

The Writing's on the Wall

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 29 May 2016

Preacher: Jonathan Gemmell

[0 : 00] Please do have a seat. Just before we get into Daniel chapter 5 and the writing of the wall, I just want to make us Presbyterian for one second. And I want us to be larger catechism people.

And particularly in the larger catechism question 160, which is this. What is required of those that hear the word preached? Now, I don't expect you to know answer 160 of the larger Westminster catechism.

But we'll read it together. So I'll ask the question and then we'll read the response. What is required of those that hear the word preached? It is required of those that hear the word preached that they attend upon it with diligence, preparation and prayer.

Examine what they hear by the scriptures. Receive the truth with faith. Love meekness and readiness of mind as the word of God. Meditate and confer of it.

Hide it in their hearts and bring forth the fruit of it in their lives. You would make wonderful Presbyterians. Let's pray together.

[1 : 10] Father God, make us faithful hearers, diligent, prepared and prayerful. Examining the scriptures to glean your truth and receiving it with faith, love and meekness as the word of God.

May we meditate upon it, talk of it afterwards and hide it in our hearts that you might bring forth fruit in our lives. Father, help me as I speak that your words would be my words and your scriptures would be handled properly so that their central theme, your son, Jesus Christ, might be seen clearly.

We ask this in Jesus name, according to his grace and for his glory. Amen. Daniel chapter 5 was held in contempt by historians until 1854.

The reference to King Belshazzar in chapter 5 verse 1 generated great scorn because the Babylonians were great chroniclers.

They wrote about everything and we know exactly who reigned and when they reigned. So a little bit of history in the Babylonian monarchy. It kind of coincides with the managers of Manchester United.

[2 : 24] So firstly, we have King Nebuchadnezzar. 605 BC to 562 BC, the longest reign. After him comes King Amal Marduk, 562 to 560.

Following that, King Nergel Shash Susa, 560 to 556. After that, King Labashi Marduk, 556.

He only actually reigned for six months because then there was a coup. And King Nabonidus becomes king of the Babylonians. I was so pleased that went through because I made this PowerPoint on Wednesday.

That is the end of the Babylonian Empire. And you will see that there is a distinct lack in that list of a king called Belshazzar. So therefore, the fact that Daniel writes, King Belshazzar gave a great banquet, generated great scorn.

Because it was obviously not historically accurate. However, in 1854, John George Taylor, an archaeologist from the British Museum, was excavating that big skyscraper, the ziggurat that was in Babylon.

[3 : 37] And found during his excavation four identical cylinders, inscribed with Babylonian cuneiform, detailing the reign of King Nabonidus. In it, he speaks of his firstborn son, Belshazzar, whom he made vice-regent of Babylon, co-king of Babylon.

Because in 549 BC, he had to go and fight a military campaign in Arabia. A tour that lasted him 10 years that ended in 539 BC.

In fact, it ended the very night that we read about in Daniel chapter 5. Suddenly, the scorn dissipated, and Daniel chapter 5 was taken seriously.

And so what do we have in Daniel chapter 5? Firstly, two points. The God who is God shows up. And then secondly, the God who is God sums up.

Firstly, the God who is God shows up. The scene in Daniel chapter 5 takes place on the last day of the Babylonian Empire. 2,555 years ago, 23 years after King Nebuchadnezzar has died.

[4 : 52] King Nebuchadnezzar, who is the big king, who's in Daniel chapter 1, 2, 3, and 4. So between the end of Daniel chapter 4 and Daniel chapter 5, verse 1, we have at least 20, 23, 25 years have passed.

Daniel has been in Babylon for at least six decades. He is now an old and seemingly retired civil servant.

And there is a royal banquet of hedonistic excess going on in the king's banqueting hall. Look at the first four verses.

See, in the first four verses, five times the drinking of wine is mentioned. He's emphasizing that this is an alcohol-fueled party.

This would put the freshers of Edinburgh University to shame. There is just wine everywhere. And it's a big party, a thousand nobles, lots of women, some wives, some concubines.

[5 : 58] This is about the grandeur of Belshazzar. And then in verse 2, in an act of hubris, self-promotion, and showing off, Belshazzar enacts a plan to cement his name in history.

Fed up of being in the shadow of the great Nebuchadnezzar. Fed up of being known as the son of the true king. He thinks, I'll go further. I'll do something so outrageous that people will remember me for years to come.

He's going to go way beyond the nerve of his ancestors. And so he says, please could you bring the golden vessels which Nebuchadnezzar took from the temple in Jerusalem.

Please could you bring those. And we're going to use them as tankards for our wine. And so you can imagine that the servants run off. They go to the storehouse of Marduk.

They have to find the key. They then have to find the key to the display cases there. They've gathered about 60 years of dust. So they need a quick buffing. All the time the wine is going and in the end they're bought before Belshazzar.

