

The Book of Daniel

Chapter Five



A significant page is turning in history. Chapter 5 of Daniel details the events just prior to the fall of the Babylonian empire to the Cyrus, king of the Medes and Persians. While history records this event from a secular standpoint, in Daniel we are allowed to witness the spiritual reasons that God brought about a change in world leadership.

5:1-4 – A New King in Town

“Belshazzar the king made a great feast to a thousand of his lords, and drank wine before the thousand. Belshazzar, while he tasted the wine, commanded to bring the golden and silver vessels which his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple which was in Jerusalem; that the king, and his princes, his wives, and his concubines, might drink therein. Then they brought the golden vessels that were taken out of the temple of the house of God which was at Jerusalem; and the king, and his princes, his wives, and his concubines, drank in them. They drank wine, and praised the gods of gold, and of silver, of brass, of iron, of wood, and of stone.”

Who is Belshazzar?

In this passage, Belshazzar is identified as the son of Nebuchadnezzar. While he may have been an actual son of Nebuchadnezzar or even a grandson¹, their exact relationship is unknown. History affords us little insight into Belshazzar’s identity, but what it does tell us about the political state of Babylon brings light to Daniel and is necessary for us to understand all the events of this passage. The Cyrus Cylinder, at right, was discovered by archaeologists in Ninevah, Iraq in 1879. It provides information on what transpired on the night of Belshazzar’s party.



The Cyrus Cylinder

The king of Babylon at the time was Nabonidus. He was the fourth king since the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, the previous kings all having short reigns of four years or less. Overall, Nabonidus enjoyed a reign of seventeen years. Like Nebuchadnezzar, he was not known as a merciful king (Daniel 4:27), but rather a slave-driver that brought oppression by forcing the people to work on his endless building projects. He also did some extensive traveling during his reign and appointed a co-regent, Belshazzar, that remained in Babylonia while Nabonidus went abroad (remember this fact later on in Chapter 5). Therefore, we see Belshazzar in Babylon holding a feast with his lords.

What is interesting is that on this very night, Cyrus, the king of the expanding Medo-Persian empire was outside the city walls of Babylon trying to conquer the city. In fact, Cyrus had been at this for approximately two years. Babylon was surrounded, however, Babylon felt safe. The city was protected by walls that may have been 300 feet high and 75 feet thick. There were 10 years worth of food stored in the city, farms inside the walls that could provide fresh food, and an unending source of water in the Euphrates River, which flowed through the city.

And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess...

One could make a good case for sobriety from this chapter. Belshazzar gathered together his posse for a drinking party during Cyrus’ siege of Babylon. His lords would have consisted of his best soldiers and military leaders that would normally have their eyes turned upon the affairs of the city. What a night for a party! As if this wasn’t enough, they made a bad situation worse by bringing the items from the temple in Jerusalem out and using them as drinking glasses. Where did they get these vessels? (see Daniel 1:2 and Ezra 1:7)

The vessels were taken from the temple in Jerusalem when Nebuchadnezzar invaded Jerusalem and took a number of the Jews, including Daniel, captive. They had remained in Babylon and were distributed to the local houses of their gods for use in their service. This was meant to represent the “superiority” of Babylon’s gods over the God of Israel. It is interesting to note that throughout Nebuchadnezzar’s reign, God made a fool out of the Babylonian gods and showed His superiority to them.

¹ According to Jay Adams & Milton Fisher in The Time of the End, in Arabic, and likely in the related Babylonian tongue of Akkadian, the term “father” has seven different uses and the term “son” has even more.

The Book of Daniel: Chapter Five

What were these vessels and what were they used for (see Ezra 1:7-11 and Hebrews 8:4-5)?

Ezra specifically mentions 5,400 different vessels that were taken back to Jerusalem from Babylon. These included chalices (libation bowls) and basins (covered dish or urn) of gold and silver. The items below are representative of the items taken by Nebuchadnezzar. They are not the originals, but recreations made by the Jewish Temple Institute which hopes to reinstate temple worship if the Jews are able to gain control of the temple mound in Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. These items are meant to be earthly representatives of things in heaven, where God dwells. Note that they may not represent actual physical objects in heaven but represent the spiritual reality of the application of Jesus' sacrifice for the sins of the whole world.



The gold mizrach, the silver cup, and the silver libation vessels²

As we consider Belshazzar's party, we notice several sins, including his drunkenness and pride. However, there are two glaring sins that are especially heinous in light of the circumstances. What are they?

He abused the use of the utensils from the temple and profaned them by drinking wine from them. They were meant to be used to honor the Lord and Belshazzar used them to indulge his sinful appetite and bring glory to himself. Also, as they drank from the utensils, they gave glory to false gods. This was the icing on the cake. The Lord had given the craftsman for these gifts special talents to make them. Belshazzar and his posse gave glory to deaf and dumb gods rather than glorifying the true maker of the equipment.

