and owns all your ways, you have not glorified*(5:23).

It is hard to believe that Daniel was speaking to a Gentile, a man outside the covenant of Moses. Belshazzar was of course bound by the covenant with Adam. He was created by God and lived in this world created by God – and on this basis was answerable to God. The apostle Paul spoke in the same way to the pagans in Athens. *We are all God's offspring* he said; *in him we live and move and have our being* (Acts 17:28). Ignorance is no excuse.

The rich man in hell was joined by the rich fool (Luke 16, Luke 12). Neither of these men committed any serious sin – no murder, no adultery, and no theft. They just got on with their lives; they worked hard and got ahead in life. They built fine houses and presumably raised children who, like them were very successful in life. How did these men end up in hell? This is worth thinking about if you wish to avoid their end.

## Execution

After reminding Belshazzar of his own theological heritage, and detailing his sin before the Lord, Daniel proceeded to interpret the writing on the wall. There were just four words, the first being repeated for emphasis. This must be one of the shortest judgments in history. The words have the common theme of being measured or weighed.

*Surely men of low degree are a vapour  
Men of high degree a lie;*

*If they are weighed in the scales,  
They are altogether lighter than vapour (Psalm 62:9).*

*Mene* means to number, or to fix a limit. *Tekel* means to weigh, and *Phares/Peres* to part or divide. *Pharsin* is simply the plural of *Phares* while the *u* is the conjunction 'and'. *Phares* is means 'Persians'. 'It is given to Daniel to discern that this means that the kingdom is to be 'given to the Medes and Persians' after it is broken up.

God had numbered the days of Belshazzar's reign and that number was up. Not only the days of his reign but the days of his life were up by God's timetable. God had examined his life ; he had weighed him in the balance and found him wanting. *For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God* (Romans 3:23). Belshazzar, like all people without Christ, was found short.

The third word of the judgment meant that his kingdom would be divided and given to the Medes and Persians. Belshazzar's son would not sit on the throne of Babylon. The mighty kingdom of Babylon was finished, just like all other kingdoms men make for themselves.

Belshazzar rewarded Daniel as he said he would. Although making it clear at the outset that he was not giving this interpretation for money (5:17), Daniel accepted the gifts of the king for what they were worth. Being made third ruler in the kingdom did not turn out be such a great reward!

Belshazzar would not have expected God's judgment to come so quickly. *That very night Belshazzar, king of the Chaldeans, was slain* (5:30). The army of Cyrus was just outside the city. Babylon was a walkover. Cyrus states in the 'Cyrus cylinder' that he entered Babylon without encounter or battle. Belshazzar was slain by him, or maybe by his own men and Darius the Mede was installed as king of Babylon. He was not a young man, being 62 years old (5:31).

God's judgment on Belshazzar was just, swift, and final. 'This is the verdict on all human pride and achievement apart from God. The sentence contains an irrevocable doom that is ringing to eternity'. What should we do? The Psalmist prays *teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom* (Psalm 90:12). This is a good place to start. If you are wise you will listen to what God says and take heed to his word. Remember ignorance is no excuse before the Lord.

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