[7 : 05] And you can imagine the raucous party quietens down as Belshazzar stands over these cups. And suddenly everyone's shouting, Shaz, Shaz, Shaz.

And he fills the cup. He's not going to, is he? He's not going to dare. Is he going to do it? Is he going to perform sacrilege? And he lifts the cup.

And he toasts the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood and stone. He toasts the great Babylon plethora of gods, the pantheon.

And everyone screams and shouts and goes, Belshazzar, you've done it. You're the most brave king. You've elevated yourself to the realm of the God of Jerusalem, whom your ancestor Nebuchadnezzar defeated.

This is rebellious idolatry. This is not respecting the one true God as gods.

[8 : 12] Using the things that were devoted to his worship for mundane things in an act of sacrilege. It is not respecting God as gods. But it's also idolatry because they're worshipping things to replace him.

This is rebellious idolatry. Not worshipping God as God, not respecting him as God and replacing him with something else.

This is an Old Testament Romans 1. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him. But their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God. For images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

It's that kind of foolishness. That Belshazzar is enacting. While we may not do it as overtly as Belshazzar. Because let's face it, none of us have got a thousand friends.

[9 : 17] We do that all the time. Fail to respect God as gods. And replace him with countless other things. Belshazzar just does it in a more overt way.

We may not be vice regents of an enormous kingdom with multiple wives. A plethora of concubines. And a gang of nobles hanging on our every word.

But our sinful hearts are just the same. And if we had the same amount of money, we would do the same kind of things. Because in our natural sinful self, we don't respect God as God.

And we readily replace him with other things that we choose to worship instead. This is a Psalm 2 situation where the nations of the earth band together to usurp the rule of God.

To break his chains of dominion. To throw off the shackles of his rule. And God's response to these efforts, he laughs. And he scoffs. Like a parent laughing at the stubborn toddler who lashes out.

[10:25] God laughs. And now this laughing God, verse 5, is going to come down and spell out to Belshazzar exactly what he's done wrong. That this God will not be mocked.

Verse 6, look at it with me. This man who was playing the big man. His face turned pale. And he was so frightened that his legs became weak.

And his knees were knocking. The NIV is a very polite translation. It uses the phrase, his knees were knocking. The Hebrew idiom is that the knots of his loins were loosened.

It literally means that he soiled himself. And therefore we have the man who is playing the big man in verses 1 to 4. And in verse 6 he's the embarrassed little boy.

Who is so terrified by what he sees before him. The king in his terror invites the faculty of futurology.

[11:27] The think tank and they come in again and they're completely clueless as to what these four words mean. They come up completely empty.

Now it's not clear why they don't understand what's written. It might be like in Rembrandt's painting of this that the hand is written vertically instead of horizontally.

That might be the confusion. It might also be because Aramaic like Hebrew doesn't have vowels. So nobody's quite sure what this collection of consonants means. Because there's a real lack of context to spell it out.

But verse 10. The queen mother. I'm pretty sure it's the queen mother. The word can mean both. But Belshazzar's wives are already at the banquet.

And the queen mother. Who if it is the queen mother. Is Nabonidus' wife. Who is actually Nebuchadnezzar's daughter. So she was probably in the royal court.

[12:26] When Daniel interpreted these dreams before. And she comes and says. There is a man. Daniel. He used to be head of the civil service. My father.

Nebuchadnezzar had lots of quandaries like this. And Daniel was able to sort them out. She recounts how Daniel has a keen mind. Knowledge. Understanding the ability to interpret dreams. Explain riddles. And solve difficult problems. It seems with that CV. Daniel might just be the guy. To help. This king who is being humbled.

Daniel is summoned. It seems that he's fallen out of favor in the civil service. He has to come in. He is now an elderly man. Standing before a petulant young king.

And I wonder what Daniel will do. I think it's a good place. To pause here. And just consider. Where we are at in the Daniel story. The first thing I think we see in Daniel.

[13:26] Is a long faithfulness. By the time Daniel appears. He's in his 70s. He's been in Babylon for 60 years. He used to be a big deal.

He served God faithfully. But he's fallen out of favor. But is he upset? Has he just jacked it in and said. God you've let me down? No. This Daniel who was faithful on day one in Babylon.

Is faithful. 60 years later. Things haven't got better for him. And yet. He's still trusting God. Even though he's not gone home.

Even though he's suffered a demotion. And has fallen out. Of Babylonian high society. He doesn't lack zeal. When the opportunity comes. To give this king really bad news.

He doesn't bottle it. And shy away. I wonder if Daniel isn't a model for us. In this respect. Serves God wholeheartedly. No matter what it goes like on the ground.

[14:25] Still prayerful. Still willing. Still persevering with his God. And he's also a man. I think. In his 70s.

