



Ministry of the Word

Sunday 28th May 2017

by Vincent Gannon

Scripture: Daniel 5:1-31

Subject: Chapter 5, Part 17 – The Writing's on the Wall

We get many sayings from this chapter such as 'You've been weighted and found wanting' or even 'Coming up short' but maybe the most famous one is 'The writing's on the wall'. It's a very interesting chapter from a historical perspective also as it starts to shape the outline of the fall of Babylonian. Now the fall of Babylonian is not to be confused with the Doom of Babylon. If you are interested in doing a little bible study which won't even take you an hour, you could read the following 6 chapters back to back, which are – Isaiah 13&14, Jeremiah 50&51 and Revelation 17&18.

Now just to set this chapter in the historical time-line. First there was King Neboplassar who died and the kingdom passed to his son who was a great general at the time, King Nebuchadnezzar. He developed Babylonian into a great Empire (and as we know it was with God's help!). Nebuchadnezzar had four children, two daughters and two sons. When Nebuchadnezzar died, his son Merodach, who is known in history as Evil-Merodach, reigned for 2 years. Then the kingdom passed on to his bother Neriglassar who was able to reign for a few more years than that. Then Neriglassar's son Labashi-Marduk reigned for only 2 months. It was obviously a troublesome career that tended to end in death. Anyway, Nebuchadnezzar's son-in-law, Nebonidus took over the kingdom. Now it's fascinating if you



look at secular history. For many years, the historians mocked the book of Daniel saying that it couldn't be true as the records showed that at the time of the fall of Babylonian, King Nebonidus was in charge. However, in the 19th Century, there was archaeological discoveries which showed that technically Nebonidus was King at the time but he didn't want to be king, the people didn't want him nor did the priest's want him in that position, in fact he spent most of his time in Northern Arabia and other places and left his son Belshazzar in charge, who was in charge at the fall of Babylonian. This information not only validates Daniel's account but also makes him an eye witness to these events that took place!

From this account, we can see that Belshazzar choose not to remember all the things that had taken place in his family in particular his grandfather, King Nebuchadnezzar. Now before before we jump on the band wagon, let me just note, that often there are things in our own lives that either we choose to forget, or just forget so we then have to face the consequences. Remember Hebrews 6:6

“if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.”

I know this verse is of course speaking of Jewish people who professed faith but returned to Judaism. Think of all that they knew but chose to turn back to the old ways while turning their whole hearts away from Christ as Messiah and Saviour. Romans 1 :18 –

“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,”

Often people do forget even the most tragic or important things that happen in life that have thought value lessons or hold a value message. Even the yearly military war remembrance services, I'm thinking particularly in the British army, use the expression “Lest we forget”. Historical these events are great fences placed there to remind us of a past we should not repeat. Yet we all know the expression ‘if you don't learn from history, you'll repeat’ which just sums up the fact that we do indeed either choose to forget or just forget.

When we forget the major and the minor lessons in life, we have to face the consequences. This leads us to the accountability and responsible that we hold, not just to ourselves, or others but also, and more importantly, to God. Man without accountability is a terrible creature. It matters little if they are quietly spoken, mild in manner, gracious in their actions,



and generous above measure, they are sinners and under the wrath of God. They are capable of vile thoughts, great blasphemies, even evil actions. They are as Ephesians 2:2 teaches

“which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience”

And yet you might be forgiven that butter would not melt in their mouths. The nature of man has not, and will not, could never, improve without divine intervention.

The year: 539 BC. The place: The royal palace of Babylon. Almost 70 years have passed since the day Daniel and the other Jewish teenagers arrived from Jerusalem. Daniel is now in his 80's. King Nebuchadnezzar has been dead for 24 years. His grandson Belshazzar (don't confuse with Daniel's Babylonian name) sits on the throne of the shrinking empire centred in the great city of Babylon.

Outside the massive walls the mighty Medo-Persian army surrounded the city. From being the mightiest empire on earth, Babylon the city is all that is left. In the city, the residents felt secure. After all they were protected by a double line of walls that stretched at least 15 miles around the outer circumference of the city. The walls in some places were 85 feet high and one source puts them at 350 feet. Over 100 watchtowers offered excellent protection for the soldiers who stand guard. The Euphrates River ran diagonally through the city and the walls were built over the water so that no floating army could enter by surprise. Finally, the city contained a 20-year stockpile of food and supplies. Though surrounded, the people of Babylon felt that no army could conquer them. They could outlast any siege.

