

Main Idea: In the story of the handwriting on the wall, we see two scenes in Daniel 5. Both scenes have a stern warning for us.

- I. Consider the folly of sin (1-4).
 - A. It's in Belshazzar's life.
 1. He lived for the moment (1).
 2. He trifled with the holy (2-3).
 3. He worshiped the profane (4).
 - B. It's often in our lives.
- II. Consider the fury of God (5-31).
 - A. Belshazzar was terrified (5-7).

Hedonist: I do what feels good.
 - B. The counselors were baffled (8-9).

Humanist: I am self-sufficient.
 - C. The Queen made a recommendation (10-12).

Realist: I do whatever works.
 - D. Daniel pointed the attention to God (13-17).

Man of Faith: I seek to honor God in my life.

Take Inventory: When you see the handwriting on the wall...

1. Run from your sin.
2. Run to the Savior.

Scripture Reading: Psalm 66

God deserves praise. He is worthy of praise. By means of His gracious provision in Christ, we can now rightly give Him praise.

But what happens when a person refuses to give God the praise He deserves? What happens when a person begins to steal what God deserves and grabs the praise for himself? And what happens when that praise-grabbing becomes the pattern of the person's life?

In the case of the person before us this morning, the answer was the writing on the wall.

Have you ever seen it, *the handwriting on the wall*? I'm not talking about crayon-marks in the toddler nursery. I have in mind a confrontation with the unexpected. In the words of Numbers 32:23, "Be sure your sin will find you out."

I observed a rather humorous example one night when I was the Resident Director in a men's dormitory. It was late, well past curfew, when I got word that one fellow in the 200 wing had left the residence hall. He had conveniently left his window open for his eventual return, so I and a couple of the students decided to wait for him, in *his* room, with a camera in hand. I want you to know when he snuck through the window back into his darkened room, only to be greeted by the popping of a flashbulb, and the presence of his resident director, that young man saw the handwriting on the wall!

So, have you ever seen the handwriting on the wall? Perhaps at work, or in a relationship, or on a ball team. The message that says things are about to change.

It's one thing to get that message from another human being, such as a boss that says it's time to clean out the desk. It's quite another to get the message from God Himself.

*** 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.

¹ For an earlier development of this passage, see the Daniel series at WBC in 1996.

This morning, we want to consider the original account of the handwriting on the wall. It's the story of Belshazzar in Daniel 5, a true story that can teach us about God and ourselves.

I say *true* story because for years, liberal scholars scoffed at the record of Belshazzar in Daniel 5. They attacked it as being fictitious and non-historical since historians had never found any mention of a king named Belshazzar in ancient, secular documents. That changed when workers discovered tablets and clay cylinders in the ruins of Chaldea on which the name of Belshazzar was inscribed as the eldest son of Nabonidus.

Let God be true and every man a liar! My friend, you can trust your Bible for it is inerrant and therefore accurate and authoritative.

We're going to see two scenes this morning as we consider the original story of the handwriting on the wall which we find in Daniel 5. One, the folly of sin (1-4), and two, the fury of God (5-17).

I. Consider the folly of sin (1-4).

Verse 1 begins, "King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine with them."

If you have been with us in previous studies in Daniel, at this point you're probably wondering, what happened to Nebuchadnezzar, the great king that God humbled in chapter four? After he repented of his pride, and God restored him, how did he turn out? The answer is, we're not told.

No transition is given in the text. Chapter four ends abruptly with a declaration by Nebuchadnezzar, and chapter five begins, without introduction, by telling us king Belshazzar was throwing a party. What you may not realize, and might want to write in the margin of your Bible is that 23 years elapsed between chapter 4 and chapter 5. That's the timeframe suggested by John Walvoord in his commentary (p. 116).²

We need a little historical background. Nebuchadnezzar died in 561 B.C., a year or so following his conversion experience after a reign of 43 years. He was followed by his son Evil-Merodach, who was assassinated after only two years by Neriglissar, who held the throne four years. When he died, his son, Laborosoarchod, who was only a child, reigned for nine months until a conspiracy resulted in his being beaten to death. The conspirators chose Nabonidus to become king, and he reigned seventeen years before being defeated by Cyrus, at which time the Babylonian empire fell to the Persians.

