

A while ago my daughter stumped me with a question pertaining to the biblical account of Noah's flood. The question was this: "Did all the animals come in pairs?" In answering, I reflected back on the scriptural account of Genesis 6-9, on how God told Noah to fill the ark with pairs of each kind of animal, and then responded, "What do you think? Did all the animals come in pairs?"

She responded, "No, the worms came in apples." She got me!

This morning we're going to consider a story about a pair of men. I've entitled the message, "A Tale of Two Men," not insinuating that the account is in doubt, for it is historical and without error. Indeed, it's the true story of two men who were in many ways quite similar, yet in the end were fundamentally different.

The two men had much in common. Both were kings. Both ruled over the most powerful kingdom in the world in their day. Both amassed great wealth. Both had great power, such that by merely speaking a word they could control the earthly fate of men. Both lived extravagant lifestyles. Both enjoyed access to all the pleasures their minds could conjure up. Yes, these two men had much in common.

But there was one big difference between them, a difference that had eternal significance. What was it? We'll discover the answer this morning.

Who were these two men? Their names were Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar, kings of Babylon. We learn about them in the biblical account of Daniel 5.

Overview of Daniel 5: Two weeks ago, we examined the first part of Daniel 5 and were introduced to King Belshazzar. Twenty-three years had elapsed between Nebuchadnezzar's transformation recorded in chapter four, and Belshazzar's entrance on the scene in the first verse of chapter five. In our previous study, we remarked that Daniel 5 reveals two episodes of warning for us.

First, we see the folly of sin (1-4). Belshazzar threw a big party and invited 1,000 political dignitaries to join him. What's amazing is to realize that at the very time the wine was flowing, the capital city of Babylon was under siege. The Medo-Persian army was attacking. But Belshazzar didn't care. He considered himself and his walled fortress to be invincible.

Then, in drunken pride, Belshazzar did the unthinkable. He ordered his servants to bring the sacred vessels that had been captured from the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem, and then drank from those goblets, and even went so far as to praise the pagan gods of gold, silver, iron, and wood.

Belshazzar's problem wasn't just pride. It was sacrilegious pride. He didn't just ignore God (which is bad enough); he challenged God, which is the height of the folly of sin.

In the second episode, we see the fury of God (5-31). The Lord sent this pagan king a message he could not ignore. He saw the handwriting on the wall. Some strange fingers recorded four words on the plaster near to the king. In terror, the king called for his political counselors for help, but they couldn't interpret the message. Finally, Daniel was beckoned, and the man of God (now well into his 80's) appeared before the king.

***Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

That's where we left off the last time, and where we'll pick it up this morning. The message that God delivered to Belshazzar through Daniel is a message which we cannot afford to ignore, for indeed, it contains a sober message for us as well.

Proposition: In Daniel 5:18-31, God uses two ancient kings to give us a vivid contrast between two responses that people make to God.

- I. Consider what Nebuchadnezzar did (18-21).
 - A. He took for granted the blessing of God (18-19).
 - B. He experienced the judgment of God (20-21).
 - C. He learned the lesson of God (21b).
- II. Consider what Belshazzar did (22-24).
 - A. He knew what was right.
 - 1. God deserves honor.
 - 2. God desires humility.
 - 3. God despises pride.
 - B. He refused to do what was right.
 - 1. He honored himself.
 - 2. He dishonored God.
- III. Consider what God did (25-31).
 - A. He penalized the proud (25-28).
 - 1. Mene: Your days are over.
 - 2. Tekel: Your life is lacking.
 - 3. Peres: Your kingdom is divided.
 - B. He promoted the humble (29).
 - C. He proceeded with His plan (30-31).

Response: Ask yourself two questions...

- 1. Am I living in light of what I know?
- 2. Am I walking humbly with God?

I. Consider what Nebuchadnezzar did (18-21).

The first thing that Daniel did with Belshazzar was to remind him what his predecessor, king Nebuchadnezzar, had done. The text calls Nebuchadnezzar Belshazzar's "father," but as we learned last time, the term can simply mean "ancestor." Nebuchadnezzar was probably his grandfather, and without question, was Babylon's greatest king. Daniel reviews three things that Nebuchadnezzar did.