As we will soon see, Belshazzar is about to lose his kingdom and his very life. In the various depictions of the fall of Babylon recorded in history, the book of Daniel is the only place we learn about Belshazzar's impious feast. Why did God choose to include this perspective on the fall of Babylon in Scripture? (see Daniel 4:17, Genesis 15:13-16 and Ezekiel 33:11)

The human perspective on a situation is often much different than the Divine perspective. We may look at a car crash and think: the result of speeding. To God, that crash might be Divine judgment, a miracle designed to increase faith, or perhaps a trial designed to refine a life. From this narrative, we are allowed a glimpse of the Divine perspective on why Babylon fell. It wasn't that they were outclassed or outnumbered by the Medo-Persians. Their leadership failed to repent of their ways and blasphemed the true God of heaven. Their iniquity was "full" and consequently, God brought another empire to power and allowed them to overtake Babylon. Truly this ties into the theme of Daniel stated in Daniel 3:17.

5:5-9 – The Handwriting on the Wall

"In the same hour came forth fingers of a man's hand, and wrote over against the candlestick upon the plaister of the wall of the king's palace: and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote. Then the king's countenance was changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his loins were loosed, and his knees smote one against another. The king cried aloud to bring in the astrologers, the Chaldeans, and the soothsayers. [And] the king spake, and said to the wise [men] of Babylon, Whosoever shall read this writing, and shew me the interpretation thereof, shall be clothed with scarlet, and [have] a chain of gold about his

² To view additional pictures of recreated temple items, visit www.templeinstitute.org

The Book of Daniel: Chapter Five

neck, and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom. Then came in all the king's wise [men]: but they could not read the writing, nor make known to the king the interpretation thereof. Then was king Belshazzar greatly troubled, and his countenance was changed in him, and his lords were astonished."

Describe the dramatic change in the king's countenance recounted for us in this text.

He went from "party" mode to a total state of fear and physical shock. Thoughts began racing across his mind and they weren't comforting. He knew that something horrible was happening. His strength was depleted (joints of loins were loosened) and his body began to involuntarily shake (knees knocked together). Some recount that the loosening of the loins indicates that he was so scared that he wet himself. Due to his inebriated state and condition of shock, it was likely.

What was Belshazzar's solution to the dilemma? Did it work?

Like Nebuchadnezzar, when a significant problem presented itself, he called in the "wise" men and motivated them with a high prize. Like we have seen time and time again, the wisdom of this world cannot begin to fathom the wisdom of God. They have no interpretation to offer Belshazzar and he is left effectively at his wit's end.

What is the prize Belshazzar offered? Does it fit with the historical background provided earlier in the lesson? Belshazzar offered the interpreter of the writing the position as the third ruler in Babylon. He was the second ruler and Nabonidus was the first ruler. This very important detail shows the impeccable historical accuracy of God's Word. It is amazing that the complete history of Babylon was lost for hundreds of years and people questioned the accuracy of Daniel because Belshazzar is not recorded as the final king of Babylon. However, this detail in Daniel remained and as archaeologists unearthed additional details, it became clear that there was a second in command in Babylon. Daniel had it right from the beginning!

Why wasn't Daniel called along with Belshazzar's other wise men? (see 1 Kings 12:1-15)

It was common among rulers to choose their own advisers when they came into power. Nebuchadnezzar trained up new wise men like Daniel when he came into power. Belshazzar apparently forsook at least some of the wise men that served Nebuchadnezzar and placed others into power around him. Daniel had enjoyed a position of prominence and power under the reign of Nebuchadnezzar. It now appears, however, that he was demoted and was no longer employed by the current king. This was a poor choice on Belshazzar's part.

How could Belshazzar be described at the end of this passage?

He was at the end of his rope. He didn't know what else to do and he was scared to death. His lords were astonished, partly because of the handwriting on the wall and partly because of Belshazzar's reaction to the situation. They likely felt hopeless as well.

5:10-12 – A Good Name is Rather to be Chosen than Great Riches

"[Now] the queen, by reason of the words of the king and his lords, came into the banquet house: [and] the queen spake and said, O king, live for ever: let not thy thoughts trouble thee, nor let thy countenance be changed: There is a man in thy kingdom, in whom [is] the spirit of the holy gods; and in the days of thy father light and understanding and wisdom, like the wisdom of the gods, was found in him; whom the king Nebuchadnezzar thy father, the king, [I say], thy father, made master of the magicians, astrologers, Chaldeans, [and] soothsayers; Forasmuch as an excellent spirit, and knowledge, and understanding, interpreting of dreams, and shewing of hard sentences, and dissolving of doubts, were found in the same Daniel, whom the king named Belteshazzar: now let Daniel be called, and he will shew the interpretation".

