

## Daniel 5:1-31

Today we start chapter 5 which we can call the Feast of Belshazzar and the fall of Babylon. It is the chapter of Divine graffiti and marks the change from one great world empire to another as noted in Dan 2. Let us start this morning with Ez 18:10, *the person who sins is the one who will die*. Dan 5 is the story of a man who fits this verse. It is also a case study of how a great empire can collapse. Ps 9:17, *The wicked will go down to the grave. This is the fate of all the nations who ignore God*. So, Dan 5 gives us an example of a man who sins against God and fails to repent and a nation that ignores God and in judgment is brought down in a single night. Before we begin a bit of clarification and historical background.

### Historical Background

It has been 23 years since the events of Dan 4. As noted in our introduction to the book, the chapters of Daniel are not written chronologically.

If we arrange the books chronologically, they appear as follows:

- a. 1, 605 BC
- b. 2, 602 BC
- c. 3, 602-586 BC
- d. 4, 585-570 BC
- e. 7, 553 BC
- f. 8, 551 BC
- g. 5, 539 BC
- h. 9, 539 BC
- i. 6, 539 BC
- j. 10-12, 536 BC

If we arrange Daniel's prophecies in chronological order they appear as follows:

Date	Dan's age	Reference	Prophecy
602 BC	18	2:1-45	Great Image
553 BC	67	7:1-28	Four Beasts, Ancient of Days
551 BC	69	8:1-27	Ram and He-goat.
539 BC	81	5:1-31	Fall of Babylon
539 BC	81	9:1-27	Seventy Sevens
536 BC	84	11:2-45	Future of Nations

## Outline

The chapter can be divided as follows:

- a. The Feast, vs 1-4
- b. The Writing on the wall, vs 5-6
- c. The Failure of the wise men, vs 7-9
- d. The Queen's advice, vs 10-12
- e. The Appeal to Daniel, vs 13-16
- f. Daniel's response, vs 17-28
- g. The Reward, vs 29
- h. The Fulfillment, vs 30-31

### **The Feast, verses 1-4.**

*Vs 1: King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine with them.*

Verse 1 opens with a terse description of an orgy. It begins with King Belshazzar. Who was he? To answer this, we need a bit more history. The Babylonian empire rose to power under the leadership of Nabopolassar, who reigned from 626 -605 BC. His son Nebuchadnezzar reigned from 605-562 BC. Following his death, his son Evil-Merodach ascended the throne (he is also known as Avil Marduk) Evil is mentioned in 2 K 25:27-30 and Jer 52:31-34. He ruled from 562-560 BC when he was assassinated by his brother-in-law, Neriglissar, who ruled from 560-556 BC. (Neriglissar is also known as Nergal-Sharezer who appears in Jer 39:3 and 39:13). Neriglissar was succeeded by his son Labashi-Marduk who ruled for only 9 months before being assassinated by conspirators who then named Nabonidus king. But he had no line to the royal family, so he married Nebuchadnezzar's daughter Nitocris. (There is some debate as to whether she was Neb's daughter or a former wife). Their son was Belshazzar (also some debate as to whether Bel was a biological child of Nabonidus and Nitocris, or whether Nab adopted him). In any event, Bel was Neb's grandson. Nabonidus reigned from 556-539 BC. For unknown reasons Nabonidus left Babylon and lived in Arabia (some have speculated this is where he was from) leaving his son Belshazzar as the de facto king though Belshazzar was still subservient to his father. Because Belshazzar was the de facto king he was considered the last king of Babylon, thus fulfilling the prophecy of Jer 27:6-7, *Now I will give all your countries into the hands of my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon; I will make even the wild animals subject to him.* <sup>7</sup>All

*nations will serve him and his son and his grandson until the time for his land comes; then many nations and great kings will subjugate him.*

The verse notes Bel gave a *great feast*. This occurred Oct 14, 539 BC. Now for some additional context. During the joint reign of Nabonidus and Bel, the Medes, and Persians united and started to attack the borders of the Kingdom. By 539 BC they were only 50 miles from the capital when Nabonidus met them in battle at Borsippa where his army was defeated. Nabonidus was taken captive and exiled. Cyrus then marched to the outskirts of Babylon thus threatening the city. Babylon was well defended. Herodotus claimed the walls were over 300 ft tall, 80 -85 ft wide, had multiple large metal gates, and were over 56 miles long. That is equivalent to a city of almost 15 miles square. The Euphrates River ran through the city and under a gate on either side of the metropolis. So even though Cyrus was threatening, Bel felt secure within the fortified city, so some have speculated this feast was intended as a confidence builder to demonstrate to his nobles and people they had nothing to worry about. So, whatever the reason, Bel gives a party for 1000 of his nobles, their wives and concubines. These nobles would have been officials within the city.