How Belshazzar was under the illusion of a false sense of security. In fairness, from a human perspective anyone could understand why sure look at the city's defences! Yet, he had forgotten his Grand-father's God who is in control of all. Often people are under a false sense of security, happy with their own level of control in life, going along like they have it all. Even we as believer's can be under a false sense of security when we begin to rely on our own abilities, finances and gifts. You know, when we step outside the grace of God it can lead to spiritual blindness, we can open a door to oppression of the enemy as well as getting in all kinds of messes or even worse, becoming apathetic to the things of God. Yes! we too can



have a false sense of security when we are not looking to God to keep us and obeying the Scriptures which is part of our security check.

I. A Drunken Orgy

In this chapter, the people in the city were lead into a false sense of security as the King was throwing a massive party. One thousand nobles (the cream of Babylonian society) were invited, along with their wives and concubines and all that is in between. Things haven't changed much even today it's the same clubbers doing the rounds; after all they are a distraction in themselves. The "who's who crowd" did not realise they would be fast becoming the "who was crowd" by the night's end.

The party was the king's way of diverting attention from the events outside the walls. It was supposed to be a massive morale-booster, meant to lift the spirits of the entire city. The king knew that to have a good party you needed three things—food, wine, and available women and preferably all three in large quantities. Such a party would have started early in the day and lasted until the early hours of the morning. Course after course would have been served, wine would have flowed freely, entertainment would have accompanied the food and wine and sexual pleasure was there for the taking.

Evidently the party got off to a great start. Lots of laughter, lots of bright conversation around the tables. Plenty of wine for everyone. No one knows when the idea first came to King Belshazzar but at some point during the party, he decided to bring out the gold and silver goblets that had been taken from the temple in Jerusalem almost 70 years earlier. Since that time, the goblets had been stored somewhere in the royal palace in Babylon. The most popular place where they would have stored them would be in the old temple dedicated to Nebuchadnezzar's old idol which was made redundant from the last chapter.

The king called his servants and whispered the command. They nodded and disappeared. Within a few minutes they returned carrying the goblets. Oohs! and ahhs! went up from the crowd. This was special and they passed the goblets from one person to another. First the king, then his wives and concubines, then all the nobles of Babylon drank from the holy goblets taken from the temple in Jerusalem.

Someone began to sing a song of praise to the gods of Babylon. Others picked it up and with one voice the drunken partygoers praised the gods they worshipped—gods of gold, silver, stone, and wood. There was shouting, laughter, and degenerate things said as the wine took effect. If we used the word orgy, we probably would not be exaggerating. This was exactly what the king had wanted, a really wild party to help people forget the trouble on the other side of the city walls and it was working like a charm.

When the party started, Daniel was nowhere to be found near it. But as we shall see, Daniel will soon take centre stage and he will become the life of the party.

2. A Shocking Interruption

Suddenly God crashes the party in a most dramatic fashion. Without warning a hand began to write on the plaster wall near the lampstand in the royal palace. No body, no face, no torso just a hand writing on the plaster wall. When the king saw the words being formed on the wall, the colour drained out of his face and he turned white as a sheet.

God can never be stopped from showing up and when He does show up, things change. Usually it is for the better but on this occasion they had crossed the line. This party was now turning its direction to mock God by the desecration of the holy things from the temple. This was a very serious matter and still is today though many do not understand when the commit desecration. Look at the word desecration it can mean a few things including sacrilege, defilement, vandalism. They were breaking the first commandment and the second just to begin with.

Human responsibility and human accountability is required by a Holy God of all men. The final party lights had extinguished the light of truth that was revealed to Nebuchadnezzar which was eluded to in chapter 4 and no doubt spoken often by the previous if not present people at court.

The devil is very busy trying hard to extinguish the truth, both the knowledge and especially the practice of it in lives today. We could, without contradiction, say that in some places he has succeeded but take heart has not Jesus said in Matthew 16: 18:



“And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.”