Of unwavering boldness. Daniel appears before Belshazzar. The words are not good news. He doesn't.

Even have the slice of goodness. Like. Nebuchadnezzar. You're the golden head. There's no kind of. Sugar on the pill. It is.

This is going to go really bad. These words are words of judgment. From the God. Who you've neither honored. Nor respected. And actually derided. In public. I wonder again.

If this isn't a model for us. If there's one thing. We all lack. It's boldness. That when opportunity comes. To share both. The bad news of God's judgment. And the good news of the gospel.

[15:21] How often. Do we shy away. And stay quiet. We need to be bold. We need to be clear.

In the face of fear. Clear. In the face of fear. Clear. About people's predicament. Before God. That as Romans 1 says. We're all guilty.

But clear. That there is one hope. That we've been singing about this morning. The Lord Jesus. Daniel. A man. Of long faithfulness.

And unwavering boldness. We then get to the second half. And God sums it up. Daniel now gives Belshazzar. A history lesson. Concerning his.

Ancestor. The great Nebuchadnezzar. And the most high God's. Patient dealings with him. See the description of Nebuchadnezzar's. Absolute power. If you want to know what absolute power is.

[16:18] Verse 19 gives us a clue. 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. That is absolute power. He can do what he wants. With who he wants. When he wants. But we learn. That standing behind absolute power. Is universal strength.

Sovereign power. In the hand of God. Almighty. And God intervenes. Verse 20. But when Nebuchadnezzar's heart.

Became arrogant. And hardened with pride. He was deposed from his royal throne. And stripped of his glory. He goes mad. He eats grass like the ox of the field.

Why? Because in his arrogance. God humbled him. And our God opposes the proud. But gives grace to the humble. And therefore this man. Who thought there was no one like him.

[17:15] Finds there's a God that is above him. But so low. Until he acknowledged. Verse 21. The most high God. Is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth.

And sets over them. Anyone he wishes. Nebuchadnezzar humbled. Until he acknowledged God. Belshazzar.

Performs pride filled. Idolatry. Sacrilege. Uses things devoted to God. To worship the Babylonian gods. Of gold and silver and bronze.

And iron, wood and stone. Which cannot see or hear. The lesson's the same. Belshazzar. You have not acknowledged. Or humbled yourself.

Before the God who holds in his hand. Verse 23. Your life. And all your ways. Belshazzar's failed to honor the God.

[18:17] Who stands above him. And he will be deposed. Like Nebuchadnezzar. Belshazzar. The writing on the wall.

The verdict is given by God himself. Mene. Repeated twice. For emphasis to show that this is absolutely true. That God has numbered the days of your reign.

And brought it to an end. A truth he's going to discover. As his cold dead body lies. On the banqueting floor this very night. Take all you have been weighed. On the scales and found wanting. Nothing. Like the goddess Justicia. Who is the statue on top of the old Bailey in London. He's got the sword of judgment. And the scales of justice. And God is saying.

I've weighed you. And you've been weightless. There's no evidence of you honoring me. As you should. Belshazzar. Who seemed to be the weightiest man alive. With all this glory.

[19:16] All this banqueting. All this greatness. And God says. Nothing. You are a mist in my view. You have been weighed. And measured. And found wanting. And then passing.

Your kingdom is divided. And given to another. In fact. While this banquet is going on. The Medes and Persians. Are finishing the most audacious battle plan.

That's ever been enacted. In the ancient worlds. The river Euphrates. That runs through Babylon. What have they done? Well they've totally diverted. The course of the river. They've put it into swampland.

Which lies to the east of Babylon. Drying up the riverbed. So the impenetrable Babylon. Is penetrated by all the soldiers rushing up the river.

And totally decimating the Babylonian kingdom. Well verse 29. Then at Belshazzar's command.

[20:12] Despite what Daniel said. Earlier on in the chapter. A gold chain was placed around his neck. And he was proclaimed the third highest ruler in the kingdom. So what? That's like getting a cabin upgrade on the Titanic.

Because it's all going down. The reason he's the third highest ruler. Well you've got Nabodinus. Belshazzar. And then the first spot available is. Chapter.

Is the third place. Verse 30. That very night. Belshazzar king of the Babylonians was slain. And Darius the Mede took over the kingdom at the age of 32.

I don't know if it bothers you though. That Nebuchadnezzar. God has been very patient with him. We've had four chapters of long reign. And God seems to have dealt patiently with him.

Whereas Belshazzar seems to kind of one strike and you're out. Well I don't think that's what the text is telling us. Firstly Belshazzar is drinking from the goblets.

[21 : 15] This isn't a spare of the moment decision. This is just alcohol fuel boldness. Giving him courage to do what he's always wanted to do. His heart has been set against God.

For a while. Secondly read verse 22 carefully. But you Belshazzar his son. Have not humbled yourself. Though you knew all this.

