

The Writing's On the Wall

The English language, like all other languages, has a number of interesting phrases and metaphors that are part of the way we speak.

Some of those phrases actually come from the Bible. *By the skin of your teeth, a fly in the ointment, sour grapes, fall flat on your face, nothing new under the sun* – these all come from the venerable King James Bible. One such phrase we often use is *'the handwriting's on the wall'*. We use this to say that someone knows the end is near. Something is coming to a close, something is about to be ruined or finished, and when someone sees the handwriting on the wall, they know it.

This elegant little phrase comes from a stirring, even frightening account of a Babylonian king who met his end through pride. And this chapter is in the Bible, not merely to supply us with a useful idiom, but to warn us about wilful pride.

Pride is foolish and dangerous. But there is a step beyond pride. You can go beyond pride and defy God. You can become so intoxicated with your own success that you dare God to stop you, to judge you, to end your life. That's what king Belshazzar did, and when he did so, the handwriting was on the wall for his reign and for his life.

As we study this chapter, we'll learn of what happens when someone lives on borrowed time and insults the one who lent him his life. We'll see what happens when the creditor finally comes to collect. We'll see another account of pride in the life of a Babylonian king, with a not-so-happy ending.

I. The Arrogant Feast

Daniel 5:1 *Belshazzar the king made a great feast for a thousand of his lords, and drank wine in the presence of the thousand.*

This account takes place on the last night of the Babylonian empire. This is 23 years after the death of Nebuchadnezzar, and it is Belshazzar on the throne.

Who is this Belshazzar?

For some time, critics scoffed at the book of Daniel, because according to the archaeological records, the last king of Babylon was Nabonidus, not some mythical Belshazzar. However, as more archaeological evidence came to light, an interesting story emerged. After Nebuchadnezzar, three kings had relatively short reigns, Evil-Merodach, Neriglassar, Labashi Marduk. Most of them were terrible kings, and eventually an inner-court coup removed Labashi Marduk and placed Nabonidus on the throne. The problem was, Nabonidus for some reason spent years and years outside of Babylon. He actually moved his capitol city away from Babylon. He spent so much time away from Babylon that in 553 B.C. , he decided to make his (adopted) son the co-regent. What was his son's name? Belshazzar. More and more inscriptions with the words "Belshazzar the prince" were found. Moreover, more historical records revealed that when Babylon was defeated, Nabonidus was not in the city. He had gone north to defend a city called Sippar, been defeated and later captured.

Who was in charge of Babylon at the time of its defeat? The co-regent, prince Belshazzar. Once again, the Bible was proved true. The liberal scholar R. H. Pfeiffer of Harvard University , who believed Daniel was written in the 2nd century B.C. wrote "We shall presumably never know how our author learned ... that Belshazzar, was functioning as king when Cyrus took Babylon." Only if

we deny this book's supernatural character do we have to say that. The simplest answer is that the author was an eyewitness, living in the fifth century B.C. in Babylon itself.

So this happens on the last night of Babylonian rule. The Medo-Persians were ascending to world power, and had been chipping away at the Babylonian empire from the outside in. King Cyrus of Persia surrounded Babylon and began what looked like a siege of the city. The siege went on for several months. On October 12, 539 B.C., the following events take place.

With the Persian army surrounding Babylon, what did Belshazzar do? Man the battlements? Give every able-bodied man a weapon? Prepare all his defensive weapons? Call for food rations? Those are the typical things you did if an enemy surrounded your city, or in later years, your castle. Did Belshazzar do any of these things? No, Belshazzar held a feast. Not merely an intimate family and friends' feast - a lavish, extravagant orgy of a feast for more than a thousand people.

This is a huge party with nobles, wives, concubines arriving to drink and get drunk, to lose themselves in merriment and debauchery. This was going to be a hall filled with the shrieks of laughing women, the roaring of inebriated men, the lusty songs of people drinking and celebrating their drunkenness. Musicians would have been playing on their strings and pipes and cymbals while dancing girls entertained the hungry eyes of the men. All the nobles and their wives dressed in their finest coloured robes, decked in their jewellery, the smell of the spices and fragrances pungent in the air. Had you been in there you would have smelt wine, wine being poured into silver cups, wine spilling onto the table and the floor it was in such abundance and poured so generously. Meat being torn off the bone, fruit half-eaten and then thrown on the floor. Sweet and sticky delicacies loading plate after plate that was brought in for this crowd. And sexual atrocities that are simply unspeakable.