Note that they *drank wine*. The implication is they were all drunk. Archeological evidence shows these parties were dominated by man's baser instincts.

*Vs 2-3: While Belshazzar was drinking his wine, he gave orders to bring in the gold and silver goblets that Nebuchadnezzar his father<sup>[a]</sup> 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.*

We are not given a reason as to why Bel asked for the temple goblets. Clearly Bel knew their previous purpose. They were used in the worship of the Jew's God (which is mentioned in both verse 2 and 3!) and now he hauls them out so he and his nobles, their wives, and concubines, can all drink to the gods of Babylon as noted in verse 4. This is not an error of ignorance. It is a deliberate affront to the God of Israel. Bel is saying I know what these vessels were used for. I know what the God of Israel did for my grandfather, and I am going to use them to drink to and worship our gods.

*Vs 4: As they drank the wine, they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone.*

Verse 4 notes the activity of the feast. They were drinking and they praised their man-made gods (see Rm 1:21-25, Is 40:19-20) `

**The Writing on the Wall, verses 5-6.**

Vs 5-6, *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. <sup>6</sup> His face turned pale, and he was so frightened that his legs became weak, and his knees were knocking.*

We see God's response in verses 5-6. *Suddenly* has the idea of moment and precision. At the moment of desecration, a *hand* now appears, and fingers begin to write on the wall. Note it was on the *plaster*. Belshazzar's banquet hall was excavated in the late 1800's. It was 170 ft long and 55 ft wide. It was made of stone but covered in white gypsum. As the hand wrote it most likely peeled away the gypsum to expose the color contrasted stone underneath to make the words as clear as they could be. As there was little natural light there had to be candles and torches to light the room. So, note the hand appears near the *lampstand*, a place where all would see. Additionally, the king would sit near the lampstands so everyone could see him. So, the fingers appear at the central focal point of the party.

We see the response of Bel in verse 6. He watched and his face turned *pale*, and he became so frightened *his legs became weak and his knees were knocking*. The word *pale* refers to Bel's countenance. Imagine the effect of the alcohol, as no doubt he is partially if not fully flushed and suddenly his face goes pale. Similarly, his legs feel weak. I love the KJV here, *the joints of his loins were loosed, and his knees smote one against another*. One way to interpret this is he had lost all lower body strength. Nahum 2:10 speaking of the fall of Ninevah says their knees shake. Haggai 2:7 *I will shake all nations, the desire of all nations shall come*. Here God is shaking one nation and at the end of time he will shake all the others.

However, there are two other ways in which commentators have suggested how to interpret this. The word *loin* in Aramaic also refers to one's sexual organs. A man's reproductive organ is noted as his strength. To have them loosed, can refer to one losing sexual desire or sexual ability. Note, Bel's wives and concubines are witnessing all this. This is a feast of alcohol, idolatry, women, and debauchery, so losing one's sexual ability amid this type of party is not a good thing. Note the word *loin* can also refer to bowel and bladder function. So, however way you chose to view the verse, it is a terrible thing for Bel.

### **The failure of the Wise men, verses 7-9.**

Vs 7: *The king summoned the enchanters, astrologers<sup>[b]</sup> 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 around his neck, and he will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom."*

In verse 7, Bel gathers himself and summons all his wise men and offers a reward if any of them can read the writing and interpret it. Note the reward involves three things:

- a. *Dressed in purple*, which signified authority ( see Esther 8:15)

- b. A *gold chain*, which was a gift of nobility (see Gen 41:42)
- c. And *I will make him the third highest ruler*. This reflected the hierarchy in the Babylonian government as Nabonidus was the supreme ruler, his son Belshazzar the co-regent and acting king, and whoever would interpret this writing would be third.