God. Belshazzar knows. About the reality of God. How he humbles the proud. How he will not be mocked. How those that are. Perform sacrilege and idolatry.

Will be judged. Belshazzar knows all this. But he sets himself up against the Lord of heaven. Anyway. This isn't. This isn't foolish ignorance.

This is pride filled. Arrogance. Belshazzar knows all this. But he's going to do it anyway. He does not heed the warning. He does not learn the lessons.

[22 : 15] He will not follow in the footsteps of Nebuchadnezzar. Who God was so patient with. This is idiocy. It's interesting that in.

Jesus' ministry. He only calls three people foolish. And there are three people who fail to heed judgment when it's coming. And just carry on regardless. In this sense.

Belshazzar is a fool. Yet left to our own devices. Would the verdict from God be much different. On us than it was on Belshazzar. If our deeds were measured by the perfect God.

Who scales. Only register. Perfection. Would God write anything much different across our lives. Than these words of judgment.

I think it's very interesting. That looking through the pages of scripture. What do we see about God's finger. And his writing in human history. Well the first place we see God's finger mentioned.

[23 : 13] Is in Exodus 8. Where Moses and Aaron go to. The Pharaoh's house. And they have this kind of miracle off. That Moses performs something.

And then Pharaoh's magicians perform something. And then something else. And then something else. Until you get to number three. Where the gnats come. And the magicians say. This is the finger of God.

God in his plagues has revealed himself to be sovereign over it all. That's what God had written in history. The next place we get God. God's finger writing is on Mount Sinai in Exodus 31.

We read of stone tablets inscribed by the finger of God. These laws written by God to reveal who he was. And what his people are to do. God writes about his sovereignty.

He writes about what he expects from his people. As those that have revelation of him. The third place God writes is here in Daniel chapter 5. Words of judgment.

[24 : 13] Against Belshazzar who has broken the first two commandments on a gigantic scale. Just as we have. We haven't worshipped God as we ought. We haven't honoured him and worshipped many idols instead.

And so God's finger writes judgment over Belshazzar. But in many ways over all humanity. People who have failed to keep God's law have failed to love God. And who have turned away to many and various idols.

Belshazzar's judgment and death is also our judgment and death. These should be the words written over our lives. That God has weighed us and measured us and found us wanting.

However there's one more place where God writes. It's in John chapter 8. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law frog march a woman to Jesus who's been caught in adultery.

They try to trap Jesus and get him to condemn the woman to being stung to death. Just as God's law written by Moses said. This woman who's broken commandment number 7.

[25 : 20] What does Jesus do? He bends down and he writes in the ground with his finger. The very same finger that's written before. Before.

He repeats the act and invites the sinless one to write. To throw home the first stone. And everyone flees starting with the eldest. Once everyone's gone Jesus says.

Woman where are they? Has no one condemned you? No one said they she said. Then neither do I condemn you. Jesus declared go now.

And leave your life of sin. And the final words written by the hand of God. Are words of grace. Words of forgiveness to people who will come.

Humbly before him and acknowledge. And receive his offer of forgiveness and pardon. That Jesus will write words of grace over our lives.

[26 : 19] If we lay down our opposition to him. If we stop not respecting him as we should. But respect him as we should. And we stop replacing him with other things.

And worship Jesus alone. One thing we learn from Daniel chapter 4 and chapter 5. That there really are only two ways to live. We can live like Belshazzar who wants to be king himself.

And he signs his own death warrant. Or we can live like Nebuchadnezzar who lived like Jesus was king. A new life and a relationship with God. It is only fun sitting in the boss's chair until the boss turns up.

And then there's serious ramifications. One man Nebuchadnezzar pardoned and restored. The other Belshazzar judged and killed. For all those who will turn to trust Jesus.

God's finger does one more act of writing. He writes their names in his book of life. Having your names written in this book will ultimately be worth everything.

[27 : 21] Listen to these words from Revelation 20 and then we're finished. Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and the heavens fled from his presence and there was no place for them.

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne and books were opened. Another book was opened which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books.

The sea gave up the dead that were in it and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them. And each person was judged according to what they had done.

Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death.

Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown also into the lake of fire.

There is nothing more important than having your name in God's book of life through faith in the Lord Jesus. That over your life is not written judgment but written grace.

[28 : 23] That when we're weighed and measured we will not be found wanting but be found in Jesus our Lord. Let's pray. Father God bless us and help us.

Father what is from you seared on our hearts? Father what is just the foolish ramblings of fallen people? Lord may it blow away in the wind. Father I pray we might leave here declaring that you Lord Jesus are our King and our God.

And that we might leave here with the assurance that you have written words of grace over our lives. Father may these words continue to resonate in our hearts. And bring about transformed and fruitful lives we pray.

In Jesus name. Amen.