

Daniel 5

God and Graffiti

No matter where we go these days, we are confronted with graffiti ... it's on public walls, motorway bridges, underground train stations, toilets, billboards, and wherever else. Some of it is eye-catchingly beautiful and we smile when we see it; sadly, there is a dark side for some of it is obscenely vulgar and it's disgustingly awful.

Next time you are out and about, take a walk or drive through an average-size town, and before you have travelled too far, you will be introduced to an al fresco art exhibition without ever setting foot in a gallery.

A divine graffiti artist is actively at work in this chapter. In order to see what he wrote, we must walk inside the marble-floored banqueting hall of the royal palace in Babylon.

The writing on the plaster wall—a message of doom and gloom—prefaced the moment when the curtain came down on a global empire and Babylon dropped through the trapdoor into the nether regions of history. Just like the prophets said it would be (Isaiah 21; Jeremiah 51).

5:1-4

Meanderings of a monarch

Belshazzar made a great feast for a thousand of his lords and drank wine in front of them. A bit of a showman. When he was a bit worse for wear, he commanded that the holy vessels of gold and silver that his father had taken out of the temple in Jerusalem be brought. Going to drink from them. The previous chapter ended on a thrillingly high note of worshipful praise with Nebuchadnezzar rejoicing in God's extraordinary grace in his life.

Twenty-three years later and this chapter is diametrically opposite; it is a culture shock as it reveals what often happens in the upper echelons of high society, a place where God is neither welcomed nor wanted and, indeed, where God is totally excluded and left out in the cold.

The message of Daniel 5 is very simple: God has no grandsons. Godliness cannot be inherited from generation to generation. This chapter is, therefore, both a rude and crude awakening.

And the man at the helm is Belshazzar, someone we have not come across before in the Daniel narrative. He comes out of nowhere. The drama of God's dealings with Belshazzar is heightened by the fact that he appears and disappears in the space of a single chapter.

The questions are: Who was he? How did he arrive on the scene? To be honest, it is a rather convoluted storyline, fascinating nonetheless.

The famed Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 BC after ruling an expansive empire for forty-three years. His son, Evil-Merodach, followed his father on the throne. He reigned until he was assassinated in a coup in August 560 BC by his brother-in-law, General Neriglissar. He had a short tenure of around four years and was succeeded by his son, Labashi-Marduk. He was savagely murdered within nine months - one of the key conspirators, Nabonidus, then became king (556-539 BC).

It seems that he was not overly enthusiastic about kingship being foisted upon him; the chances are he was planted there as a compromise candidate by the plotters. Some think that his eldest son

Belshazzar was the real mover and shaker behind the wheeler dealers and that he was pulling all the strings.

When Nabonidus was invited to relocate to Tema, five hundred miles from Babylon, because of his religious beliefs, his son Belshazzar became his co-regent, a kind-of proxy king. We cannot be sure, but in all probability his mother was a daughter of Nebuchadnezzar.

He operated as de facto king in Babylon for over a decade and that is why we bump into him in the manner we do without any formal introduction or personal bio in verse 1.

Chapter chronology

Before we unpack the teaching in chapter 5, it is important to realise that between chapters 4 and 5 Daniel has been busily occupied with affairs of state as well as receiving and writing prophecies. Even in advanced years, the pensioner Daniel is active in the work to which God has called him.

The lesson is, we are never too old to serve the Lord. The hymn is spot-on, 'There's a work for Jesus none but you can do.' For example, the vision of the four beasts was revealed to Daniel in the first year of Belshazzar (Daniel 7:1), and the vision of the ram and male goat occurred in the third year of the reign of King Belshazzar (Daniel 8:1). Chapters go 1-2-3-4-7-8-5 ...

Wine, women, and worship

The story of Belshazzar's feast is one of the best known parts of Daniel. Many evangelistic talks have been preached from it and they have often been connected with the foolish farmer in the gospels, where the parting shot is, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you.'