Vs 8-9: *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.*

We see in verse 8 the wise men arrive but cannot interpret the writing, and therefore, Bel becomes more terrified (note the idea of *read* here means they could read the words but could not read what they meant). Contrast the response of Neb when his wise men could not give him or interpret his dream (see 2:5). Note his nobles are *baffled*. The word is also translated as perplexed. They do not know what to say.

### **The Queen's advice, verse 10-12.**

Vs 10, *The queen,<sup>[c]</sup> hearing the voices of the king and his nobles, came into the banquet hall. "May the king live forever!" she said. "Don't be alarmed! Don't look so pale!*

In verse 10 we are introduced to the queen. Her identity is given by verse 3. Since the banquet included all of Bel's wives and concubines, the queen noted in verse 10 is Nabonidus's wife, Nitocris, who is Bel's mother. It is likely the writing caused the news of it to travel quickly through the palace and overhearing the voices regarding the hand, the writing, and the wise men's failure, she comes into the banquet hall ready to give some advice. Like any good mom she starts by comforting him: *don't be alarmed! Don't look so pale!*

Vs 11-12: *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 Belteshazzar, 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."*

Queen Nitocris announces there is another wise man whom you have not consulted. She speaks of him through her polytheistic world view as she states he has the *spirit of the holy gods in him* and had *intelligence and wisdom like that of the gods*. Nitocris knew that Daniel had been appointed chief of the wise men while her father reigned, but now it is apparent that Daniel has lost this position as Belshazzar has not heard of him and he is not a part of the wise men who come when Bel summons them. Note she uses both his Hebrew and Aramaic name. This was a sign of respect.

She then notes several of his attributes: he has a keen mind, knowledge and understanding, and the ability to interpret dreams, explain riddles, and solve difficult problems. The literal word for difficult problems is to loosen knots. The hand and the writing were certainly a difficult problem, but she was confident Daniel could solve it.

### **The Appeal to Daniel, verses 13-16.**

*Vs 13: 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?"*

It is clear from verse 13 that Bel did not know Daniel. Bel asks Daniel to identify himself.

*Vs 14: I have heard that the spirit of the gods is in you and that you have insight, intelligence, and outstanding wisdom.*

Bel now recounts what his mother has said to him about Daniel.

*Vs 15: 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.*

Bel informs Daniel that none of the wise men were able to solve it. This must have been déjà vu for Daniel. I have seen this rodeo before (see 2:10-11, 4:7).

*Vs 16: 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 around your neck, and you will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom."*

Bel now again affirms what he has heard from his mother and tells Daniel of the reward that awaits the one who can interpret the writing.

### **Daniels Response, verse 17-28.**

Daniel's response is given in verses 17-28. This section can be further divided into the condemnation of Belshazzar in verses 17-24 and the interpretation of the writing in verses 25-28.

#### The Condemnation of Belshazzar, vs 17-24.

*Vs 17: 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.*

Note Daniel answers the King abruptly and not with the greeting he used for Neb (O King live forever 3:9) or Darius (long live the King! 6:21). Daniel rejects the gifts Bel offers stating he will read the inscription without compensation.

*Vs 18: Your Majesty, the Most High God gave your father Nebuchadnezzar sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendor.*

Daniel now gives Bel a small sermon with a lesson from history. He starts by stating that God, the Most High: who is greater than all the gods of Babylon: who is the possessor of Heaven and earth and therefore able to divide and give portions of the earth to anyone he chooses. It is the God Most High who gave your father Neb *sovereignty and greatness, glory, and splendor*. There is no word in Aramaic for grandfather or grandson, so the word *father* is used for generational familial relationships.

*Vs 19: Because of the prominent 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.*

Note that because God had given Neb his position, it had two effects: first *all the nations and peoples of every language dreaded and feared him*. Neb had the power of life and death, so everyone feared his rule. Second, Neb could conduct his will with absolute authority. He was a law unto himself.

*Vs 20: But when his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory.*

Daniel now summarizes all of chapter 4 in verses 20 and 21. Note in vs 20 Daniel states Neb's heart became arrogant and hardened with pride. Some translations have an exalted heart, or his heart was lifted up. The word "hardened" means to overpower. Neb's pride and arrogance overpowered him. Note as God gave him authority and power in verse 18, God now removes Neb from his position and strips him of his glory.

