

Daniel Interprets The Handwriting On The Wall II Daniel 5

Valley Center Seventh-day Adventist Church
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History written from a human point of view records the great accomplishments of man. History from the divine point of view records the struggle between pride and humility, obstinacy and submission. History from the human point of view focuses on the outward appearance. History from the divine point of view focuses on the inward issues affecting heart and character. In the final analysis, it is the inward aspect that has permanence.



Babylon's glory, the Dubai of yesterday, is gone. That in which Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar had placed their pride is now but a heap, a mere shadow of its former magnificence. But the decisions made by both kings, Nebuchadnezzar saying, "Yes" to God, Belshazzar steadfastly resisting against God, will last through eternity.

Last week we began our study of Daniel 5, and reviewed the amazing discovery of the name and role of Belshazzar the king. Until 1861 the name of Belshazzar was not to be found outside of the Scriptures. It builds our confidence when we note that even in

the small details the Bible has been vindicated. When Belshazzar offered the reward of being "third ruler" to the one who could interpret the writing on the wall, that makes perfect sense from what we now know, since Belshazzar was himself second ruler, sharing the throne with Nabonidus his father. "Third ruler" was the highest position he could offer!

We saw how the king, who was Nebuchadnezzar's grandson, threw a party when the armies of Cyrus the Persian were on the doorstep. Rather than doubling the guard and putting his forces on stand-by, Belshazzar felt confident enough to call for a celebration.

Belshazzar trusted in the things he could see and touch, and those included the double walls that surrounded his capital, the abundant water supply represented in the River Euphrates, and the immense food stores, sufficient to outlast a 20 year siege. The prophecies of Yahweh he discounted as rubbish. The message of the dream given to his grandfather held no significance for him.

A thousand guests raised their goblets with him in defiance against the will and plan of God during the festival, in which, according to ancient historical records, drinking played a large role. We noted how the Scriptures warn against alcohol abuse. It clouds the mind and impairs judgment. In this case, the drinking that took place that night allowed Satan to induce Belshazzar to do something that was an act of outrageous defiance and blasphemy. What was that? It was to bring forth the vessels that had been taken from the temple of Jerusalem, the bowls and cups fashioned for sacred ministry, and use them in his drinking spree. It was a bold and blasphemous statement mocking God. Last week we mentioned how those vessels represent us. We are His vessels, dedicated to spiritual ministry in His temple. But how the devil delights in taking those chosen for ministry and putting them to a use that mocks God!

Satan is having his way in bringing ridicule against God and religion in the world today. Hollywood specializes in coming up with titles that have a word or a phrase that come from this Book, and using them in a way that makes Jesus sad. "Bruce" (I won't finish it), "The Kingdom," and other titles drag spiritual words and concepts into the gutter of shame. You wouldn't give the devil money to do something like that, would you?

We saw that that event was Belshazzar's Last Supper—literally. We saw the contrasts between his Last Supper, and what took place the Thursday before Jesus died. In one self was enthroned, while in the other self was denied. One was about pride and defiance, the other about humility and submission.

"They drank wine, and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze and iron, wood and stone." Daniel 5:4. As Belshazzar's bash began, the drinking and laughter started. Toasts and jokes, music and mirth arose, filling the air with boisterous commotion. They drank from the temple cups and praised the gods of gold, silver, bronze and iron (an interesting order! I wonder if anyone there remembered the sequence of the metals in the statue dream!). As the evening continued, eyes became glazed, voices hoarse, as the king and his guests tried to outdo one another in disorderly conduct.

Suddenly the loud party noise stopped. Across the room there rippled a wave a shocked silence. Heads snapped to find the cause of the interruption of their festivity, and then eyes widened, faces paled, as on the plaster wall, letters of fire appeared, inscribing a cryptic message written by a mysterious hand. What just seconds before was unchecked revelry was replaced by pained and awkward silence. Instead of the bombastic laughter there was a hushed quietness. Belshazzar found that his knees quaked without control.

A furious search for the meaning of the inscription followed. "The king cried aloud to bring in the astrologers, the Chaldeans, and the soothsayers. And the king spoke, saying to the wise men

of Babylon, 'Whoever reads this writing, and tells me its interpretation shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around his neck; and he shall be the third ruler in the kingdom.'" Daniel 5:7.