A. He took for granted the blessing of God (18-19). Notice v 18, "O thou king, the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar, thy father, a kingdom, and majesty, and glory, and honor." Don't miss the title by which Daniel identifies God. In contrast with the pagan gods that Belshazzar toasted back in v 4, Yahweh is "the Most High God."

The Most High God blessed Nebuchadnezzar. What did He give him? A kingdom, majesty, glory, and honor. You see, Nebuchadnezzar didn't get to be king merely because he outwitted his political rivals. God gave him his position, just like God allows government officials in our day to assume leadership.

Daniel elaborates in v 19, "And for the majesty that He gave him, all people, nations, and languages trembled and feared before him. Whom he would he slew; and whom he would he kept alive; and whom he would he set up; and whom he would he put down." Nebuchadnezzar's rule was unrivaled and sovereign. What he said, went. The problem was that what he held went to his head.

His power led to pride. He took the blessing of God for granted. In fact, he failed to acknowledge the source of the blessing. Like we so often do.

B. He experienced the judgment of God (20-21). In v 20, Daniel reminds Belshazzar how it happened, "But when his heart was lifted up, and his mind hardened in pride, he was deposed from his kingly throne, and they took his glory from him."

What was Nebuchadnezzar's problem? His problem was twofold. First, his heart was lifted up, and second, his mind was hardened in pride.

Pride does devastating things to people. It blinds them. It makes their heart callous to reality. Have you ever tried to talk to a wealthy person about their need for Christ? Jesus said, "It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God (Mt 19:24)."

Why is that? C. S. Lewis once observed, "One of the dangers of having a lot of money is that you may be quite satisfied with the kinds of happiness money can give and so fail to realize your need for God. If everything seems to come simply by signing checks, you may forget that you are at every moment totally dependent on God."

Nebuchadnezzar ignored the fact of his need for God until God got his attention. The judgment of God upon Nebuchadnezzar was severe, even bizarre, as v 21 explains (LB), "And he was chased out of his palace into the fields. His thoughts and feelings became those of an animal, and he lived among the wild donkeys; he ate grass like the cows and his body was wet with the dew of heaven."

For Nebuchadnezzar, pride carried with it a costly penalty. He lost his sanity, his dignity, and his throne. He lived with the animals until a third activity occurred.

C. He learned the lesson of God (21b). What lesson? It's spelled out at the end of v 21, "Till he knew that the Most High God ruled in the kingdom of men, and that he appoints over it whomsoever He will."

Here's the lesson he learned. God is sovereign. I am not. He's in control. I am not. He is deserving of honor and glory. I am not.

The truth is we tend to live our lives as though we are in control, don't we? Nebuchadnezzar did, until God stripped him of his pretense. Let Jesus' words sink in, "Without Me you can do nothing (Jn 15:5)."

Do we really believe that? Did you live this past week as though you really believed you could do *nothing* without Jesus? How many days out of the past seven did you begin your schedule by speaking to the Lord in prayer, and by allowing Him to speak to you through His Word? If we really are convinced we need Him, we'll show it by making devotional time with Him a daily priority. If you have never developed the discipline of a daily "quiet time," start with a realistic goal. Spend the first five minutes of your day with God. Read His Word for 3 minutes (start with James, a practical, easy to understand book), and spend 2 minutes praying about what you learned. Do it daily for a week. The amount of time isn't as important as the admission that "I need You Lord, every day, every moment. You are in control, and I am not."

That's the lesson that Nebuchadnezzar finally learned the hard way (see 4:37). But at least he learned it, which is more than can be said for another man, Belshazzar.

II. Consider what Belshazzar did (22-24).

Were there similarities between Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar? Yes, many, but there was also a huge difference. What was true of Belshazzar? Two things.

A. He knew what was right. We see the evidence of this by what Daniel told him in v 22 (NIV), "But you his son, O Belshazzar, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this." Don't miss those indicting words, "Though you knew all this."

Belshazzar's problem was not a lack of knowledge. Indeed, like most of us, he knew what was right. He had heard what had happened to Nebuchadnezzar, about his pride, his insanity, his restoration, about how the God of the Jews had gotten his attention. In fact, he knew three things about God, as evidenced by Daniel's words in verses 22-24.