*Vs 21: 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.*

Because of pride, God drove him away and caused him to go insane. Note we are given an additional fact regarding Neb's insanity that was not mentioned in chapter 4, and that is Neb lived with wild donkeys. (maybe that is where we get the descriptor, he is an ass!). The reason for Neb's humbling is given here: *until he acknowledged that the Most High God is sovereign*

over all the kingdoms on earth and sets over them anyone he wishes. It took 7 years for Neb to realize God was indeed God and he was but a man under God's sovereign control. We know, and Bel knew, that Neb finally came to his senses and praised the Most High God, and that his position, power, glory, and majesty were all restored.

Vs 22: *But you, Belshazzar, his son,<sup>[d]</sup> have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this.*

Now in verses 22 -24, Daniel is going to give a threefold indictment of Bel. Vs 22 is indictment number 1. *You knew all this.* Bel rejected knowledge. This is one of the most tragic verses in all of scripture. Daniel says, "*you knew all this*" and yet you chose to discard it. When we hear the gospel, we have a choice; to believe or discard. Bel had the example of his grandfather and yet chose to disregard the lesson of Neb's life. He could not plead ignorance (see also Acts 24:24-27). His sin is like that mentioned in Mt 11: 20-24 and Heb 10:24-31.

Vs 23-24: *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 honor 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.*

Daniel now details Bel's response to God's message through Neb. Instead of humbling himself, Bel set himself up *against the Lord of heaven*. Here is indictment number 2. After rejecting the truth, Bel blasphemes God. Bel purposely defiled the vessels of God and drank to the gods the Babylonians had made. He was saying I have no respect for the Jewish God and am not intimidated by him. Instead of worshiping the Jewish God, I will speak against him and then indictment number 3; Bel chooses to worship *the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone*. Note the gods descend in importance but the progression is not to be missed. Bel rejects the truth he knows, then blasphemes God, then worships the idols he has made. Daniel says these idols *cannot see, hear, or understand*. This is contrast to the God of Israel who can see, hear, and understand for He has written Bel's condemnation on the wall.

Note Daniel now summarizes Bel's sin; you did not honor the God who gives life and determines your ways. Bel did not acknowledge God, nor see his position as from God, nor seek God, nor did he have anything to do with God. Now Daniel says it is time for judgement.

The interpretation of the writing, vs 25-28.

Vs 25: *This is the inscription that was written: menu, mene, tekel, parsin.*

Daniel now turns his attention to the interpretation of the writing. Vs 25 lists three Aramaic words that are measures of weight. Mene corresponds to the Hebrew word mane or mina which designates either a measure of weight or money (Ez 45:12 states 60 minas equals one

shekel). Mane comes from the Hebrew root manah which means to number or appoint. Tekel corresponds to the Hebrew word shakel from which we get shekel, which can mean either a measure of money or to be weighed. Parsin, means to divide (although the Hebrew root paras, from which parsin is derived can also mean Persia).

*Vs 26: Here is what these words mean: Mene<sup>[e]</sup>: God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end.*

Daniel now interprets each word. As we noted Mene comes from the root manah, which means to number or appoint. Daniel uses the word in both ways. First *God has numbered the days of your reign*. God had set an exact number of days for Bel's reign. (He numbers our days as well, Ps 37:18, Ps 39:4-5, Ex 23:25-26). Second, He has *brought it to an end*. In other words, He has appointed a time, a specific time, for it to end. In other words, you are done.

*Vs 27: Tekel<sup>[i]</sup>: You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting.*

We saw from verse 25 the Hebrew word that corresponds to Tekel, which means either money or to be weighed. The application here is that Bel has been weighed according to God's standard of righteousness and has been found deficient. (you are too light).

*Vs 28: Peres<sup>[g]</sup>: Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians."*

We noted the word parsin meant to divide. Note Daniel does not use the word parsin, rather the word peres, which is a word play on the root. Daniel is saying *your Kingdom is and given to the Medes and the Persians* (this event was prophesied by Isaiah in Is 21:1-10).

We can summarize all this into a simple phrase; Mene- you are done, Mene- you are done, Tekel -you are too light, Parsin-you are divided.