Now why this scene, when there are Persian armies outside the walls, ready to take over your city? Were these a kind of 'last-wish-before-we-die' kind of people? "Let's eat, drink and be merry, for tonight we die?" Not at all. Belshazzar held this feast to shake his fist in the face of the Persians, to make the point that Babylon was so unconcerned about them, that they would hold a party.

You might remember when we considered the pride of Nebuchadnezzar just what a remarkable city Babylon was. The walls of Babylon surrounding the city were 113 metres high, which is the height of 37 storey building. The walls were 28 metres thick, and four chariots could ride alongside each other right around the walls. When you are about to attack a city with walls 37 storeys high and 28 metres thick, you are like a flea taking a knock at the titanium door of a bank vault. Babylon was widely regarded as unconquerable. The walls were preposterously big, and no army, no siege engines, no machine invented till that point, could have broken them down and allowed the enemy army in. The Persians weren't going to get in. And the Babylonians weren't going to be starved out.

The Euphrates river ran through the city. There would be no problem with water. And to top it all off, Babylon had laid up food reserves, in case of a siege, to last them for several years. And in fact, by this night, October 12, the armies of Persia had already been around the city for between two to four months. So this party is nothing less than a taunt - a proud, insulting, arrogant mockery of the Persians. It is an act of arrogant defiance - you are so weak, our army is so strong that we will hold a feast while you sit out there waiting for our surrender.

But Belshazzar's pride went beyond arrogance, it went a step further - defiance.

II. The Defiant Act

² *While he tasted the wine, Belshazzar gave the command to bring the gold and silver vessels which his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple which had been in Jerusalem, that the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them.* ³ *Then they brought the gold vessels that had been taken from the temple of the house of God which had been in Jerusalem; and the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines drank from them.* ⁴ *They drank wine, and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze and iron, wood and stone.*

Belshazzar drinks, and the words *while he tasted the wine* suggest he was increasingly under the influence of the wine. And one of the effects of alcohol on many people is to make them feel very bold, very confident, and willing to step over lines they otherwise wouldn't. So Belshazzar did a very bold and brash thing. You'll remember from chapter 1 that when Nebuchadnezzar defeated Jerusalem, he plundered the Temple in Jerusalem. It was one of the tactics of ancient warfare – you went into the temple of your opponent's god, took some of his furniture back to the temple of your god. That way, you not only made the point that your god was stronger than his god, but you took out some insurance for yourself. Just in case his god really was strong, you gained his or her favour by providing a special place for his or her furniture in your god's temple. As a good polytheist, you didn't want to make any god angry, so you tended to treat whatever religious objects belonged to its worship with some care.

Belshazzar is not going to do that. Belshazzar is going to get the objects that belong to the God of Israel, and desecrate them. He is going to use consecrated objects in the middle of his perverted orgy, where unspeakable acts are taking place. He is going to have all the temple prostitutes, and all the immoral men and women increase their drunkenness and increase their debauchery, using God's gold vessels.

See what he is saying? Not only is Jehovah a conquered God, but we will use his cups and jars and jugs for our sinful pleasure. We are going to get dirty, and wipe our feet on God. Not only that, but while we drink out of Jehovah's cups, we'll toast *our* gods. So much for Jehovah being the *only* God. This is total defiance. We'll gloat over our victory. We'll profane His temple vessels. We'll take the stuff of the God who claims to be the only God and we'll praise our gods.

