

## **Daniel 5:1-31 The Writing is on the Wall**

### **Introduction**

Some years ago in Santa Rosa, California, certain residents of the city work up to the unpleasant sight of dead robins in their front gardens and on the pavement outside their homes. All the dead birds had purple stains on their beaks. It transpired that due to unusually cold weather the berries on the trees they had been eating had fermented and this had led to the birds overdosing on alcohol which had caused their deaths [D.R.Davis, *Daniel*, p. 70]. These birds had not intended to indulge in excessive alcohol consumption but that did not spare them from the unintended consequences of their actions. Unlike the birds the main characters in the story recorded in Daniel chapter five did intend to enjoy a wild party. It was a crazy situation. The country was at war with their enemy, Persia, besieging the city walls of Babylon. Now the strength of the fortifications was such that no army of that era had the remotest chance of scaling the walls. It gave a false sense of security to residents of the city who had gone about their daily business as usual for some time without impediment – unless they had wanted to leave the city to travel to another place!

What was going on in Babylon? Nebuchadnezzar the great ruler had died in 562BC The succession to the throne was contested by different family members which led to great instability until 555BC when Nabonidas took the throne. The establishment in Babylon were devotees of the god Marduk, but Nabonidas was devoted to the moon god Sin. He became so unpopular that he moved his residence to a place called Tema, five hundred miles away and left his son Belshazzar serving as the acting king in his place (the second ruler in the kingdom) between 553 and 539BC. No one in that function expected that evening to be their last but the ‘who’s who’ of Babylonian society was engaged in reckless folly that night. In that city there was at least one believer in the living God, Daniel. He is now an elderly man who would have been tucked up in his bed long before the party was in full swing. What possible influence or impact could this elderly believer have on this situation? Don’t be surprised because then and now God will use the people available to Him to accomplish His will. You and I will face some surprises as we live for the Lord but in His strength we can accomplish all that He has planned for us. We can be assured of that.

### **1. The Celebration in the Palace** (Daniel 5:1-4)

(a) **He ‘forgot’ he was King** (Daniel 5:1) *King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine with them.* The date is 15 October 539BC. Earlier that month the Babylonian army was devastated by a crushing defeat by the Persians at Opis on the Tigris River. The empire was now defenceless. King Nabonidas was either a prisoner of the Persians or had fled into exile. On 14 October 539BC, Sippur the only other city left undefeated surrendered to the Persians without a fight. The siege of the capital city of Babylon that had begun months earlier had settled down to a fixed pattern. Both the defenders of the city and the besieging forces knew that there was sufficient food and water in the city for it to continue in its present form for years to come- if the defenders remained alert to any potential dangers. The city had been built in the shape of a square with each of the sides of the walls fifteen miles in length. The outer wall was eighty seven feet thick and 350 feet high. It was used as a two lane highway, each way, for chariots. The Euphrates River ran through the centre of the city guaranteeing a steady supply of water. The young monarch had become complacent assuming life would go on as before for the foreseeable future, but he made some fatal mistakes. The two most serious ones related to his forgetting to honour

the office he held and then forgetting about the God of Israel. Nebuchadnezzar never socialised with his courtiers let alone the general population of the city. He would have been utterly horrified at the conduct of Belshazzar. There are echoes here in the conduct of some younger royals compared to our Queen Elizabeth II. Belshazzar wanted to be one of the boys and be 'popular' with them. It was a foolish choice. More than five hundred years later Herod Antipas tried to do the same thing with his officials and in the midst of gross excess he made a ridiculous offer to the daughter of his current wife which led to the death of the man of God John the Baptist (Mark 6:21-29). The wild party in the palace complex was known to the Persians outside the city. They knew that all the key officials in the city would be present and that by morning they would be incapable of carrying out their duties as a result of excessive drinking. How many people in each generation make foolish choices when under the influence? How many acts of sexual indecency or immorality are committed? How often are inappropriate words uttered that cannot be taken back? Proverbs 23:29-35 describes this kind of folly: *Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaints? Who has needless bruises? Who has bloodshot eyes?* <sup>30</sup> *Those who linger over wine, who go to sample bowls of mixed wine.* <sup>31</sup> *Do not gaze at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup, when it goes down smoothly!* <sup>32</sup> *In the end it bites like a snake and poisons like a viper.* <sup>33</sup> *Your eyes will see strange sights, and your mind will imagine confusing things.* <sup>34</sup> *You will be like one sleeping on the high seas, lying on top of the rigging.* <sup>35</sup> *'They hit me,' you will say, 'but I'm not hurt! They beat me, but I don't feel it! When will I wake up so I can find another drink?'* The Bible repeatedly warns against drinking to the point of drunkenness for good reason. Sadly even some Christians ignore these clear warnings.

