

## **DANIEL 5    CBC 8.11.2020**

### ***Please read Daniel 5:1-31 ...***

Every chapter of Daniel is teaching us something about God:

- ch.1: we discover God is faithful: He keeps His covenant, even in disciplining His people.
- ch.2: we discover God is wise and all-knowing, revealing mysteries.
- ch.3: we discover God is powerful: He can keep His people through the furnace.
- ch.4 we discover God is patient, graciously bringing Nebuchadnezzar to bow down to Him.

Behold, Daniel says, the greatness of God. And this is a great comfort to us. Who would not want to belong to the God who is faithful when we're unfaithful, wise when we're foolish, strong when we're weak, and patient when we're stubborn?

But ch.4 ends with a warning: *"Those who walk in pride He is able to humble."* That's just what He did to Nebuchadnezzar, and it led to his salvation. But what if we refuse to be humbled? That's ch.5. The attention switches to another Babylonian ruler, Belshazzar, a proud man who continues in his arrogance and so is lost – and one of the world's great empires falls.

And so in ch.5 we learn something else about God. We discover that God is our Judge. Never be ashamed to believe in the judgment of God. The day God brings judgement is going to be the day things are set right.

### **1. THOSE WHO WALK IN PRIDE ... vv.1-24**

Nebuchadnezzar is dead, and Belshazzar is ruling in Babylon. Verse 2 refers to Nebuchadnezzar as his "father", but the term is a broad one: "ancestor". From Babylonian records, it appears that his immediate father was Nabonidus, who'd moved to another part of the empire and left his son in charge of Babylon.

And Babylon was in trouble. The armies of the Medes and Persians were outside the city but the Babylonians were confident they wouldn't get in. And with the enemy at the gates, Belshazzar throws a banquet. It's a glimpse of the world as it always is on the eve of catastrophe: a reckless orgy of self-indulgence in defiance of the crisis. In fact, the Medes and Persians came up with a clever plan for overcoming the city's defences – but Daniel isn't interested in that. His testimony is that God overthrows human arrogance.

Note what Daniel highlights about this banquet: the booze (mentioned 5 times in the first 4 verses – less like Buckingham Palace garden party, more like a rugby club initiation) and the blasphemy: drinking himself under the table with the goblets looted from the Jerusalem temple. This isn't the first time we've met these sacred vessels. Back in 1:2, before ever Daniel talks about himself, he talks about the temple vessels – and there's something ominous about them. They were captured because God judged a king in Jerusalem who was treating Him with contempt.

And now those same vessels appear on Belshazzar's table. And he used them to get drunk, and to praise *"the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone"* (v.4). He knew where those vessels came from. He knew they were God's treasured possession. He's not sinning in ignorance. He's putting two fingers up at God.

But v.5 wasn't in the script. Do you see how quickly God can change the scene? In the twinkling of an eye the game is up for Belshazzar. The music stops, the wine ceases to flow, the dancers put their clothes back on, and Belshazzar is reduced to jelly. v.6 is a very polite translation of what happened to Belshazzar: literally, *"the knots of his loins were loosed."*

He sent for his wise men to tell him what was going on and they didn't know. God was showing him this world's bankruptcy. All his props were knocked away - the alcohol, the partying, the gold, wives, concubines, university professors who share his views, designer spirituality - none of them can help him now. So he became even more terrified, and his face grew more pale(v.9).

Do you see how the threads of the Babylonian chronicle are coming together? Not only do we have the reappearance of the temple vessels from chapter one - there's another link. The story began with Daniel rejecting the royal wine, and do you remember why Ashpenaz didn't want Daniel refusing the banquet? *"You'll look ill!"* (1:8-10). And now it's reversed. Belshazzar is full of royal wine and he looks terrible! God has penetrated his fortress, and exposed his fantasy world.

And what Belshazzar is hearing (and what we'll hear if we've ears to listen) is a death march being played over Babylon. The Bible is like a great symphony where motifs are introduced and then recapitulated and developed - we hear the first strains of this melody at least as far back as Ge 11 when God's judgement falls on the Tower of Babel (Babylon). It's recapitulated in Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel. And it's played full volume by every instrument of the orchestra in Rev 17-19. And here in Da 5 it's being played for Belshazzar.

Into this confusion steps the Queen / Queen Mother (v.10). Her identity is uncertain - she may even have been the widow of Nebuchadnezzar himself. But she'd been around long enough to remember Daniel, who'd evidently been pensioned off long ago. It's now nearly 70 years since Daniel first interpreted a dream for Nebuchadnezzar. He's now in his eighties, but spiritually he's on the ball and ready to serve God at a moment's notice. She refers to him as "Daniel" - he's kept his identity through all the years. Remember that Daniel means "God is my Judge" - and now the man who remembered that God would be his judge confronts the man who told himself that would never happen.