Let me ask a simple question, who would you be willing to obey - The Lord or the devil? You know the right answer of course but so did the churches in Revelation 2 and 3 so did the church in Corinth and yet look at what happened. I know, and possibly you know, churches today who are not on the Lords side. They may think they are but are far from it. Just like Belshazzar, who would have known the truth but did not want to obey it. He chose to forget it.

At first the king thought he was seeing things, but then he realized the party had stopped. There was dead silence in the room. This was no illusion. Everyone saw the same thing. The king grew faint, his knees buckled, and he almost collapsed. Just as suddenly as it had appeared, the hand vanished yet the words remained. Four words in Aramaic, the trade language of that day. What did they mean?

The King James Version describes verse 6 as the kings

“the joints of his lions were loosed...”

In other words, he had a very embarrassing accident that needed more than stronger perfume but even then he was not put off such was his fear.

The king called for the astrologers and the enchanters. This seems to be the tradition and the same departments were called for. Oh how history repeats itself! Do you realise that this is the first known conundrum we have in the Bible? Anyway, these men used various secret and strange techniques to solve riddles and advise the king about the future. The king’s offer was simple. The man who figures out what the four words meant will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom. It was the chance of a lifetime. Even if it was only a short term contract. The new managers outside the gates were not going to renew it, that’s for sure!

They couldn’t do it. Seems once again very familiar, talk about history repeating itself. All the king’s men tried and every one of them failed.



What a way to end the party. No one knew what to do. The nobles were baffled at what it all meant. They came to get drunk and have some fun on the side. They hadn't bargained on this. Imagine the fear which replaced the intended fun.

In another part of the palace the queen mother (who was Nebuchadnezzar's daughter, the wife of Nabonidus, and the mother of Belshazzar) was getting ready for bed. When she heard shouts from the banquet hall, she came in, surveyed the scene, and realized at once what had happened and what to do, as mothers do.

As she thought about the strange handwriting on the wall, a name from the past came to her mind. She remembered the man who had once helped her father interpret a couple of his dreams.

"Call for Daniel," she said. "He has wisdom and insight, and the spirit of the holy gods is in him. He will tell you what the writing means."

A drowning man will grasp at anything and so the king called for Daniel and he came.

Enter Daniel, a former slave, once a teenage hostage, now an old man. All his life he has served in the court of the kings of Babylon. More than once he had pulled Nebuchadnezzar out of a jam. Evidently he had been faithful to God all his life. Never once had he compromised his values even though he lived his entire adult life in a pagan land serving in a pagan government. Somehow he managed to keep his values intact while serving in Babylon. Here, he was called for his last act of service to a Babylonian king.

I pause here in order to make a point. Made a century ago by Joseph Parker, the famous London preacher. He wrote the following:

"When the world throws an orgy, the children of God are not invited. We don't fit in and our values would just be a nuisance when the world wants to party. But let a marriage break up, or let cancer hit, or let the children get in trouble, or the career hit the rocks, and who do they call? They call the faithful men and women who know the Lord. Daniel wasn't invited to the party, but when God intervened and no one had the answer, suddenly Daniel was the one man the king wanted to hear from."

We never know our influence until a crisis comes. What an encouragement this is. You may be stuck in an office or a classroom or a factory or a neighbourhood or a club or a family gathering where you are the only Christian. And you may feel overlooked and taken



for granted, or possibly ridiculed and misunderstood. Bide your time, my Christian friend, and do not despair. Soon enough life will come tumbling in and the people who have no time for you will turn to you for answers. You may not be invited to every party, but you will get the call when trouble comes. When it happens, be bold to speak the truth in love.

Never underestimate the power of a godly life.”

3. A Damning Indictment

Belshazzar offered him the same deal. If Daniel could interpret the four words written on the wall, the king would give him the robe of royalty, a chain of solid gold, and he would be named the third highest ruler in all of Babylon. Remember that Belshazzar was only second in charge as the main king was off on his travels enjoying elsewhere. Whatever else you can say, this much is certain, Daniel was not lacking in confidence. He knew the anointing of the Holy Spirit which showed him again more than the meaning of the words. The Spirit of God is God and is not limited by the age of the individual. Daniel was old in our eyes but he was still a willing servant in the eyes of the Lord. So this goes to show you, there is no retirement plan in the kingdom of God.

He began by refusing the king's reward. He didn't need it and didn't want it but he did gladly explain the meaning of the mysterious handwriting. The King more than he bargained for as Daniel gave him a history lesson, a theology lesson, and a reading lesson and a life changing prophesy.