Now there's something interesting here that we need to ask. Why did Belshazzar select the vessels from God's Temple? Why did he select Jehovah's vessels as the vessels to desecrate? Remember, Babylon was the capitol of polytheism. There were at least 53 temples to various gods throughout the city. Having conquered numerous nations, Babylon would have had the vessels and images and items from literally hundreds of gods. Why choose Yehovah? Was it just the God that came to his mind? Was it purely random? No, I think Belshazzar knew full well that to desecrate the items of Yehovah was the boldest, brashest act he could muster. Babylon had already seen the power of Israel's God. Babylon knew from experience and from interacting with the Israelites that Jehovah was the god of gods, the Lord of lords. Nebuchadnezzar had published a decree stating that God was truly the only God – the sovereign, all-powerful, eternal, so when Belshazzar did this, he did it with knowledge.

It is rather like the phenomenon today of people who claim to be atheists or agnostics, but when they want to curse or swear, whose name do they use? Allah? Krishna? Buddha? No, they use the proper names and titles of the Christian God – God, Lord, and Jesus Christ. I think that's curious. It's as if when people want to make a point, they select the name of the god they think is most likely to be true. Why curse with a name that means nothing to you? Why swear by a name you claim has no reality? It doesn't make sense.

Like Belshazzar, man has knowledge of God intuitively, and he sins against that knowledge.

Romans 1:21 ²¹ *because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened.*

But, the party came to a shattering halt.

III. The Chilling Sign

⁵ *In the same hour the fingers of a man's hand appeared and wrote opposite the lampstand on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace; and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote.* ⁶ *Then the king's countenance changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his hips were loosened and his knees knocked against each other.*

The king, and his party see fingers writing on the wall. Whether they were larger than usual, or a normal size; whether they were holding some kind of item to write, we don't know. We know that seeing a disembodied hand write on the wall, turned squeals of laughter into screeches of terror. The music stops, the party freezes, and the king goes from beating his chest, to jelly-legs.

A fascinating archaeological note: when Robert Koldewey excavated the ruins of Babylon from 1899 to 1917, he discovered the room that was almost certainly this room. It was a throne room, that was 56 metres by 18 metres. That's a massive room, enough to accommodate well over a thousand people. There were three entrances, and a place where the king's throne would have sat. And here's what was fascinating. What were the wall made of? A white plaster.

Someone has interrupted the party, and done so in a way that the party cannot go on. So the king calls for the same people who had done so well interpreting the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar.

IV. The Hopeless Experts

⁷ *The king cried aloud to bring in the astrologers, the Chaldeans, and the soothsayers. The king spoke, saying to the wise men of Babylon, "Whoever reads this writing, and tells me its interpretation, shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around his neck; and he shall be the third ruler in the kingdom."*

⁸ *Now all the king's wise men came, but they could not read the writing, or make known to the king its interpretation.*

With a track record like these fellows had, it's amazing they kept their heads, let alone their jobs. These guys have a batting average of 0. Here are the resident experts in the spiritual, the esoteric, the supernatural, and they are promised the moon. To be clothed in purple is a sign of royalty, and to be third ruler in the kingdom would mean ruling along with Nabonidus and Belshazzar, the winning wise man would be the third ruler, making up a triumvirate.

Now, why you would want to be the third ruler of a kingdom that presently consists of just one city under siege, filled with drunk nobles, I'm not sure. But they took the bait, and tried. However, they couldn't read it or interpret it. We don't know why. Perhaps they couldn't make out the script. Perhaps they could and simply didn't know what to make of it. Whatever the reason, they remained the consistent failures they had been in the past.

And Belshazzar is about to lose his mind.

V. The Queen's Suggestion

⁹ *Then King Belshazzar was greatly troubled, his countenance was changed, and his lords were astonished.*

¹⁰ *The queen, because of the words of the king and his lords, came to the banquet hall. The queen spoke,*

saying, "O king, live forever! Do not let your thoughts trouble you, nor let your countenance change. ¹¹ "There is a man in your kingdom in whom is the Spirit of the Holy God. And in the days of your father, light and understanding and wisdom, like the wisdom of the gods, were found in him; and King Nebuchadnezzar your father -- your father the king -- made him chief of the magicians, astrologers, Chaldeans, and soothsayers. ¹² "Inasmuch as an excellent spirit, knowledge, understanding, interpreting dreams, solving riddles, and explaining enigmas were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Belteshazzar, now let Daniel be called, and he will give the interpretation."