(b) **He forgot about God** (Daniel 5:2-4)<sup>2</sup> *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.* <sup>3</sup> *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.* <sup>4</sup> *As they drank the wine, they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone.* These consecrated vessels were on display in Babylon but no-one had previously suggested getting them out to use for profane purposes. Nebuchadnezzar would not have done that. However, this young man under the influence of alcohol orders his servants to fetch them and then asked them to serve the guests at this party using the Temple goblets. This action was a direct blasphemous challenge to the God of heaven. Did he think he could get away with it? Yes he did! People today make verbal challenges to God or engage in inappropriate actions and interpret His silence or lack of visible action as a sign of the non-existence of God or His inability to do anything about the affront to His name or character. Paul in Galatians 6:7-8 reminds us of how God views such activities: *Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.* <sup>8</sup> *Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.* Belshazzar's fate was sealed the moment he gave this order. Too many people today make similar mistakes failing to acknowledge God's mercy towards them for their acts of sin and folly. Who was drinking out of these goblets? Not just the king and his officials but their wives who had been summoned to the function together with other women in the harem invited to 'men only' functions to provide sexual services to those present. It was a wild function of excess that could not have a happy outcome. Outside the city the Persians had been hard at work diverting the course of the River so that a significant proportion of the water had been diverted into a canal. This allowed Persian troops to wade into the city evading its defenders on the walls, possibly without being noticed under cover of darkness. Even if the guards on duty had noticed can you imagine the reception of their report about water being diverted from the river? No-one will mock God and get away with it in any generation.

## 2. The Clues on the Wall (Daniel 5:5-12)

This hall was sixty feet wide and one hundred and seventy-two feet long. It had been beautifully decorated with plaster drawings in dramatic colours. However, Belshazzar had ordered the walls to be whitewashed with a view to redecoration! It was, therefore, an ideally prepared wall for the writing that would be inscribed upon it later that evening.

(a) **The Divine Intervention** (Daniel 5:5)<sup>5</sup> *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.* Sometimes God uses the most dramatic of circumstances to gain our attention. In some cases it might be bereavement in the family or a marital breakdown or a family crisis that can lead some people to turn to God. For others it may be a positive change in their circumstances such as the birth of a child or children that makes a couple reflect on their importance of the responsibilities they have for the welfare of that young life. God may use a variety of means to speak to us. The question for us all to answer is this: Am I open to listening to God's directing of my life? Or will it take something dramatic to gain my attention? There are many people who live like this man without a moment's thought about God. <sup>16</sup> *And He (Jesus) told them this parable: 'The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. <sup>17</sup> He thought to himself, "What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops." <sup>18</sup> Then he said, "This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. <sup>19</sup> And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.' " <sup>20</sup> But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?" <sup>21</sup> 'This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich towards God.'* (Luke 12:16-21)

Our lives may appear to go on steadily for years, but no matter how many years we are given one day we will be called to give our account to God- are you ready if your time comes soon?

(b) **The Royal Panic** (Daniel 5:6-9)<sup>6</sup> *His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his legs became weak and his knees were knocking. <sup>7</sup> The king 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 round his neck, and he will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom.'* <sup>8</sup> *Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or tell the king what it meant. <sup>9</sup> So King Belshazzar became even more terrified and his face grew more pale. His nobles were baffled.* The old placards pictured at open air meetings a century ago declared: 'Prepare to meet Thy God'. Twenty-first century secular observers would see such practices as quaint and amusing, but on the day when they stand before the Lord it will be anything but amusing. In many a crowd people have said and done things that in a calmer solitary moment they regret. Alcohol and drugs may be blamed for loosening their self-control but we are all accountable to God. Prime Ministers and Presidents will one day be on a level with the most ordinary of citizens when called to account by King Jesus. Present at his party were his favoured religious figures to whom he now turned. But they had nothing to offer and even if they understood the words on the wall –which is far from certain- they were utterly useless in his hour of need. Religion cannot save anyone – only Jesus Christ can save us. A watered down gospel is equally useless. Humanity has a big problem its sinfulness. Unless the problem is acknowledged there is no hope of a resolution of it. Paul, the great apostle never forgot his indebtedness to Jesus for saving him. It caused praise to God to rise up in his heart every time he reflected on it. In his first letter to Timothy the young pastor of the church at Ephesus he wrote: *Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst. <sup>16</sup> But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life. <sup>17</sup> Now to*

*the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen (I Timothy 1:15-17).* I hope each one of us has a testimony to share of God's amazing grace at work in us.