He reminded the king of what had happened to his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar when he became arrogant and his heart was filled with pride. God humbled him by taking away his sanity and causing him to eat grass like the beasts of the field for seven years until he acknowledged that God was sovereign over all the affairs of life.

“But you his son, O Belshazzar, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this” (Daniel 5:22).

You should have known better, Daniel said. You should have learned from the past. But you managed to forget it, and thus the lessons of history were lost to you.

In this case the “select memory syndrome” had been in operation. They intentionally “forgot” about what happened to Nebuchadnezzar as a way of not having to deal with the problem of

sin. This was a fatal mistake. They were not getting better as a result but worst. Some might say, they were repeating the same historical sins, and they were.

Daniel went on to point out that by drinking wine from the sacred goblets and by praising the gods of Babylon, Belshazzar had set himself up against the God of heaven. It was a direct, public, premeditated assault on the Lord. The idols cannot see, hear, or understand, but Belshazzar had provoked

“the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways” (Daniel 5:23).

And that’s why God sent the hand that made the strange writing on the wall.

“Mene, Mene, Tekel, Parsin”

Daniel’s explanation was short and to the point.

Mene means “numbered.” God has numbered the days of your reign, and now your number is up.

Tekel means “weighed.” God has weighed your life in the scales of justice and you’ve come up short. O king, you do not measure up.

Parsin means “divided.” “Your kingdom is about to be broken up.”

These mysterious words were a message from God that Belshazzar’s reign was over, his life would soon end, and his kingdom would be divided and given to someone else.

The king must have sobered up by that point and may even have believed Daniel was telling him the truth. He ordered the purple robe to be given to Daniel along with the gold chain. He turned to the thousand nobles and announced that as of that night Daniel was the third highest ruler in the kingdom.

Note Daniels attitude. He did not minister for reward. He did minister to bring glory to God and in doing so, he gave the hearer the benefit of repenting. God always gives opportunity for repentance as He is gracious and loving. Secondly, Daniel told it as God gave it. No embellishments, no dramatics, no fan fair. Simple and honest with the correct tone. After all, if heeded, it’s the truth that sets you free! Amen!!

4. A Sudden Judgment

The end of story comes quickly. Verse 30 informs us that Belshazzar was slain that same night but no details. Secular history fills in the gaps of what happened next. The army of the Medes and Persians were camped near the Euphrates River and in a surprise attack, the army managed to divert the river into a nearby lake. When the river dried up, the way was open into the city. One ancient writer even says that when the army entered the city they found the Babylonians feasting in a time of drunken revelry. Not long after Daniel gave his solemn message to the king, the Medo-Persian army entered Babylon almost without a fight. Before sunrise Belshazzar was dead and the Babylonian Empire came to an inglorious end.

Let me draw the moral of the story quickly in four statements:

1. Babylon became great because of the sovereign blessing of God.
2. When they became great, their pride made them forget God.
3. When they forgot God, they began to take him for granted.
4. When they took him for granted, God judged them and they were no longer a great nation.

Daniel 5 is in the Bible for a very particular reason—so that we will know that what happened to Babylon may also happen to us. Search through the rubble of history. See the great nations come and go: Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, Rome and in the last hundred years the Communist empire of Russia and the Third Reich of Hitler have both come and gone.

The tendency of every great nation is the same: To begin to believe that a nation, any nation, or even an individual can be a superpower. This slowly pushes God out of the picture. When a nation peruses to take the Lord out of public life, to forbid the mention of his name, to ridicule those who still believe in him, to promote those who exalt man and down play God, to scratch at the absolutes, to rewrite the rule book, and to live by our own set of rules, the end of greatness is neigh for that nation. Over time we take God for granted, turn to our own idols of technology, and begin to worship the things we make with our own hands and in the end God judges us. Note this biblical fact. Judgment often comes at the hands of another nation that God raises up for that very purpose.

What should we learn from this well-known story? Here are three lessons to ponder.