The emotional mood is going from bad to worse in the former party-room. And as Belshazzar is beginning to break down, in walks the queen. Now this probably wasn't Belshazzar's wife, given the fact that she was not in there to begin with, and given how she speaks to the king with some authority. She was probably the queen mother, perhaps Nabonidus' wife, Nitocris, or even perhaps Nebuchadnezzar's widow Amytis. At any rate, she uses words that sound exactly like Nebuchadnezzar. She says there is a man called Daniel who has the Spirit of the Holy God within him. She saw the signs, she saw the miracles, she heard the dreams interpreted, and she knows it is a perfect fit.

Somewhere between the reign of Nebuchadnezzar and his successors, Daniel had apparently been demoted, or bumped aside, as new administrations put their own people and friends and relatives in the key positions. But he's always been there, and is still around. Bear in mind, this is no less than sixty-five years after Daniel and his friends were taken to Babylon. Daniel is probably in his eighties right now. But they know where to find him, and however long it took, an hour or so, as Belshazzar fretted and paced, Daniel is finally brought in.

VI. The Prophet Commissioned

¹³ Then Daniel was brought in before the king. The king spoke, and said to Daniel, "Are you that Daniel who is one of the captives from Judah, whom my father the king brought from Judah?" ¹⁴ "I have heard of you, that the Spirit of God is in you, and that light and understanding and excellent wisdom are found in you. ¹⁵ "Now the wise men, the astrologers, have been brought in before me, that they should read this writing and make known to me its interpretation, but they could not give the interpretation of the thing. ¹⁶ "And I have heard of you, that you can give interpretations and explain enigmas. Now if you can read the writing and make known to me its interpretation, you shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around your neck, and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom."

Whether Belshazzar really didn't remember Daniel, or whether he was just trying to make up for his demotion and neglect of Daniel's abilities, we don't know. He tries to flatter Daniel, tells him the situation, and gives him the same hollow offer of being third ruler in the kingdom. And you can't help hearing the words of an eighty-something year-old man speak somewhat condescendingly to this young king in his reply.

VII. The King's Indictment

¹⁷ Then Daniel answered, and said before the king, "Let your gifts be for yourself, and give your rewards to another; yet I will read the writing to the king, and make known to him the interpretation. ¹⁸ "O king, the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father a kingdom and majesty, glory and honor. ¹⁹ "And because of the majesty that He gave him, all peoples, nations, and languages trembled and feared before him. Whomever he wished, he executed; whomever he wished, he kept alive; whomever he wished, he set up; and whomever he wished, he put down. ²⁰ "But when his heart was lifted up, and his spirit was hardened in pride, he was deposed from his kingly throne, and they took his glory from him. ²¹ "Then he was driven from the sons of men, his heart was made like the beasts, and his dwelling was with the wild donkeys. They fed him with grass like oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till he knew that the Most High God rules in the kingdom of men, and appoints over it whomever He chooses.

²² "But you his son, Belshazzar, **have not humbled your heart**, although you knew all this. ²³ "And you have **lifted yourself up against** the Lord of heaven. They have brought the vessels of His house before you,

*and you and your lords, your wives and your concubines, have drunk wine from them. And you have **praised the gods** of silver and gold, bronze and iron, wood and stone, which do not see or hear or know; and the **God who holds your breath in His hand and owns all your ways, you have not glorified.***

Daniel says, keep your reward. Daniel knows better. He knows the Persians are coming in tonight, and he does not want to be identified as third ruler alongside Belshazzar. Besides, he's not interested in prizes. He will make this known to announce judgement on the king. And he does so by rehearsing some history. And when he's finished doing that, he indicts Belshazzar on several accounts.

- 1) You committed wilful pride. "You knew all this". Belshazzar knew the history of Nebuchadnezzar, but did not humble himself. How many today know the history of those who have lived arrogantly, but do not learn the lesson.
- 2) You defied God Himself. You did more than be proud in your own person, you sought to insult God directly. The writer of Hebrews says that many do that today when they know about the Christian gospel, the know about Christ and his death for sin, but ignore it and go on. **Hebrews 10:29** ²⁹ *Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?*
- 3) You have worshipped false gods, and did not glorify the God who hold your breath and owns all your ways. Idolatry is a twofold slap in the face to God. One – it does not thank the God who keeps you breathing and puts food on your table, and lets you live each day, and two – it gives praise and honour to things. Things – created, man-made things. In our age it might be money, a job, a car, a house, a lifestyle, gadgets, hobbies, power, prestige, fame, pleasure, relationships. But it's the same thing – instead of giving adoration and trust and submission to my Creator, I'll give it to something created.