The state banquet was held in the magnificent banqueting hall of the royal palace with its hanging candelabra in a special tiered alcove, marble pillars carved into the form of elephants, and a variety of paintings and artefacts gracing the room. Trained peacocks dressed in a gold and silver trimmed harness drew miniature chariots around the room filled with goblets of wine. When archaeologists excavated the site in modern times they discovered that the huge ballroom where the party was held was some 60 feet wide and 172 feet long.

The occasion was outlandish in many respects—in ceremony, content, and celebration this was the night of all nights, the party of all parties. This one promised to outshine and outdo every other party in living memory in the kingdom. And it did! For all the wrong reasons.

A night on the town

Take one look at the guest list for it was one VIP after another. Thirty-six-year-old Belshazzar is a royal party animal, led the way when it came to alcohol consumption. The revellers gorged with food. The music stirred the emotions. Passions were high. It was not too long before the evening turned into a drunken orgy where anything and everything of a sensual nature took place. It was a few hours of sin, more sin, and much more sin. No person, king or pauper, can sin and win.

Enough is enough

Belshazzar had ample scope to sort his life out, but he dug his heels in and spurned every God-given opportunity. He chose not to humble himself before a holy God. In so doing, and he has only himself to blame, he was written out of God's

saving plan for God had had enough of him (Genesis 6:3).

'There is a time we know not when, a point we know not where, That marks the destiny of men to glory or despair; There is a line, by us unseen, that crosses every path, The hidden boundary between God's patience and his wrath.'

God deals with us as individuals; with him, there is no one size fits all. That is why we dare not presume upon the grace and mercy that God has shown to others and think he will do the same for us.

We are confronted here with the twin towers of justice and judgment, both attributes of a sovereign God.

A timely reminder that from Nebuchadnezzar to Nero of Rome and on to the killing fields of Pol Pot of Cambodia, from Belshazzar to Mao of China and to Idi Amin of Uganda, pagan rulers have defied God. But the Lord of heaven always wins. His plan is unstoppable.

5:5-6

A hand from heaven

This same finger of God had written before and will do so again. Right here, the same finger of God is writing a warning to Belshazzar and Babylon that judgment was imminent. The biblical principle is that 'God is not mocked.'

He is shocked to the core and shaken out of his wits. Belshazzar's countenance changed colour to a pallid shade so that he was ashen and anaemic looking. He was drained. His mind goes into overdrive as he tries to rationalise all that he sees in front of him, but he struggles to make any sense of it. His arms go into limp mode and his

legs go from under him. He buckles. Even his knees are banging against each other. In fact, the Aramaic conveys the idea that he lost control of his bodily functions, with a wet patch appearing under his chair. How embarrassing!

Belshazzar is so terrified he is like a rabbit caught in the glare of a car's headlights. His heart was beating so fast that his chest was heaving up and down. His blood pressure has rocketed. His pulse is racing. He is rattled. Unnerved. Belshazzar is petrified and completely undone. Paranoia has gripped him and is leaving him in a state of paralysis where he just feels so helpless.

The monarch, who just happens to be a man made of the same material as the rest of us, is a total nervous wreck. This is serious. Extremely serious. This man goes from a break with reality to a check with reality.

5:7-9

All the king's men

The only thing we have learned from history is that we have learned nothing from history. So, like Nebuchadnezzar before him, Belshazzar's holler for help reaches the ears of the wise men. The same old losers. They are like broken cisterns that hold no water.

In an act of sheer desperation, Belshazzar offers no threats, but a threefold reward of honour, wealth, and status to the person who could decipher the writing on the white gypsum wall.

And, not surprisingly, the wise men with all their expertise and experience were in the same boat as they failed to deliver the goods. Even though the rewards were high, they just could not unravel the mystery on the wall. All his props are gone.