1. *God deserves honor.* He alone is worthy. He alone is mighty. He alone is the "Most High God" (18, 21). Belshazzar knew this.

2. *God desires humility.* From us. He alone is God, we are not. He didn't create the universe to revolve around us, but around Himself. He desires humility from us. The prophet Micah put it this way (6:8), "He has shown you, O man, what is good, and what does the Lord desire of you, but to do justly, to love mercy, and to *walk humbly* with your God." If Belshazzar had learned anything from Nebuchadnezzar's experience, it was this. God desires humility. And thirdly...

3. *God despises pride.* The LB paraphrase of verses 22-23 make this point clear, "And you, his successor, oh Belshazzar--you knew all this, yet you have not been humble. For you have defied the Lord of Heaven, and brought here these cups from His temple; and you and your officers and wives and concubines have been drinking wine from them while praising gods of silver, gold, brass, iron, wood, and stone--gods that neither see nor hear, nor know anything at all. But you have not praised the God who gives your the breath of life and controls your destiny!"

Can't you picture the scene. Daniel, the man of God, looks into the eyes of this powerful monarch and says, "You knew all this. You knew that God deserves honor, that God desires humility, and that God despises pride. You knew it." What was Belshazzar's problem then? You guessed it.

B. He refused to do what was right. He knew better. He knew better than to ignore God, and even taunt God. He had the evidence of what happens to people who do. But he chose not to live in light of what he knew.

Sometimes the objection is raised, "How could God judge poor innocent people?" My friends, there is no such thing as poor innocent people in the sight of a holy God. All have sinned (Rom 3:23). All have gone astray (Isa 53:6). None are without excuse (Rom 1:20).

In fact, Romans makes it clear that God speaks to us, even shouts to us, through creation (ch 1), and through our conscience (ch 2), and ultimately He spoke to us through the Living Word, His Son (ch 3). From the native in the jungles of Africa to the native in the fast lane on Wall street, God speaks clearly and says, "I am God. You are not. Surrender your life to do My will."

We know better. We all know better. But like Belshazzar, our instinct as depraved human beings is to live as though we are God, to resist God, and to refuse to do what He says is right. I recall meeting with a man who was seeing a woman who was not his wife. He knew better. I met with another person who was under the conviction of God, and urged him to come to church, and place himself under the influence and authority of God's Word. He didn't, but he knew better.

Belshazzar knew better, but he refused to do right, choosing two wrong paths.

1. *He honored himself.*
2. *He dishonored God.*

And he knew better. As a nation we know better, too, but daily we are choosing to dishonor God and go our own way. I recently obtained a copy of a prayer that was delivered in the Kansas state capitol, by Rev. Joe Wright of Wichita. Here's how he began:

"Heavenly Father, we come before you today to ask your forgiveness and seek your direction and guidance. We know your word says, 'Woe to those who call evil good,' but that's exactly what we've done. We have lost our spiritual equilibrium and inverted our values.

"We confess that we have ridiculed the absolute truth of your word and called it moral pluralism. We have worshipped other gods and called it multi-culturalism. We have endorsed perversion and called it an alternative lifestyle. We have exploited the poor and called it the lottery. We have neglected the needy and called it self-preservation. We have rewarded laziness and called it welfare. We have killed our unborn and called it choice. We have shot abortionists and called it justifiable. We have neglected to discipline our children and called it building esteem. We have abused power and called it political savvy. We have coveted our neighbors' possessions and called it ambition. We have polluted the air with profanity and pornography and called it freedom of expression. We have ridiculed the time honored values of our forefathers and called it enlightenment. Search us O God..."

It is a serious matter to trifle with God, and lest we doubt that, we need to remember what Belshazzar did. He knew what was right, but refused to do what was right. And v 24 tells us what happened--he saw the handwriting on the wall. He had passed the point of no return, and God let him know.

III. Consider what God did (25-31).

God took action in three ways.