Wilful pride. Defiance of God. Idolatry. These is the charge sheet against Belshazzar, and it could be the charge sheet of many a person.

Daniel goes on to explain:

VIII. The Lord's Judgement

²⁴ *"Then the fingers of the hand were sent from Him, and this writing was written. ²⁵ " And this is the inscription that was written: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN. ²⁶ "This is the interpretation of each word. MENE: God has numbered your kingdom, and finished it; ²⁷ "TEKEL: You have been weighed in the balances, and found wanting; ²⁸ "PERES: Your kingdom has been divided, and given to the Medes and Persians."*

Daniel has absolutely no problem with the writing. MENE means numbered. God has counted up the days of Belshazzar's reign, and they are at their end. TEKEL means found too light on the scales. Belshazzar's reign has failed according to God's standard. PERES (UPHARSIN is the same word with an 'and' and a plural. The word means divided, but it is a play on the word for Persia – Babylon is about to fall to the Persians. And here is Daniel, God's faithful prophet, announcing doom to this packed throne room, without fear, without compromise.

IX. The Prophet's Reward

²⁹ *Then Belshazzar gave the command, and they clothed Daniel with purple and put a chain of gold around his neck, and made a proclamation concerning him that he should be the third ruler in the kingdom.*

Odd man, Belshazzar. After hearing the worst news of his life, he seems to almost congratulate Daniel, and give him all the promised rewards (which I'm sure Daniel didn't wear for long).

X. The Prophecy Fulfilled

³⁰ *That very night Belshazzar, king of the Chaldeans, was slain.* ³¹ *And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old.*

How did that happen, with Babylon's 37 storey walls? Well, king Cyrus of Persia laid siege to Babylon, and after a month or two, the Babylonians became less vigilant – not watching the walls closely, or guarding every possible entrance. He sent a team of his engineers and soldiers further up the Euphrates river. You might remember the river ran right through Babylon. He had his engineers divert part of the river into a marsh land, and the level of the river dropped to about just over knee-height. In the meantime, he had his army stationed at the entrance of the river to Babylon, and at its exit, and once the level dropped, they easily got into the city. There was no one watching the street-gates by the river, and the Persian army came in, and took over with hardly a fight. Impenetrable Babylon was taken over by a bunch of soldier crawling in through the rivers. How mighty Babylon was humbled. We know one man they killed that night – Belshazzar. Proud, defiant, idolatrous Belshazzar.

Does this mean that everyone who wilfully rebels against God and defies him will face a sudden judgement? No, we know from Scripture and from life that many people go right through life knowing full well who God is, but living for themselves, daring God to stop them, and honouring whatever gods they have chosen to serve.

The lesson is not in when God judges. The lesson is in the inevitability of judgement. The same God who numbered Belshazzar's day has numbered ours. He selected the day of your birth, and the day of your death. He too will weigh you on a scale. On the other side of the scale will not be other people, so that God will compare you to most others and see if you were pretty good. On the other side of the scale will be Christ – His own Son. If you are less righteous than Christ, you will be weighed and found wanting, and a judgement awaits, which Christ described as everlasting torment. If you are as righteous as Christ, you will enter into the blessedness of God's kingdom. How can you ever be as righteous as Christ? By turning away from your own work and embracing Christ as your only hope. Turning to Him for forgiveness and life will bring His righteousness being credited to you, and your sin paid for by Him.

For everyone who believes they can live in God's world by God's permission and enjoy God's gifts but never know and love God, the writing's on the wall. Such pride and defiance will eventually be judged. To everyone, who like Nebuchadnezzar, humbles his heart and trust in the living God, they will find only the welcoming arms of a loving Father.