Now, Belshazzar is really frightened and his face turns whiter than a white Egyptian cotton sheet with a look of stark terror. His reaction is contagious for the assembled partygoers are bemused, bewildered, and befuddled too. God scared the living daylights out of them.

5:10-16

Enter Daniel the octogenarian

Here we have a time-honoured scenario: when all else fails, listen to the advice of a woman, even more so if she is your mother or grandmother or some other matriarchal figure in the family tree. It is likely a reference to the Queen Mother who was the widow of the late Nebuchadnezzar.

She would have lived in one of the state apartments, fairly close to the banqueting hall. Whatever, in the late night air, she must have heard the commotion and the hullabaloo from within, but she sensed with a sixth sense that something was not just quite right.

After giving the king a firm but cordial talking-to, she got straight down to business and informed him all about Daniel with the paraphrased words, 'I know a man you don't know, but whom you ought to know, who can tell you what the writing on the wall is all about!' His name, Daniel.

In her eyes, Daniel was significant, spiritual, superior, and skilful. The queen believed Daniel had three virtues: one, he knew God personally; two, he was one to whom God often spoke; and, three, he was one through whom God communicated to others.

'Ah, you must be Daniel ...!'

When Daniel arrived, as cool as a cucumber, it seems to me that the king did not give him the

respect which he deserved. Belshazzar comes across in his opening remarks as someone who is cynical and condescending in his tone of voice to the Lord's servant. He did not waste much time as he related the events of the evening to him in relation to the writing on the wall, being careful to mention that the wise men could not help out.

He offered Daniel the same reward package he had previously offered to all and sundry. Daniel told him to stuff his bag of goodies, that he was not in the least bit interested. So far as Daniel was concerned, quid pro quo was a non-starter. He worked for God, not gold.

Once again, the godly character of Daniel shines through; in the real-world politics of power and sleaze, the white-haired Daniel is a person of real, refreshing integrity. He could not be bought with any bribe, at any price, at any time. We need men of his calibre—Spirit-filled men who are fearless, courageous, and truthful in their allegiance to God—in our society.

5:17-23

Preach it, brother

Basically, Daniel gave Belshazzar a history lesson spanning a few decades as far back as Nebuchadnezzar. He traced his rise and fall and mentioned his sensational comeback after his time of humiliation.

One of those life stories which, thank God, ended well. It is not how we start the race that counts, it is how we finish and, sadly, too many fall out on the last lap. Not Nebuchadnezzar.

As thick as two short planks

Then boom, boom, boom and Daniel targeted Belshazzar with a salvo of truth which he did not

want to hear. Nebuchadnezzar was notoriously bad. No one argues with that. Belshazzar, though, was a million times worse. No fewer than a dozen times is Belshazzar accused of one thing or another with the words you and your heard like a rat-a-tat-tat from a submachine gun.

All the time Belshazzar knew exactly what he was doing and would be held accountable for his barefaced actions. He should have known better and learned the lessons from yesterday, but he failed.

He knew the truth that might have saved him, but he stubbornly chose not to obey it. He did not take God seriously enough. He is dense. His conscience is silent. He did not ask for a history lesson, he got one.

It was a powerful 'preach' as Daniel reminded this consummate hedonist of some vitally important issues; he did not mince his words in any shape or form when it came to confronting Belshazzar with the senseless folly of his ways. He nailed him more than once and left him squirming in the swirling sea of his own stupidity.

We need men like that in our pulpits today; men who will stand tall and call sin for what it is and men who will faithfully proclaim that God has his finger on every man's pulse and who, as sovereign Lord, determines issues of life and death. The God who holds the whole world in his hands is the same one who gives us every breath that we breathe. The message is that we ought to number our days, lest God number them for us.

5:24-28

Heavenly hermeneutics

Four words on a wall. That was all. And even one of them was repeated! When God speaks, there is no need for verbosity or pious platitudes. He goes for the jugular. God has plenty to say in that we have his mind revealed in Scripture from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22; but here in a Babylonian palace, he is a God of few words.