A. He penalized the proud (25-28). At this point, Daniel interpreted the inscription on the plaster wall for Belshazzar. The message was brief, yet authoritative. There were three Aramaic words, with the first word repeated twice: Mene, Mene, Tekel, Parsin (note: The KJV has the fourth word "Upharsin," the difference being the "u" simply means "and," and the "p" and "ph" sound are interchangeable).

1. *Mene: Your days are over.* "God has numbered thy kingdom, and finished it (26)." In other words, "Belshazzar, God says your number is up!" Why?

2. *Tekel: Your life is lacking.* "Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting." Never forget, God is omniscient and righteous, and His scales weigh accurately. 1 Sam 2:3 says, "The LORD is a God of knowledge, and by Him actions are weighed." (see also Prov 16:2; Ps 62:9)

A good question to ask yourself is, "How much do I weigh in God's eyes?" A person of character has great weight. A fool is as light as a feather.

3. *Peres: Your kingdom is divided.* The Medes and Persians will take over.

God penalized the proud. To look at God's message from another point of view, it reveals the danger of power politics. Daniel 5 is a vivid illustration of what God thinks of leaders who play with power and pride.

A couple of months ago, I received a prayer letter from Edgar Feghaly, a missionary serving in Egypt. In it, he revealed a startling situation: "Mr. Farakhan, the head of the nation of Islam visited South Africa, Libya, Sudan, Iran, Turkey, and Malaysia. In Iran

and in front of 2 million Moslem fanatics gathered in the Freedom Square and shouting, 'Death to the Great Satan, America,' the head of the nation of Islam criticized his country (USA) and declared that his ultimate objective is to implement Islamic laws into the Constitution of the United States. According to 'El Hayat' (a prominent Arabic newspaper), Mr. Farakhan called upon all Islamic nations to unite and destroy America. Sometimes one wonders how far a person must go in order to be considered a traitor to his country! It is worth noting that Libya alone contributed \$1 billion to destabilize the USA and turn blacks against whites. It seems to us that the blacks of America need help and must be considered a mission field. If Christian churches do not pay attention and help them, Moslem nations such as Libya, Iran, and Saudi Arabia will buy them with petroleum money, teach them hatred and turn them against whites. As America tries to reach the world with the Gospel, she must not overlook her own backyard."

Daniel 5 makes it clear God penalizes the proud. In stark contrast notice v 29.

B. He promoted the humble (29). Notice what happened to Daniel, "Then commanded Belshazzar, and they clothed Daniel...that he should be the third ruler in the kingdom." Daniel did what was right, and God honored him for it using Belshazzar.

C. He proceeded with His plan (30-31). The first words of v 30 in the NIV are very sober, "That very night." "That very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain, and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom, at the age of sixty-two." Everything he lived for was gone instantly. His pride took a heavy toll.

We need to remember that when we're working hard for that job promotion, that new home, that extra perk. We get it, and it's gone before we know it. So should we even seek advancement? Yes, but not our own. God's. Seek first His kingdom, as did Daniel.

Response: Ask yourself two questions...

1. *Am I living in light of what I know?* Are you? It takes more than hearing the facts to be saved. Two people can hear the same message about God and their need for Jesus Christ. One will humble himself and be saved, while the other will harden his heart and be lost forever. Case in point: Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar.

Why do people refuse to be saved? The answer is pride and self-sufficiency. We know better. We've seen what God has done in other people's lives, but we refuse to submit our lives to Him. Am I speaking to you right now? Do you know better? Is God telling you that a change needs to occur in your life? Are you willing to humble yourself before Him? Perhaps His Spirit is saying to you, "You need to be saved. Right now. You need to stop resisting God, and receive Jesus Christ." Or perhaps, "You need to be baptized. You need to get serious about living in obedience to Christ." Or perhaps, "You need to make things right with that family member you're not speaking to."

Do you know what you need to do? Are you willing to do it? Lehman Strauss points out that Belshazzar's sin was greater because he knew better. James 4:17 states, "To him that knows to do good and doesn't do it, to him it is sin."

2. *Am I walking humbly with God?* Lehman Strauss comments (168-9), "Empires do not stand by human might, man-made machines, and missiles. There is not a wall high enough nor thick enough to prevent a nation from falling when God pronounces that nation's doom." The lesson of Daniel 5 is clear. Humble yourself in the sight of God.