A parade of wise men comes before the king, but they have no clue as to what the inscription means. Belshazzar needn't have bothered. This is heaven's message, to be understood and interpreted by heaven's man. Human wisdom will fail here just as it has in every circumstance reported by the book of Daniel.

- In chapter two the message came in a dream of a great statue, which the king couldn't remember and the wise men couldn't relate. But God gave the dream and its meaning to Daniel.
- In chapter four the king could remember the dream of a great tree, but the wise men were unable to decipher its meaning.
- Now the message is emblazed on the palace wall in letters of fire for all to see, but still man's wisdom falls short. "Now all the king's wise men came, but they could not read the writing, or make known to the king its interpretation." Daniel 5:8.

Perhaps we should understand the word "all" as referring to "all the wise men in active duty." There was one who was not invited to untangle this knot, and he had been appointed the chief of the wise men! But in his pride and defiance, Belshazzar hoped desperately that the riddle could be solved without having to call on him. How stubborn is the human heart! How resistant to heaven's pleadings! We saw that Nebuchadnezzar in his unconverted state pursued this same policy, when he called for *all the wise men* (but not including Daniel) to interpret the dream about the great tree. The Bible says, "But at last Daniel came before" him and gave him the meaning.

When the wisdom of the wise men of Babylon proved inadequate, "King Belshazzar was greatly troubled, his

countenance was changed, and his lords were astonished. The queen, because of the words of the king and his lords, came to the banquet hall. And the queen spoke, saying, 'O king, live forever! Do not let your thoughts trouble you, nor let your countenance change. There is a man in your kingdom in whom is the Spirit of the Holy God. And in the days of your grandfather, light and understanding and wisdom, like the wisdom of gods were found in him; and King Nebuchadnezzar your (grand)father—your (grand)father the king—made him chief of the magicians, astrologers, Chaldeans and soothsayers. Inasmuch as an excellent Spirit, knowledge, understanding, interpreting dreams, solving riddles, and explaining enigmas were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Belteshazzar. Now let Daniel be called, and he will give the interpretation.'" Daniel 5:9-12.

The literal translation of the phrase "explaining enigmas" is "untie knots." When this woman of wisdom is given the title of "queen," it may mean "queen mother," and could even have been the widow of Nebuchadnezzar.

When Daniel, now approaching 90 years of age, comes in, his eyes quickly take in the scene, including the handwriting on the wall and the blasphemous usage of the sacred implements. There, in front of the lampstand, are brought together

Heaven's light, heaven's hand,
Heavens message and heaven's man.

"Then Daniel was brought in before the king. And the king spoke, and said to Daniel, 'Are you that Daniel who is one of the captives from Judah, whom my (grand)father the king brought from Judah? *I have heard of you...*'" Daniel 5:13, 14. "I've heard of you." (??) No doubt, this is one of the greatest understatements of history! Belshazzar, think back! Has the memory of your grandfather out in the pasture eating grass faded so quickly? I don't think so!

In this chapter, when Daniel recounts the story of the king who ate grass, notice that in verse 21 he says that the king lived among "wild donkeys." Whenever I read that, I have to think of Ivan. Some of you know about Ivan. He lives just south of us here, at the San Diego Wild Animal Park. Ivan is a giraffe. You can see him if you take the tram ride, and you can hear his story, how he came to possess only half of a tail. Do you know how that happened?

Ivan lived with the wild donkeys for a while, and evidently he did something that offended one of them, so he bit Ivan's tail off! (Giraffes' tails don't grow back like lizards' tails do.) After that, the keepers decided that the wild donkeys would have to live by themselves, and not with the general animal population. Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar's grandfather, lived with wild donkeys. I wonder how they got along! Belshazzar, have you forgotten about the fiery furnace when Daniel's God rescued the Hebrews who wouldn't bow to the golden image? Have you forgotten about the statue dream, and how all the wise men failed, but God gave Daniel the answer?

Be assured, Belshazzar had more than "heard of Daniel." The self-willed king had made a career of beating back the quiet impulses of the Holy Spirit, pointing him to a better way. For years he had been pushing away those lessons, those memories, those promptings which could have brought light and salvation.