Mene. Mene. Tekel. Parsin. Less than a handful of words from God and the party is over. The nation is on her last legs. The sun is about to set for the final time on a once great empire, just as predicted in the metallic statue dream. These are the closing hours of Belshazzar's life and he does not seem to grasp the gravity of the situation.

Mene, the first word, is repeated so as to emphasise the salient message that it is. If it did not sink in first time, they would surely get it second time around. It means 'numbered' as in the days of Belshazzar's Babylon were numbered by God and they were rapidly drawing to a close. No golden finale is promised, just an ignominious end. Within hours, his life's work and the legacy of Nebuchadnezzar would collapse like a pack of cards around his feet. Their number was up.

Repeat. They are finished!

Tekel, the second word, means 'weighed' in that Belshazzar had been weighed on the scales of divine justice and found lacking. The thought is that he was found too light in moral and spiritual worth to balance out God's gauge of holiness and righteousness. He was a liability to God. When measured against the searching light of God's critique, he is shallow, unconvincing, and flimsy! Parsin, the third word, means 'divided.' That is, the entire kingdom would be taken from him and

given to the conquering Medes and Persians (Daniel 5:30-31).

5:29-31

And it came to pass

In spite of the hard message he heard from God's servant, the king kept his word and honoured Daniel, even though he did not want it at all. This was the last thing on his mind; in fact, truth be told, it was not even in his mind. His elevation to Number Three in the hierarchy was probably one of the shortest promotions in history, lasting only a matter of minutes.

For Daniel, there was no mileage in causing a fuss; better to take the paraphernalia and be done with it, it was much ado about nothing for he knew that Belshazzar and Babylon were as good as gone.

For that is what happened in October 539 BC. Cyrus knew from reconnaissance information that the defences of Babylon were impregnable. There was just no way in to the city and no way over the top. So he deployed another action plan.

He ordered his sappers to use a diversionary manoeuvre by rerouting the flow of the Euphrates River which went under the massively thick walls of the heavily fortified city. Once the water was shallow enough to be forded, his soldiers entered the river channel and walked underneath the walls straight into the unsuspecting city.

Needless to say, the Babylonians were caught napping. They were totally surprised. Before many of them knew what was happening, their beloved city had fallen to the enemy. The Medes and Persians gained control without a major battle being fought.

Some of the storm troopers of the advancing army made directly for the royal palace to get their plum target, Belshazzar. As they dealt with the guards outside the palace gates, a great deal of noise ensued. Curiosity caused the king to order some of the internal sentries to go outside and investigate.

As these men unwittingly opened the palace gates, a handful of elite soldiers rushed past them, through the open gates into the palace itself. They made a beeline for the banqueting hall. And they got their man!

When the music stops ...

Scripture records in a brief obituary, That very night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was killed. He died a gruesome and horrible death. What a last night for any man. He learned the hard way that God is the Most High. He never saw another sunrise. To spend your closing hours with the finger of God pointing directly at you is not the best way for any person to be launched into an eternity where there is no wine, no women, and no worship.

A place of aloneness, consciousness, darkness, and separation. He died the way he lived, without God. Like King Saul, and Judas Iscariot, and the rich man. No sin goes unpunished, but when the sinner knows better, the punishment is greater. Solemn stuff.

These words are most instructive to every one of us and enormously challenging too. There is a last night for every nation and there is a last night for every individual.

People need the Lord – our family and circle of friends, our neighbours and colleagues. We have

a responsibility to share the gospel of God's grace with them, one person at a time, bearing in mind that there is a colossal difference between the endings of chapters four and five for Nebuchadnezzar repented of his sin and was wonderfully converted whilst Belshazzar refused to get right with God and died in his sins.

The chapter ends with an important historical observation for the head of gold was toppled by the inferior chest and arms of silver, with a 62-year-old Darius at the helm. The end of an evil empire. Extraordinary. God said it would happen. And it did!