

Sermon – 09/09/2007 pm

Writing on the Wall

Study Text: Daniel 5:1-16

It is interesting listening to Christians share their testimonies. Many have no dramatic event to tell of – they just listened to the gospel and believed in Jesus Christ. Others, however, have had dramatic ‘Damascus road’ experiences – so called because of the Apostle Paul’s dramatic conversion. But few have seen the detached hand of a man writing on their wall like King Belshazzar.

Despite this personal message from God, however, Belshazzar did not repent and humble himself before God. Another king, the king of Nineveh, got up from his throne and covered himself with sackcloth and ashes when he heard the word of God through Jonah – but not Belshazzar.

The Jews had the prophets and the very oracles of God but they did not repent and believe in Jesus Christ. It is tragic when people grow up in homes hearing the word of God, and in a land where the gospel is preached week after week, but still they do not repent. Nevertheless, the writing is on the wall.

Chapter 5 refers to a time many years after chapter 4. King Nebuchadnezzar has died and his son Nabonidus taken over as king of Babylon. Nabonidus sought to exalt the moon god, Sin, as the chief deity among the Babylonian pantheon, replacing Marduk. For this or other reasons he was not a popular king. He moved his residence out of Babylon and left his son Belshazzar as viceroy in the palace. Belshazzar was as unpopular as his father it seems, for when the city was attacked by the Medes in 529BC there was little resistance. This chapter records the slaying of Belshazzar, and passing of the kingdom into the hands of Darius the Mede (5:30, 31).

Delight In Drink

Belshazzar decided to throw a party for his friends, a thousand of them. The general public may have hated him, but he was popular among the few elite – at least when he invited them to his party. Drinking wine and getting drunk was the focus of this party. Belshazzar took pride in being a hard drinker it seems.

In a drunken state Belshazzar sought to impress his guests with lewdness and blasphemy. He called for the gold and silver goblets which his father/ancestor, Nebuchadnezzar, had taken from the temple in Jerusalem to be brought. He was going to mock the God of the Jews to impress his friends, including many women.

Wine is a mocker and strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise (Proverbs 20:1). Belshazzar was not wise. ‘In his pathetic display of manliness, he crossed the line of proper restraint in God’s world’. Many before him did the same thing, and so have many since. If our Sunday papers are anything to go by, this wisdom is still widely ignored today.

We have a society in which binge drinking is on the increase. We have a society in which thousands of families are terrorised by drunken behaviour. Thousands of families are broken because of drink. Thankfully we have had the wisdom to make drink driving a criminal offence. When will drunken parenting be made a crime? When will we stop excusing people's bad behaviour 'because they were drunk'? The judge and jury may accept the plea of drunkenness, but not God. The writing was on the wall for Belshazzar and it would stay on the wall.

Danger of Blasphemy

Wine in itself is not evil but it has the potential to do great harm. It leads to the lack of self-control, a personal characteristic emphasised in the Bible (Galatians 5:23). Without self-control man's moral compass goes haywire, leading to all manner of corrupt and wicked behaviour.

The drunken Belshazzar called for the holy things of God to be brought to him so that he and his friends could drink from them. Was this just to impress his friends and get a laugh? If so that would have been blasphemous anyway. God will not be mocked. Belshazzar knew that these goblets had been set apart for holy use in the temple of God.

What Belshazzar was guilty of before God was idolatry. He not only drank from the goblets but proceeded to worship the gods of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood and stone (5:4). Such gods may well have lined the walls of his palace. From the sacred things of the only true God, Belshazzar was drinking toasts to the gods that he had made.

In the same hour the fingers of a man's hand appeared and wrote on the wall of the palace (5:5). God was not slow in condemning the blasphemy and idolatry of Belshazzar. In clear view of the king and all his guests a man's hand appeared and wrote on the brightly lit wall. A message from God was etched onto the plaster wall of the king's palace.

Belshazzar, like most heathens, was a superstitious man and when he saw the hand and the writing he became a nervous wreck. He started to shake all over with fear. He screamed for his wise men to be brought so they could tell him what the strange words meant. But they could not help him. The king became even more troubled. He stood there trembling as he stared at the writing on the wall; and no one could help him. The party was over.

Men utter blasphemous words when in a drunken state, but they also do so while in a sober state. They think they are being smart and entertaining but God thinks otherwise. If the writing was on the wall for Belshazzar what will it be like for those who persist in offending God in this way? What will it be like for those who worship man-made gods, knowing that there is a holy God who made all things and before whom they will be judged? God gives such people over to vile passions, the Bible says, to a debased mind, to violence, strife and murder (Romans 1). We do not have to look far to see evidence of this in our society. People think it strange that you do not follow them is such behaviour.

'Come out from among them and be separate', says the Lord. *Put off anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, and filthy language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another since you have put off the old man with his deeds and have put on the new man (Colossians 3:8).* Let us put on Christ and live to honour and glorify his holy name.

Discarded Daniel

While Belshazzar was still shaking in fear and asking what the words meant, the queen entered the hall (5:10). The queen, or probably the queen mother, the wife of Nebuchadnezzar, came to give this young king some advice. She reminded him that there was a man in his kingdom who could interpret dreams, solve riddles and explain enigmas, a man called Daniel.

The queen remembered how king Nebuchadnezzar had found Daniel to be the wisest man in his entire kingdom. He had interpreted dreams for Nebuchadnezzar. He was a man in who was the spirit of the holy God.

What had happened to Daniel after the death of Nebuchadnezzar? Clearly he was not among the wise men of Belshazzar, although Belshazzar obviously knew of Daniel. *Are you that Daniel who is one of the captives from Judah* he asked Daniel when he came (5:13). 'I have heard about you' he said, but clearly did not respect the wisdom of Daniel.

Daniel it appears was discarded by Belshazzar when he became king. He probably gathered around him a younger school of wise men. We are reminded of another young king who rejected the advice of his elders in preference for that of younger men. Rehoboam took over the kingdom of Israel from his father, King Solomon. When he rejected the advice of his elders he had trouble and the most of his kingdom was taken from him. Belshazzar lost the kingdom all together.

Daniel was brought and Belshazzar offered him a reward if he could read the writing on the wall and tell what it meant. He offered Daniel a royal robe of purple and a gold chain, along with the status of being third in the kingdom. This indicates that Belshazzar was only second in the kingdom after his father Nabonidus.

Daniel politely told Belshazzar that he could keep his gifts (5:17). They were more of an insult than a gift to this man of God. He was following in the footsteps of the prophet Elijah who was offered gifts by Naaman if he could cure his leprosy. Sadly there are so-called men of God who are more like Gehazi than Elijah or Daniel. There are those who peddle the gospel for a profit. *They run greedily into the error of Balaam for a profit* (Jude 11). Remember Balaam was a prophet who tried to make a profit from the word of God. Not so Daniel or any true servant of God.

Once again the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Babylon come face to face. Belshazzar had brought about this confrontation through his pride and self-glorification, just like Nebuchadnezzar. Belshazzar had gone even further in provoking God's wrath through desecration of what was holy. What did Nebuchadnezzar learn – that God is sovereign and will not give his glory to another. Belshazzar would learn the same lesson even as he felt the severe wrath of Almighty God. God is sovereign. He will not be mocked by any man.

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