

## 21<sup>st</sup> July 2024 – Daniel 5 ‘The writing on the wall’

A rich, middle-aged man feels like a party. His father, the true king, has spent most of the last ten years at war. So, this middle-aged man, the Prince Regent, has stayed at home while his dad has fought the battles, and frankly he's enjoyed the freedom. He almost *feels* like the king. He can do what he wants, when he wants, with whom he wants. He can snap his fingers and call a party for a thousand guests, all of whom will fawn over him and make him feel like the ruler he is. What could possibly go wrong? The cat's away, and the mice will play.

But how to impress his guests this time? What could he do that he hasn't done before? Every musician, every jester, every diviner, every dancer and actor have all been seen many times. Even though he knows no-one would ever criticise his capacity to throw the best party, he wants to do something to top it all. He wants to make a *statement*.

And then he remembers. There is a stash of treasure that no-one has ever seen. Locked away in the royal vaults, it is beautiful and extraordinarily precious. It was bounty from the temple of one of those little nations that his grandfather the great king Nebuchadnezzar had conquered. But that particular people were particularly fussy about their God. Just one God they said, the absolute ruler of the world. No room for Bel, or Bel's son Nebo, or any of the other hundreds of gods of his people, the Babylonians. And he'd heard the tales many times that his grandfather had told him, of how this God always seemed to keep himself in the picture. First there was Daniel and his dreams, then there was the story of the fire that didn't burn Daniel's friends. Then, most extraordinary of all, his grandpa had gone mad and this God had apparently restored him.

But what did it matter now? Daniel was an old man, no-one had paid any attention to him for many years. His scary granddad was dead, and that funny little people he'd conquered.... well, they were still conquered. Nearly 60 years had gone by since they'd captured its capital. If this God – what was his name, Yahweh, or something like that – if this Yahweh was really a proper God, then surely he would have blessed his people by now.... No, his mind was made up, it was time to put on a show, time to parade the bling that even his grandpa, the fiercest of them all, had been afraid to show off. It was time for the temple treasures of Jerusalem. What a show it would be!

And so begins Daniel chapter 5, the story of Belshazzar. At this point it's worth filling in a bit of historical detail. The Jews had – and still have – a very strong concept of family lineage, so when you hear the word father it doesn't necessarily mean literal father, but a descendent in your father's line. Belshazzar was actually Nebuchadnezzar's grandson, and as you can imagine, what happened after the great old king died in 562BC after 40 years of absolute rule, was that chaos broke out, as it often does after a great ruler. There were 3 kings in 6 years – Amel Marduk lasted 2 years, then Neriglissar another 4, then his son Nabasi Marduk lasted only 9 months before Nebuchadnezzar's final son Nabonidus took control and actually managed to hold onto power.

But he only did so at the cost of constant military activity; he didn't even live in Babylon for most of the time, settling instead in North Arabia and Syria to keep an eye on his borders. His son Belshazzar was left at home to rule as Prince Regent, and this is the Belshazzar we meet in this chapter, which takes place in 539BC i.e. Nabonidus has been king for 17 years, with his son left to do as he pleased for most of that time. Old King Nebuchadnezzar has been dead for 23 years, and Daniel, if he was a teenager when he was taken to Babylon in 596, would therefore be at least 70 by now and long since put out to grass.

So, before we go any further we need to understand – this is a long time since chapter 4, and the people of Israel are still ruled by Babylon, Daniel is old and this ‘king’ Belshazzar has been living the life of Riley for a good decade or more. Where is God?

Well, God is about to make a major comeback. The thing is, it’s one thing to conquer God’s people – God allowed that, after all, his people were corrupt and disobedient. It’s another to mess with God himself. And this is Belshazzar’s first mistake, and **our first reflection for today. He’d forgotten his roots**, what his old grandad had taught him. Look at what Daniel says to him in v22: ‘But you, Belshazzar, his descendant, have not humbled yourself, though *you knew all this.*’ You knew all this. And you’ve forgotten. You’ve made the catastrophic howler of thinking that all spiritual beings are the same, it doesn’t matter who you worship, they’re all the same in the spiritual supermarket...

No. They’re not. Nebuchadnezzar learnt that the hard way and it turned his life around. And no doubt his made sure his family understood – ‘you knew all this’. But pride and privilege and hubris had blinded Belshazzar. The stakes might be lower for each of us, but the lesson is the same. The first powerful lesson we learn from this amazing story is to remember our heritage of faith. Don’t take it for granted. Tell me the old, old story, for I forget so soon. The early dew of morning has passed away at noon. God is still God. The Lord is your heritage. Hold onto it!

**The second encouragement we learn is that you’re never too old to be used by the Lord.** Enter Daniel. Not only is he very old, he’s probably been ‘out in the cold’ for a long time, if Belshazzar – who has ruled in all but name for 17 years – is unaware of his gifts. However, his mother remembers the past more clearly, and urges her son to call for Daniel. She remembers his spiritual insight and wisdom. He is not just another astrologer, he is revered as having something deeper to share.

God can still use all of us. We are never too old, never ‘on the scrapheap’. Indeed, our age and experience might just be the thing that is most needed. Whatever age you are, you still have gifts to offer, wisdom to share, people to bless. How could God use that today, this week, this year?

The final message for us today is that **what the world still needs most is godly, spirit-filled people – people who have a deep walk with the Lord, who live lives of truth and integrity.** Daniel lives his whole adult life as part of a small minority of faithful believers in a different, and sometimes hostile, culture. What difference could he, or even his whole community, possibly make in the world’s largest empire of the time?

The Book of Daniel gives us the answer time and again. Time and again, the Lord uses him. Even the Queen in the story remembers that Daniel has ‘the spirit of the holy gods in him’ (v11). She may not use the correct biblical language but she recognises the presence & activity of God when she sees it.

And that is no less true for us today. We live in a culture which is less religious, but more spiritual. People are open to spiritual things – they may not have the language, but many have the interest. It’s our job to point them in the right spiritual direction, towards the only true source of spiritual life. So much that promises life actually brings death or bondage or confusion, because people aren’t taught to recognise the good spiritual stuff from the bad – like Belshazzar they believe the dangerous lie that it’s all the same. Believe me, it isn’t. Or rather, don’t believe me, believe Daniel. He knew the true God who ‘holds in his hand your life and all your ways,’ as he puts it.

The culture in which we live now brings greater pressure but also much greater opportunity. I’m excited by that, and my prayer is that you will be, too. People are no longer inoculated against faith by a tepid religious culture. They want the real thing – and we have it! Like Daniel, the true Spirit of God is in all of us who know the Lord. And God can, and will, use us. The world still needs Spirit-filled people. May the Lord send us out into his world, whatever our age, rooted in our faith, filled with his Spirit and surrendered to his glory. Amen.