### **The Reward, vs 29.**

*Vs 29: Then at Belshazzar's command, Daniel was clothed in purple, a gold chain was placed around his neck, and he was proclaimed the third highest ruler in the kingdom.*

In verse 29 Bel fulfills his promise of a reward even though Daniel had refused it in verse 17. Note the reward was threefold:

- a. Daniel was clothed in purple: this was a sign of royalty and rule.
- b. A gold chain was placed around his neck: a sign of rule, authority, and favor.
- c. He was proclaimed the 3rd highest ruler in the kingdom: Daniel was elevated to just below Nabonidus and Bel. Note this position only lasted a few hours as Bel was killed later that evening.

### **The Fulfillment of Prophecy and the Fall of Babylon, vs 30-31.**

*That very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians,<sup>[b]</sup> was slain,<sup>31</sup> and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom, at the age of sixty-two.<sup>[i]</sup>*

The fall of Bel and the city of Babylon are abruptly discussed in verses 30-31. We will give a bit longer explanation as to how the city fell.

Historically, Babylon fell on Oct 14, 539 BC. As mentioned earlier, Cyrus was threatening the city and indeed just a month prior to the banquet, Cyrus had taken a neighboring city called Opis, near Babylon. Unbeknown to Bel and his army, Cyrus began a diversion of the Euphrates to lower the water level. This would allow the river to drop below the level of the protective gate and allow his army to enter without obstruction. Ironically, on the night of the feast, Bel had pulled his watchmen from the wall as a statement to his people that though they were being threatened, no one could besiege such a well-constructed and defended city, so it need not be watched! It was that night that Cyrus marched his army to the wall and entered the city unopposed. Note there was no fighting, only executions.

We also need to explain who Darius is. This is not the Darius of chapter 6. There are many theories as to who this Darius was. But the following are two that make sense. The first is from Dr. Steven Anderson, <https://truthonlybible.com/2016/01/08/darius-the-mede-a-solution-to-his-identity/>). "Cyrus shared power with a Median king until about two years after the fall of Babylon. This Median king is called Cyaxares (II) by the Greek historian Xenophon but is known by his throne name Darius in the book of Daniel. Cyrus did not make a hostile conquest of Media, did not dethrone the last Median king, and did not become the highest regent in the Medo-Persian Empire until after the fall of Babylon. Cyrus was Darius's co-regent, the hereditary king of the realm of Persia, the crown prince of Media, and the commander of the Medo-Persian army—yet it was still Darius who was officially recognized as the highest power in the realm. Darius died naturally within two years after the fall of Babylon, and as he had no male heir and Cyrus had married his daughter, Cyrus inherited his position upon his death and united the Median and Persian kingdoms in a single throne."

The second is from Fructenbaum and his Daniel commentary. He claims the following: Cyrus did not initially take the city. This task fell to one of his generals named Ugbaru, who entered the city on Oct 14, 539 while Cyrus remained in Opis. Cyrus entered the city 18 days later Oct 29, 539BC. Cyrus named Ugbaru the provincial governor, but Ugbaru died 8 days later. Cyrus then named an associate named Gubaru governor. Gubaru was born in 601 BC and his father was a Mede, so Gubaru was known as a Mede and was also 62 yrs of age when he became governor. He ruled Babylon till 525 BC. Josephus states "Babylon was taken by Darius, and when he, with his kinsman Cyrus, had put an end to the dominion of the Babylonians he was 62 years old". Darius was likely another name for Gubaru and vice versa.

I mentioned when we started that Dan 5 was not only the tale of a man brought down by sin it was also an eyewitness account to the fall of a great world empire. But what made Babylon fall? Certainly, we can say it was God's sovereign will. But there are also human factors at work here and they are worth exploring, for they provide lessons for us in our own time.

Proverbs 14:34, *Godliness makes a nation great, but sin is a disgrace to any people.*

Some observations:

- a. This culture had a drug problem, vs 1.
- b. They had an entertainment fixation. vs 1.
- c. They were immoral, vs 1.
- d. They willfully rejected the truth, vs 2-3.
- e. They were blasphemous, vs 2-3.
- f. They were idolatrous, vs 2-3.
- g. They were materialistic and corrupt, vs 7.
- h. They were overconfident in their human defenses.

Unfortunately, much of the above sounds like us today. We are in a post Ninevah moment. Jonah went to Ninevah somewhere 773-755 BC. The city was not destroyed till 612 BC. God is longsuffering, but judgement ultimately comes.