You say, "Where does Belshazzar fit in then?" Most likely, he was the son of Nabonidus, and his mother (who we will see later in the story) was either a wife or daughter of Nebuchadnezzar.

If you're following carefully, you might wonder, "If Belshazzar was the son of Nabonidus, and if Nabonidus was still living when the Babylonian kingdom fell to the Persians, where was he in verse 1 when Belshazzar threw this party?"

The answer seems to be that Nabonidus was out of town at the time. History tells us that Nabonidus spent much of his time away from Babylon on projects, and while he was gone, he delegated rule to his son, Belshazzar, who served as co-regent.

At this point, we need to clarify something about the book of Daniel. The writer develops the book of Daniel not strictly chronologically, but thematically. For instance, while chapters one through four are arranged chronologically, chapter five skips ahead

² Furthermore, in that time period a number of kings had succeeded Nebuchadnezzar before Belshazzar came along (see Walvoord, 113; Strauss, 146).

and is out of sequence. In fact, if you wanted to arrange the chapters of Daniel chronologically, it would probably look like this: chapters 1-4, then chapter 7, then chapter 8, then chapter 5, then chapter 9, then chapter 6, then chapters 11 and 12, and finally chapter 10.³

Why this arrangement? The answer is God wasn't interested in merely giving us a history book. His aim was to provide us with theological history, that is, a true account arranged in a format so as to teach us some important life-changing lessons, about God and His kingdom, and about ourselves.

What is it God wants us to learn from chapter 5? Two main lessons, and now we come to the first. We see the folly of sin. The folly of sin is evident in two places.

A. It's in Belshazzar's life.

Belshazzar was a base, corrupt man who models for us the folly of sin. He stands in stark contrast with humbled Nebuchadnezzar who said in 4:37, "Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, all whose works are truth, and his ways justice; and those that walk in pride he is able to abase." Nebuchadnezzar learned the hard way that God hates pride and deals severely with pride.

Oh, how slow we are to learn! Belshazzar, no doubt, knew what happened to Nebuchadnezzar, how he had boasted in the palace, and spent seven years of insanity in the pasture until he was humbled. In fact, Daniel later tells him so, in verse 22, "though you knew all this."

Yet Belshazzar wouldn't take a second-hand lesson. He had to learn the hard way.

In verses 1-4, Belshazzar illustrates for us the folly of sin. His sin progressed through three downhill stages.

1. *He lived for the moment (1).* "Belshazzar, the king, made a great feast to a thousand of his lords, and drank wine before the thousand (AV)." Here was a proud, self-focused man who lived for the moment. The fact that he threw a massive party is not unusual. Ashurnasirpal II invited 69,574 guests to his great feast when he dedicated his new capital city of Calah in 879 B.C. So though impressive, the size of Belshazzar's party is not all that unusual in the standards of monarchs.

What is unusual is *when* he threw the party. Do you know what was happening at the very time Belshazzar had the big bash? His capital city of Babylon was under siege! In fact, the army of the Medes and Persians had already captured the surrounding territory, and only the city of Babylon remained.

So why in the world did he throw the party *then*? It's because Belshazzar was arrogant. He believed his city (and therefore himself) to be invincible, and for good reason, or so he thought.

According to Herodotus, Babylon had outer walls 87 feet thick and 350 feet high, with 100 great bronze gates in the walls. There was a water moat between a system of inner and outer walls that made the city very secure. The city walls were so broad and strong that chariots four abreast could parade around its top.⁴

Yes, Babylon was an impressive fortress. But every Goliath has his vulnerable spot, a truth which Belshazzar ignored in his delusion. What did he do while the enemy was knocking on his door? In pride, he threw a party, passed the bottle, and lived for the moment.

³observation by my seminary OT professor Leon Rowland

⁴Walvoord, 119

Isn't that what we're prone to do? I know people, and so do you, whose lives are on the verge of crumbling. Their marriage has disintegrated, their finances are in shambles, their relationships with their kids are non-existent, yet what do they do? Admit they've got a problem? Seek God's gracious help, and resolve to do things God's way?

Sadly, the answer is no. Instead of dealing with their problems, they try to cover up their problems, with the bottle, with their job, with whatever. They live for the moment, and fail to see that the handwriting is about to appear on the wall.

Notice the second stage of sin...