(c) **The Royal Visitor** (Daniel 5:10-12) <sup>10</sup>*The queen, hearing the voices of the king and his nobles, came into the banquet hall. 'May the king live for ever!' she said. 'Don't be alarmed! Don't look so pale!'* <sup>11</sup>*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.* <sup>12</sup>*He did this because Daniel, whom the king called Belshazzar, 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.'* It is interesting that the only people with anything credible to offer in this situation were not at the party! Now it could rightly be said in response that the two individuals in question were elderly and would naturally have gone to bed much earlier than these partygoers! However, it was not just a question of age or intelligence; it was a matter of wisdom. The queen referred to here was Nabonidas' wife. She was a generation older than Belshazzar but age alone doesn't lead to wisdom but it should. In our current culture that idolises youthfulness the wisdom of older people is often devalued, but a time will come when it will be sought. There may be younger people in your family who are currently not living for God as they should and at the moment are not open to words of counsel about changing their ways. Pray that the time will come when they offer an invitation to you to point them in the way they should go. This was such a moment for the foolish young Belshazzar. Even in his befuddled state he recognised that he was out of his depth and desperately needed help. Daniel almost certainly had been praying about this situation and then had probably gone to bed and slept. I am sure that Philippians 4:6-7 would have been true of Daniel. *Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.<sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.* I need to make much more progress in practising these words. Maybe you do as well. May we keep in our minds that God is on the throne. The scene before us may appear to be one of utter chaos, but somehow God can work for our and other people's good and for His glory in even the most unpromising of circumstances.

### 3. **The Captive with the Message** (Daniel 5:13-28)

(a) **The person they sought** (Daniel 5:13-16)<sup>13</sup>*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?'* <sup>14</sup>*I have heard that the spirit of the gods is in you and that you have insight, intelligence and outstanding wisdom.* <sup>15</sup>*The wise men and enchanters were brought before me to read this writing and tell me what it means, but they could not explain it.* <sup>16</sup>*Now 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 round your neck, and you will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom.'* It appears that like Rehoboam the foolish son of Solomon (I Kings 12) that Belshazzar had dismissed the older people who had worked with his grandfather and father in government. The only ones whose counsel he sought appear to have been young people like himself with no experience of life. Daniel was, therefore, in involuntary retirement around but not any form of service. I wonder how he viewed that situation? After decades in government as a senior civil servant or the equivalent of Prime Minister he was more than entitled to time off duty, but sadly there appears to have been no one of similar stature and godliness to take his place. Yet his work was not finished. He may have had less to do in terms of quantity of tasks to perform but there were still opportunities

for God to use him in his service. This is so important to remember as we get older that while God gives us life He will provide openings for service. The question is simply this: in what ways and in what context can I be of use in God's service whatever my age? For Daniel the offer of a reward by Belshazzar was laughable. It sounded impressive and was genuine, but to this man of God with his godly focus his priorities were so different to the king. It was, though, this difference that enabled Daniel to contribute to this situation. Your friends and acquaintances or work colleagues will face situations in their lives that other friends cannot help them with. Pray for the opportunities to speak a word at the right time when someone is open to hear of your faith and hear something of your testimony of what God has done in your life. In times of crisis people are looking for something that is real and genuine. As Christians we can bring the Lord Jesus into such situations.