Before interpreting the message of the flaming letters, Daniel reviewed some of the highlights of God's attempts to win Belshazzar, including the living parable of his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar living like an animal. In words that must have cut the king to the heart, Daniel said, "But you, his (grand)son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, *although you knew all this.*" Daniel 5:22. He also pointed out the blasphemy in Belshazzar's usage of the sacred temple articles in his defiant feast.

Then Daniel turned his attention to the writing on the wall, and immediately discerned the play on words used to convey the message of doom. "Mene, mene," from the Aramaic verb *manah* which means "to count." The word is repeated to emphasize the scrutiny and carefulness of the examination. In other words, "God has gone over your records and checked them twice." Whenever you're adding a column of figures, like in your checkbook, do you sometimes add them up from top to bottom, and then a second time, from bottom to top, to double check the accuracy of your addition? In interpreting this word, Daniel said, "God has numbered your kingdom, and finished it." Daniel 5:26.

"Tekel," meaning "to be weighed." Scales were used in ancient times to weigh metals in a test of their worth, and from this they were used symbolically to represent judicial examination. In the Egyptian Book Of The Dead, the artists pictured a man's heart placed on one side of the scales, and a feather in the other, to determine his merit to go into the afterlife. The symbol of scales is still used today to represent fairness in the courtroom. I'm sure you've seen a picture of the statue "blind justice," a blindfolded lady holding a set of scales representing fairness in the courtroom. Daniel said, "You have been weighed in the balances, and found wanting." Daniel 5:27.

God's indictment is given from an accounting point of view: "Your records have been called in for a divine audit. They have been double checked, and your account is short." It is also given from a metallurgical point of view: "You have been assayed in the divine scales, and shown to be unworthy."

The third term declares the result of the failed examination. "Upharsin," from the Aramaic *peras* meaning "to divide or break." This word is used often in the Bible to describe the split hoofs of animals that were "clean." There were many words that could have been used to describe the disintegration of the Babylonian kingdom, but God chose one which uniquely included the "act" as well as the "actor," since the word *peras* is the root for the word "Persia," the kingdom which would conquer Babylon before the

next sunrise. Babylon would be “divided” by the “dividers,” or “broken” by the “breakers.” Notice that when he interprets this part of the puzzle, Daniel doesn’t use the word “upharsin,” but “Peres,” which is a verbal cognate of “upharsin.” “Peres: your kingdom has been divided, and given to the Medes and Persians.” Daniel 5:28.

Even as Daniel was speaking, and the royal tailor was fitting him with the purple robe of honor in a kingdom whose existence was now measured in minutes, Cyrus’ armies were about to enter the city. A century and half earlier the prophet Isaiah had foretold, “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.” Isaiah 45:1. And now, in an exact fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy, Cyrus had dried up the riverbed by diverting the Euphrates around Babylon, and the gates had been left unlocked, and the conquering infantry came into the city with virtually no resistance. Babylon fell; Belshazzar was slain; God’s Word came true.

In this chapter, we gain a view of God’s system of justice at work. The great controversy between Christ and Satan began over the issue of justice and fairness. Satan has claimed that God is unfair, that He requires too much, that it’s impossible to obey His law. God’s proposition is the opposite, that it’s only by following and obeying Him that peace and serenity can reign and the safety of the universe be secured.

When the devil successfully tempted our first parents, Adam and Eve to disobey God’s express command, Jesus stepped in and said, “I will pay the ransom for their disobedience. Mankind will be given another chance.” The story of this Book is the record of how the members of the human race have either accepted that second opportunity or rejected it. Patiently God has allowed time for humans to make up their minds, and even though they begin in pride, if they are willing, as eventually Nebuchadnezzar was,

God can bring change into human hearts and lives. He is able to make us humble.

In Daniel three we observed Nebuchadnezzar throwing three Hebrews into a fiery furnace. If you see it this way, actually *Nebuchadnezzar has been in the furnace*. A heavenly Watcher observed his actions and read his thoughts. God had been trying him, testing him, cleansing him, changing him. Finally, through the trials, he came forth as gold, with the likeness of God's Son imprinted on his heart. To his grandson Belshazzar these lessons and others had been available to study. God gives humans intelligent reason, and sufficient evidence upon which to base their decisions.