2. *He trifled with the holy (2-3)*. Verse 2, "While Belshazzar was drinking his wine, he gave orders to bring in the gold and silver goblets that Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken from the temple in Jerusalem, so that the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines might drink from them."

In verse 2, we see a vivid example of what is true of human nature. Sin becomes boring. Frankly, if the act of sin wasn't enjoyable, Satan couldn't entice people to do it. The problem with sin, besides the fact that it's an offense to a holy God, is that it becomes boring. What's a thrill today is old-hat tomorrow. Our human depravity demands bigger thrills, bigger sins.

Case in point, look at Belshazzar. In verse 1, he throws a party like we've never seen. An orgy, and we can well imagine the base expressions of every sensual desire that occurred. But did they satisfy Belshazzar? Hardly. Sin never brings lasting satisfaction.

So what did he do next? In verse 2, he trifled with the holy. Maybe his guests were getting restless, I don't know, but the king got an idea, a blasphemous idea. In his drunken bravado, he gave the order to bring the sacred temple utensils that Nebuchadnezzar had captured from Jerusalem decades earlier.

Verse 3 tells us what happened, "So they brought in the gold goblets that had been taken from the temple of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines drank from them."

Belshazzar was announcing exactly what he thought of the Lord by his blasphemous deed. He's weak and irrelevant to my life, an object of my humor.

But it got even worse.

3. *He worshiped the profane (4)*. Verse 4, "As they drank the wine, they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone." Do you see the downward spiral of sin? Immorality (1) led to irreverence (2-3). And irreverence led to idolatry (4).

There is a close connection between immorality and idolatry (see 1 Cor 6:18-20). Why is that? It's because there is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every person. That vacuum must be filled with something. The Lord God created us to live for Him, but if we reject Him, we'll fill that vacuum with something else. Alcohol. Sex. Living for the moment. Yet eventually, we discover that these things don't bring lasting satisfaction, which God alone can do. Finally, in our search for satisfaction, we slide from immorality to idolatry, and try to fill that spiritual void. Just like Belshazzar did.

Dear friends, from looking at Belshazzar's life, do you see the folly of sin? Do you see futility of that which does not satisfy?

Years ago my daughter used to have a pet hamster. I found it amazing to watch him when he got on the wheel in his cage. He would run and run and run. It never seemed to matter to him that he wasn't getting anywhere.

Are you like that? Do you feel like you are going nowhere *fast* in your life? The answer isn't to run faster, to cover up that hopelessness with a bottle or anything else. What's the answer? It's to admit that the folly of sin shows up in a second place.

B. It's often in our lives.

Years after Belshazzar, a man of God was concerned that some Christians were being deceived by the folly of sin, so he wrote this warning, in 1 John 2:15, "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him." Then he concluded (17): "And the world passes away, and the lust of it; but he that does the will of God abides forever."

Jesus Christ came to set us free from sin. He lived a righteous life, then died on the cross taking sin upon Himself and enduring the wrath of God for that sin, then conquered death, returning to heaven where He now hears the cry of the sinner who calls out in faith.

Do you want to be free from the folly of your sin? Then look to Christ.

What happens if we don't, if we refuse to deal with the folly of sin? We find out in scene 2.

II. Consider the fury of God (5-31).

The Bible reveals that those who refuse to forsake the folly of sin will experience the fury of God (Heb 9:27). Belshazzar did, as we see in verses 5-31 (we'll focus on verses 5-17 today and the rest next week, the Lord willing).

It's there we see that God intervened. No, there was no lightning bolt, no trumpet call, no earthquake. Just some fingers on a hand, and a message of judgment on a plaster wall.

There are four responses to the message God gave revealed in verses 5ff. Four different individuals saw the same message, yet responded in different ways. I would suggest that these four responses represent four types of people in our day (the hedonist, the humanist, the realist, and the man or woman of faith).

A. Belshazzar was terrified (5-7).

Hedonist: I do what feels good.

What was it that terrified Belshazzar? Two things. First, he was terrified...

1. *By what he saw (5).* Verse 5, "Suddenly the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall, near the lampstand in the royal palace. The king watched the hand as it wrote."

The king was terrified by two things he saw. He saw the fingers of a hand, and he saw a message of four written words (25).