A. God's Word is sure.

Forty or fifty years earlier Daniel had told King Nebuchadnezzar that Babylon would be replaced by the Medo-Persian Empire. At that point there was no reason to take him seriously. But on October 12, 539 BC it happened just as the prophet had spoken. The same is true for everything found in God's Word. It all comes true sooner or later. Though the days turn into months, the months into years, the years in decades, and the decades into centuries, in the end every word of the Lord will come to pass. Nothing will be left unfulfilled. Belshazzar discovered this truth the hard way. If God says it, you can take it to the bank. Sooner or later, it's going to happen.

B. God's Spirit does not strive forever.

Sinners like to believe that God will never punish them, or if punishment is coming, it is so far off in the distant future that they have plenty of time to repent and be ready to meet the Lord. This is a dangerous false sense of security and even a deadly attitude. God is not obligated to continually send his Spirit to convict us of our sin. The time may come when God says, "You have crossed the line," and the Holy Spirit no longer works in a person's heart. No one knows when that time is coming, and no one but God knows when the line has been crossed. But of this much we may be sure, the opportunity to get right with God is before death because after we die, there is only the judgment to come (Hebrews 9:27)

"And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment."

It is foolish to presume upon the grace of God. He owes you nothing at all. If you reject his offer of salvation, there remains no other sacrifice for sin (Hebrews 10:26)

"For if we sin wilfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins."

If you turn away from Jesus, or if you put off trusting him, where else will you go to have your sins forgiven? Those who take God's grace for granted will end up eternally disappointed.

C. God weighs every human heart.

Here is a message for all of us—Christians and non-Christians alike. We know from many passages that God scrutinizes every human heart. He looks not simply at our outward actions but also inspects our inner motivations, thoughts, dreams and secrets. Everything is laid bare in his eyes. Nothing is hidden from him.



I find this a solemn and challenging thought. Just as Belshazzar was accountable for what he knew about King Nebuchadnezzar, even so we are all responsible for the light we have received. The more light there is, the greater our accountability in the eyes of God. Someday you will have to account for every sermon you've heard, every Bible study you've attended, every bit of wise advice you've received, and all the truth you have learned from every source. Because you were put on earth to glorify God, you will be judged according to what you have done with what you have received. To whom much is given, much is required.

If God were to write a message on the wall for you, what would it say? There may be some people who wish that God would send them a personal message. If you are waiting for God to write you a letter, he already has. He wrote you a letter 2000 years ago and signed it with the blood of his Son. God's message says, "I love you" in words that all of us can understand. When Jesus cried out, "It is finished," he meant that the work of salvation is so complete that nothing can ever be added to it. What more can God say that he has not already said through his Son –

Hebrews 1:1-3 - "God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, 2 has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; 3 who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high"

Why would we want something more than Jesus?

One day we will individually stand before God. I know that some people think that God will weigh their good deeds versus their bad deeds, and if the good outweighs the bad, they will be admitted into heaven. That might be a nice thought for some people, but it fails on one crucial point. If you dare to stand before God on your own merit, and claim your own goodness, and presume to offer God your own righteousness as your entry ticket into heaven, you will be making a huge mistake. On that day, you will discover that your sins are like a mountain stretching toward heaven. Your sins will be so great that your supposed good deeds will be dwarfed by comparison.

You need Jesus Christ to take your place. The perfect sacrifice, Jesus never sinned; not in thought, word, or deed. By his perfect righteousness he fulfilled the Law of God in every



detail. He succeeded where you fail, and because he died in your place, he can represent you when you stand before the Lord. If you stand on your own merits, you will be found “wanting.” If Jesus stands in your place, you will be found fully qualified to enter heaven.

The choice is very simple. You can represent yourself and end up in hell. Or Jesus can take your place and you will go to heaven to be with him. There is no other option.

Let’s end by stepping back and considering Daniel 4-5 together. In Daniel 4 a pagan king was humbled and then radically changed by God. In Daniel 5 another pagan king was judged and then slain the same night. It reminds me of what has been said about the two thieves crucified with Christ. One was saved that none should despair; one was lost that none should presume.

Today is the day of salvation. It is also the day for all of us to make a new start with the Lord. This is the day to forgive, to repent, to renew our vows, to repair broken relationships, and to encourage a fellow pilgrim.

Just as God humbled proud kings, he can do the same to us. These two chapters show us that our place is at his feet in obedience, submission, and gratitude. They teach us as clearly as anything could, the First Rule of the Spiritual Life: He is God and we are not.

Amen.