When Daniel said, "But you his grandson, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, *although you knew all this,*" he referred to the vast catalogue of evidence that had been made available to Belshazzar. Those five words "although you knew all this," are some of the most important in the chapter, because they clearly reveal the fairness of God's justice. He does not hold us accountable for what we do not know, or could have known. The standard to which the king was held was a fair one, based on his own experience and opportunities, and Daniel reminds him that he was not ignorant of divine principles. No one will be judged unfairly. "All this" may be a different package of facts and experiences for each one of us, but it is *always* sufficient for an intelligent decision for God.

This story follows the model clearly patterned in Scripture, in that our gracious God stoops to speak in human language while administering divine justice. Before the punishment was meted out, there was an accounting. The phrases as interpreted by Daniel demonstrate this aspect of *investigation before reward*. "Your kingdom **has been** numbered; you **have been** weighed." Before the gavel of justice would fall, He would examine the case once more. Did He have to do this? No! Without question He knew the heart of Belshazzar, ripe for destruction, but God uses concepts and practices familiar to mortal minds which inspire

confidence in His justice. In His omniscience, He has no need to “number” the kingdom and check it twice. God knows! He is not required to place Babylon’s record in the heavenly balances to determine its worthiness. God knows!

And yet, before the sentence against Belshazzar and Babylon is executed, God would give the case a final review. He would one last time, “number” and “weigh.” He would “double check,” not because He needed to, but because He wants all to be comfortable with the decision that is to be pronounced. Thus has been His practice as revealed by Scripture.

- In the Garden of Eden, before the sentence against sin was pronounced, God inquired into the conduct of His creatures. Genesis 3:11-20.
- Before the judgment of a world-wide flood, God looked, and saw that the wickedness of man was great. Genesis 6:5-7.
- Before visiting judgment upon wicked Sodom and Gomorrah, God said, “I will go down now and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry against it that has come to Me; and if not, I will know.” Genesis 18:21. Was this because He didn’t already know? Could it possibly be that our Lord was ignorant of their conduct? No! He knows everything! But our wonderful God lowers Himself to do things in a way that we can understand. He would “visit” Sodom before He would “visit upon” the city.

Thus it will be also in the great judgment of the last day.
Before

the sentence is pronounced, God will have reviewed each case “one last time.” Before Jesus returns, every decision will have been finalized. “He who is unjust, let him be unjust still; he who is filthy, let him be filthy still; he who is righteous, let him be righteous still; he who is holy, let him be holy still. And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me to give to everyone according to his work.” Revelation 22:11, 12.

In chapter five of Daniel, we are given a glimpse of divine justice

at work. We see that information is supplied, opportunity is given. Belshazzar “knew all this.” God forces no one, but leaves the individual room to make his or her decision. But with privilege and opportunity comes accountability. This is something the unregenerate heart detests. The unconverted heart pushes away the thought of a divine tribunal, a heavenly judgment, an answering to God for the thoughts and deeds of our lives. Man will go so far as to deny the very existence of a Supreme Being, in an effort to escape the responsibility of being accountable. But all these efforts will be swept away by God’s awesome court of final review.

Someday soon what transpired that night in ancient Babylon will be projected on a global screen, as God brings to trial a world in rebellion. Though the evidence mounts that we are living in the last days of earth’s history, humanity is intoxicated in the pursuit of wealth and pleasure. The thoughts of man are far removed from the coming of the Savior. Soon, the “handwriting on the wall” will be plain for everyone to see. The course of humanity will be stopped in its tracks just as was Belshazzar’s banquet. Each person will stand before the judgment seat of Christ.

While we see God’s justice in action in this story, take a closer look at the hand which inscribed those letters of fire on a palace wall. That hand has been God’s instrument of mercy and grace.

- With unspeakable love, *that hand* “formed man of the dust of the ground” in Eden. You and I were there that day. Physically speaking, our component parts, our genes were present in the body that God formed on Friday of creation week. We all came from Adam!
- *That hand* was given in blessing while Jesus was on earth, touching the blind and healing the leper.
- *That hand* was raised in blessing when the loaves were multiplied, giving food for thousands.

- *That hand* was nailed to a cross to pay for your sins and mine.
- *That hand* knocks on the door of our hearts today and seeks admission.
- *That hand* offers, as part of the New Covenant, to write His law in our hearts.

If the gracious Lord Jesus appeared visibly to us here today, Oh, what a sight that would be! With His nail-pierced hands outstretched, He would simply ask, "Will you give Me your life?" How would you be able to refuse Him!