It's worth noting that in the ruins of Nebuchadnezzar's palace, archaeologists have discovered a large throne-room which probably was the scene of this very banquet. The room was 173 feet long and 56 feet wide, and interestingly one wall was covered with white plaster, an excellent background for a written message from God.⁵

We know the king was terrified by what he saw. There's a second evidence of his terror.

2. *By what he did (6-7).* Verse 6, "His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his knees knocked together and his legs gave way." Belshazzar was terrified.

Guess what he did next? The text says he called for his official counselors (just like Nebuchadnezzar had done when God sent him a message). Notice verse 7, "The king

⁵ According to Walvoord.

summoned the enchanters, astrologers and diviners. Then he said to these wise men of Babylon, ‘Whoever reads this writing and tells me what it means will be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed around his neck, and he will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom.’”

Interesting offer. Why did he offer the *third* position in the kingdom? The answer is because it was the highest he could offer. Remember, his father Nabonidus was #1 and he was #2.

Belshazzar was in a jam. When terrorized by the handwriting on the wall, he tried to do what any hedonist would do. He tried to buy his way out.

By the way, many people today think just like Belshazzar. They think that if they have money, they can buy anything. But of course there are lots of things money *can't* buy. Like what? Money can't buy a good marriage, or health, or contentment. Nor can it buy eternal life, for eternal life is a gift God offers us through Christ alone (1 Pet 1:18).

Belshazzar was a hedonist who lived for his senses, who thought he could buy his way out of any jam, yet he was terrified by the handwriting on the wall.

B. The counselors were baffled (8-9).

Humanist: I am self-sufficient.

A humanist is a person who believes man has the resources necessary for all his problems. He doesn't need the Lord. He trusts his education, his contacts, his instincts in life, his ability to fix things and figure them out. He puts his confidence in *man*. He is a humanist.

Watch what happened to the humanists in verse 8, “Then all the king’s wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or tell the king what it meant.”

The king’s counselors failed. How many times have we seen the counselors of kings flop in crunch times in the book of Daniel? They failed in 2:10-11, again in 3:7, and here. When the hand-writing of God is on the wall, it has a tendency to bring mankind down to size!

Notice verse 9, “So King Belshazzar became even more terrified and his face grew more pale. His nobles were baffled.” (see also Psalm 2:1-4)

C. The Queen made a recommendation (10-12).

Realist: I do whatever works.

That was the queen's approach in verses 10-12, “The queen, hearing the voices of the king and his nobles, came into the banquet hall. ‘May the king live forever!’ she said. ‘Don’t be alarmed! Don’t look so pale!’¹¹ There is a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods in him. In the time of your father he was found to have insight and intelligence and wisdom like that of the gods. Your father, King Nebuchadnezzar, appointed him chief of the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners.¹² He did this because Daniel, whom the king called Belteshazzar, was found to have a keen mind and knowledge and understanding, and also the ability to interpret dreams, explain riddles and solve difficult problems. Call for Daniel, and he will tell you what the writing means.”⁶

Who was this woman? She probably was not the king's wife, but his mother (remember, Belshazzar's wives were already at the party), and quite possibly the elderly

⁶ (LB), "But when the queen-mother heard what was happening, she rushed to the banquet hall and said to Belshazzar, 'Calm yourself, Your Majesty, don't be so pale and frightened over this. For there is a man in your kingdom who has within him the spirit of the holy gods...Call for this man, Daniel...for his mind is filled with divine knowledge and understanding. He can interpret dreams, explain riddles, and solve knotty problems. He will tell you what the writing means.'"

widow of Nebuchadnezzar whom Nabonidus had remarried. For our concerns, she was a *realist*, and her recommendation was to do what works. With motherly advice, she told her son to pull himself together, and call for a man who could make a difference, namely Daniel.

D. Daniel pointed the attention to God (13-17).

Man of Faith: I seek to honor God in my life.

How can you spot a person of faith? Look for a person in whose life God is real. He was real in Daniel's life. Throughout the book, when you see Daniel, you see God in his life. He constantly pointed the attention of people to God.

Here he did in two ways.

1. He honored God with his reputation (13-16).

We see this in verses 13-16, "So Daniel was brought before the king, and the king said to him, 'Are you Daniel, one of the exiles my father the king brought from Judah? ¹⁴I have heard that the spirit of the gods is in you and that you have insight, intelligence and outstanding wisdom. ¹⁵The wise men and enchanters were brought before me to read this writing and tell me what it means, but they could not explain it. ¹⁶Now I have heard that you are able to give interpretations and to solve difficult problems. If you can read this writing and tell me what it means, you will be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed around your neck, and you will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom."