Belshazzar offers him great rewards, but Daniel's not playing that game (v.17). He'll tell Belshazzar what the writing means, but he gives him a history lesson first (vv.18-23). *"You know your family history. You know what happened to Nebuchadnezzar - how God humbled a far greater king than you'll ever be - and yet you deliberately insulted Him! Instead of bowing to God you set yourself up against Him. You raise the sacred goblet and think you've got God in your hand, but God has got you in HIS hand (v.23)! And now (v.24) His hand*

has appeared and signed your death warrant – and it's all your own fault!" Daniel hammers home Belshazzar's personal responsibility: in v.22-23 the words "you" and "your" are used 15 times – a machine-gun like application.

Belshazzar was *unteachable*. Perhaps you've said to someone, "Will you never learn?" Could God say that to us? It's a great question for the nations as we have our annual remembrance ceremonies – what have we learned from history? But we need to apply it personally: has God found us teachable? Have we learned the lesson of history that God will not be mocked? Or have we been listening to God's word for years and ignoring it? Maybe we've faced a crisis and we've cried out, "Lord, if You get me through this, everything will be Yours" – and we've even forgotten that we said it. We learn so little from our own past history.

But God judges Belshazzar by the information God had made available to him. "You knew!" (v.22) Would God say to people today, "You knew ... but you set yourself up against the Lord of Heaven"? That's exactly the warning of Ro 1:18-32. But setting ourselves up against God is an impossible position to sustain. Because (4:37) those who walk in pride, He humbles ...

## **2. ... HE IS ABLE TO HUMBLE vv.25-31**

God had already delivered His verdict in writing, and now Daniel reads it. He went to university in Babylon to learn to read Chaldean (1:4). And the four words are easy enough – counted, counted, weighed, divided. They're words from the market place. But what's the message? Daniel notices that these words convey three big ideas – like files on your computer – click on them and a whole document opens up. These words are files of divine revelation.

- MENE = "counted / numbered": God has numbered Belshazzar's days, and he's reached his credit limit.
- TEKEL = "weighed": God has weighed Belshazzar's life and found it wanting. Notice that this is judgement based on evidence. Here's human responsibility. God has looked at his life and said "Where's the evidence of faith in me? There's none! The scales are weighed down with your sins!" On the scales of judgement, isn't God right to pass a guilty verdict on Belshazzar?
- PARSIN / PERES (singular) = "divided". Belshazzar's kingdom is in ruins.

Belshazzar has miscalculated badly, hasn't he? He'd numbered his days and thought he had plenty left. He'd weighed his wealth and power, and though he was a heavyweight. He gloried in his kingdom and thought it was secure. But his self-assessment was irrelevant. It's God's assessment that counts. Belshazzar was dead before the night was over, and the Babylonian empire dropped through the trapdoor into the basement of history.

Sobering, isn't it? The book of Daniel is a reminder to us that the writing is on the wall for those who arrogantly set themselves against God. Leaders of nations should read Da 5 every night, and remember that God is able to bring down the biggest leader and the most powerful nation in 60 seconds.

**Is there no good news? There is!**

Of course there is! The kingdoms of this world pass away, but the gospel – the Good News – never passes away. The message of Da 5 is that God is the Judge; but He's such a good God and such a good Judge that he's given us information so we can prepare. He's written the entire Bible so that we can know where life is going – "*you knew!*" (v.22). And because none of us have lived up to what we've known, He's given us a Saviour.

God's human hand was seen again when Jesus lived among us. And the ultimate blasphemy was what we did with God's greatest treasure – His Son. We took Him, beat Him, spat on Him, stripped Him, crucified Him. And God allowed this so that we might become His treasured possession. Wonderfully, on the cross Jesus drank from God's cup – not a golden goblet, but the cup of God's wrath – His judgement on our sins (Mt 26:39) so that we might never drink that cup, but drink instead a cup of joy with Him in His eternal kingdom (Mt 26:29).

And the key to facing the judgement day is to say: "I'm in my Maker's hands, and one day I'm going to be in the Judge's hands, so I'm going to put myself in the Saviour's hands." And you'll find there are wounds in those hands because He's so committed to your rescue that He paid Himself for everything that would keep you from an eternity with Him. He did it on the cross.

And when you put yourself into the hands of the Saviour, you can look in the mirror and say, "Yes, it's true that my days on earth are numbered, but I have eternal life in Christ. And it's true that if I'm weighed, in myself I'm insufficient, but in Christ I have His righteousness so I'll not be found wanting. And it's true that in myself I deserve to be separated from God and have the kingdom taken from me, but in Christ I'm part of God's family forever, and I'll join Him in His eternal kingdom."

Isn't that a wonderful message? God can take a prince like Belshazzar and expose him as a fool. Yet He delights to take a fool like me and make me a prince – a child of the King.

And as the curtain falls on Babylon, the same divine hand holds the curtain open on us for a little longer so that we can see and learn the lesson if we will, and flee to Christ – for the writing is indeed on the wall.

**PRAYER:** Thank You, Father, for the lesson of Daniel 5. Help us, by Your Spirit, so to trust in Christ, that we may always walk humbly before you. Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom, and so come at last to our eternal home with You; for your glory's sake. Amen.

### **FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION**

- When do you act to impress others rather than to honour God? Why?
- "*You knew – but you didn't bow!*" Where does that apply in your life?
- What difference does it make to your life to know that Jesus drank the cup of God's wrath so that you might drink with Him in His eternal kingdom?