(b) **The principles he maintained** (Daniel 5:17)<sup>17</sup> *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.* In Mark 10:45 there are some powerful key words to sum up the ministry of Jesus. *For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.* In a sentence this was the calling on Jesus' life. It was His mission statement. Daniel although an Old Testament believer lived an exemplary life carrying out his duties in the unpromising setting of Babylon; he could not be bought. Elisha showed a similar attitude after the healing of the Syrian general Naaman. He likewise declined significant rewards (II Kings 5:16); in Acts 8:18-20 Peter similarly rejecting financial inducements from the rather dubious character Simon Magus. Daniel would later accept the reward but made it clear that his actions would not be influenced by it. He could never be bought. His tongue would not be silenced at a time when he should speak and he would not speak at a time when silence was more appropriate. As God directed him Daniel sought to follow the guidance given. In the current House of Lords in Westminster there are a proportion of exceptionally able and gifted individuals whose wisdom exceeds the vast majority of those in the House of Commons. However, there are others whose appointment to that place was merely a reward for party loyalty or a determination to increase numbers on a particular side of the House and their minimal and inadequate contributions reflect that. Daniel was worth his proverbial 'weight in gold'. May we in some small measure be blessed to share the wisdom and insights that God wants to communicate in this generation to the people around us.

(c) **The perspective he explained** (Daniel 5:18-21)<sup>18</sup> *'Your Majesty, the Most High God gave your father Nebuchadnezzar sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendour.*<sup>19</sup>*Because of the high position He gave him, all the nations and peoples of every language dreaded and feared him. Those the king wanted to put to death, he put to death; those he wanted to spare, he spared; those he wanted to promote, he promoted; and those he wanted to humble, he humbled.*<sup>20</sup>*But when his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory.*<sup>21</sup>*He was driven away from people and given the mind of an animal; he lived with the wild donkeys and ate grass like the ox; and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, **until he acknowledged that the Most High God is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and sets over them anyone He wishes.** Not everyone loves history! Those who don't know it and learn from past mistakes are destined to repeat them! Unlike his father Nabonidas Belshazzar had no time for the past he was only interested in the present contemporary things. Many of the Psalms were reflections on the working of God in Israel's history. Psalm 107 is a classic example. It concludes with these apt words: *The godly will see these things and be glad, while the wicked are struck silent.*<sup>43</sup>*Those who are wise will take all this to heart; they will see in our history the faithful love of the Lord* (Psalm 107:42-43). We must never live in the past but the present must be contextualised in the light of the past in order to plan for the future. To fail to take it into account is to risk making significant mistakes in the present as this young ruler had done. The*

Acts of the Apostles book in the New Testament, for example, is a record of the acts of God in history through His people when the Christian Church began. Our calling is to be history-makers for God, following on in the footsteps of others who have gone before us!

(d) **The predicament he proclaimed** (Daniel 5:22-28) <sup>22</sup> *'But you, Belshazzar, his son, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this.'*<sup>23</sup> *Instead, you have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven. You had the goblets from His temple brought to you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines drank wine from them. You praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or understand. But you did not honour the God who holds in His hand your life and all your ways.* <sup>24</sup> *Therefore He sent the hand that wrote the inscription.* <sup>25</sup> *'This is the inscription that was written: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN'* <sup>26</sup> *'Here is what these words mean: Mene: God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end.* <sup>27</sup> *Tekel: You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting.* <sup>28</sup> *Peres: Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.'* All of us one day will reap the harvest from what we have sown in our lives. Only Daniel could say these words of judgement. His faithful and godly witness over many decades had earned this position for him. All our evangelism that is effective will involve earning the trust to speak into people's lives. We will need to demonstrate that we love them in the Christian sense of that term and that we genuinely want the best for them. When that is true we can speak into each other's lives and those of other people encouraging one another to be the best we can be for God. Yet it still took huge courage for Daniel to say what he did. In Psalm 90:12 Moses urges us to pray these words: *Teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom.* How much do we need men and women in politics and government; in business and trades unions –in fact in each area of society, who can exhibit godly wisdom as they conduct their daily lives.

#### 4. **The Command from the King** (Daniel 5:29-31)

(a) **The reward on offer** (Daniel 5:29)<sup>29</sup> *Then at Belshazzar's command, Daniel was clothed in purple, a gold chain was placed round his neck, and he was proclaimed the third highest ruler in the kingdom.* All credit to this young man that he accepted the constructive criticism Daniel gave to him and kept his promise about the honour he was to confer, although by the time Daniel woke up the next morning the regime was gone and the Persians had taken charge of the city.

(b) **The regime that was over** (Daniel 5:30-31) <sup>30</sup> *That very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain,* <sup>31</sup> *and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom, at the age of sixty-two.* How long do you and I have left to live? God alone knows but may we always be deeply consciousness of the shortness of time and the nearness of eternity, Amen.