So Belshazzar brought Daniel to the banquet hall (13), and twice he said to him, "I have heard of you (14, 16)." What had he heard? He had heard that "the spirit of the gods was in" Daniel (14). He had heard that Daniel was a man of insight, intelligence, and wisdom (14). He had heard that Daniel could solve difficult problems (16). In essence, Daniel had a reputation as a man who sought to honor God in his life.

What kind of reputation do you have? When people talk about you, do they instinctively think of your God? Do they see the Lord as being what makes you tick?

By the way, some people are great people, you know, nice neighbors, pleasant to be around, do a lot of good. But they don't make you think of God. Here's what sets apart a person of faith. He seeks to honor the true and living God in his life.

What does that mean practically? If a person of faith hears a profane joke at work, he doesn't laugh as the others do. Why not? Because there's someone else he's aware of, whom he seeks to please, for he knows one day he will give account to Him.

If a person of faith sees immorality flash across the television screen, she changes the channel. Why? Because she wants her children to see that God is real in her life. If a person of faith is asked to play golf on Sunday morning, he'd say no, and if a person of faith got a bonus check at work, he'd give the first fruits to God. Why? Because his highest aim in life is to know, honor, and please God, and no compliment could bring him more joy than to hear you say, "I see the Lord in your life. He is real to you."

And of course, his response will be, "Thank you. But it's only because of His grace. He sought me. He rescued me from hell. He now owns me and is working out His good plan for me."

Daniel models this for us. First, he honored God with his reputation. Second...

2. He honored God with his response (17). Belshazzar made Daniel, a man in his 80's now, an offer he couldn't refuse in verse 16. But guess what Daniel did?

Verse 17, "Then Daniel answered the king, 'You may keep your gifts for yourself and give your rewards to someone else. Nevertheless, I will read the writing for the king and tell him what it means.'"

You can't buy a true man of God. He does what he does for one reason. He's not interested in pleasing men. He's driven by the supreme passion of pleasing God (2 Cor 5:9-10).

Do you like bumper stickers? They're often indicative of our culture. One that was around several years ago said, "He who dies with the most toys wins." Later somebody adapted it with a more accurate assessment, "He who dies with the most toys...still dies."

Hebrews 10:31 warns us, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." The sight of a few divine fingers petrified Belshazzar, but did he repent? Did he humble himself and cast himself upon God's mercy?

Sadly, as we'll see next time, the answer is no. He will die, that very night in fact, without taking to heart the writing on the wall.

But of course, this isn't about him. It's for us. "All Scripture is God breathed and profitable," says 2 Timothy 3:16-17, [and that includes Daniel 5] "that the man of God may be equipped for every good work."

So the Lord intends to use this passage for our profit, for our reproof, our conviction, our instruction in righteousness, to equip us for every good work. So let's take inventory.

Take Inventory: When you see the handwriting on the wall...

What about you? Have you been learning the hard way the folly of sin? Is God calling you? Oh, you haven't seen any words on your kitchen wall, but this morning you've seen the Word of God, and you know God is sending you a message. What should you do?

Two critical responses.

1. *Run from your sin.* The Bible calls that repentance. For Belshazzar, it was irreverence and pride. What sin is in our lives? "Flee immorality," Paul exhorted Timothy. Run from your sin.

But don't just run *from*.

2. *Run to the Savior.* The Bible calls that reconciliation. Be reconciled to God today. Have you, like Belshazzar, been living for the moment? Perhaps you've been coming to church, even working in the church. But you've been ignoring God. He is not real to you. He is not *God* in your life.

Oh my friend, run from your sin and run to the Savior! Specifically by doing three things.

First, pray honestly and reverently to Him. "Almighty God, You alone are God. Thank You for your mercy toward me in the wake up call You're giving me this morning. I am a sinner."

Two, submit your life to Him. "Take my life, Lord. You are God, have your way with me. I want my life to please You."

But that brings us to a problem. We can't do what we know we ought to do. We need a Savior. And we have one. So...

Three, put your trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. He loves you and will save you, from the penalty of sin, and its power. Get to know Him, and by His grace determine to live for Him from this day forward.