Apparently the queen wasn't part of Belshazzar's feast. We don't know whether this is Belshazzar's wife, perhaps his mother or grandmother (Nebuchadnezzar's wife) or even perhaps the wife of Nabonidus. However, she has some important institutional memory and was therefore probably not Belshazzar's wife. When word got around of the desperate situation, she didn't fret but went to Belshazzar and passed along the name of a man that could resolve this situation. What does this teach us about our reputation?

Even though Daniel had been demoted and no longer enjoyed the power and influence that he once held over Nebuchadnezzar, his reputation remained. This is a great testimony to Daniel's testimony. He lived and worked in such a manner that he gained favor with God and men. Even though he was out of sight, he was not out of mind and the Lord pulled him right back to the forefront when the time was right.

The Book of Daniel: Chapter Five

5:13-16 – A Tempting Offer

“Then was Daniel brought in before the king. [And] the king spake and said unto Daniel, [Art] thou that Daniel, which [art] of the children of the captivity of Judah, whom the king my father brought out of Jewry? I have even heard of thee, that the spirit of the gods [is] in thee, and [that] light and understanding and excellent wisdom is found in thee. And now the wise [men], the astrologers, have been brought in before me, that they should read this writing, and make known unto me the interpretation thereof: but they could not shew the interpretation of the thing: And I have heard of thee, that thou canst make interpretations, and dissolve doubts: now if thou canst read the writing, and make known to me the interpretation thereof, thou shalt be clothed with scarlet, and [have] a chain of gold about thy neck, and shalt be the third ruler in the kingdom.”

Apparently, this is the first time that Belshazzar and Daniel met. Belshazzar appears to have some knowledge about Daniel's past. Most of what he says is a reiteration of the queen's statement, but he also mentions Daniel's ethnicity (Jewish) and his deportation by Nebuchadnezzar. As we stated earlier, it is likely that Daniel was demoted by Belshazzar, Nabonidus, or a previous ruler after Nebuchadnezzar's death. What does Belshazzar mean when he offers Daniel the position of the “third ruler in the kingdom”?

As we previously mentioned, Belshazzar was the second ruler in the kingdom and therefore could not offer the first now would offer the second position. However, he could set someone else under him and that position was offered to Daniel.

Given what we know about what will happen later on this very day, should Daniel accept the offer?

No! The kingdom was to fall that very night. Becoming the third ruler in a kingdom that is about to be conquered is not much of a gift.

5:17-23 – Daniel's Response

“Then Daniel answered and said before the king, Let thy gifts be to thyself, and give thy rewards to another; yet I will read the writing unto the king, and make known to him the interpretation. O thou king, the most high God gave Nebuchadnezzar thy father a kingdom, and majesty, and glory, and honour: And for the majesty that he gave him, all people, nations, and languages, trembled and feared before him: whom he would he slew; and whom he would he kept alive; and whom he would he set up; and whom he would he put down. But when his heart was lifted up, and his mind hardened in pride, he was deposed from his kingly throne, and they took his glory from him: And he was driven from the sons of men; and his heart was made like the beasts, and his dwelling [was] with the wild asses: 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 ruled in the kingdom of men, and [that] he appointeth over it whomsoever he will. And thou his son, O Belshazzar, hast not humbled thine heart, though thou knewest all this; But hast lifted up thyself against the Lord of heaven; and they have brought the vessels of his house before thee, and thou, and thy lords, thy wives, and thy concubines, have drunk wine in them; and thou hast praised the gods of silver, and gold, of brass, iron, wood, and stone, which see not, nor hear, nor know: and the God in whose hand thy breath [is], and whose [are] all thy ways, hast thou not glorified:

What did Daniel demonstrate by refusing the gifts from Belshazzar?

Daniel's allegiance could not be bought. He used his gift from the Lord without requiring earthly recompense. He knew that His Lord would repay Him with treasures beyond what Belshazzar could offer.

Daniel made six accusations against Belshazzar. Fill in the blanks below.

1. He did not **humble** his heart
2. He **knew** what happened to Nebuchadnezzar and didn't **respond** to it.
3. He **boasted** himself against God
4. He **abused** the temple implements
5. He **worshipped** deaf and dumb idol

The Book of Daniel: Chapter Five

6. He did not glorify the God of heaven

One of the most prominent lessons from this chapter is found in this passage. The Lord spoke in several miraculous ways to Nebuchadnezzar, giving him multiple opportunities to witness His power and majesty. Eventually, Nebuchadnezzar repented and found salvation. We know from 2 Peter 3:9 that the Lord is not willing that any should perish in hell. This includes Belshazzar. From the little we know of Belshazzar, he does not seem to be given the amazing opportunities that Nebuchadnezzar was given of God. Why not? How does God hold him accountable?

We know that Daniel, an amazingly wise and godly man had been “shelved” by Belshazzar or another king. In doing so, they were rejecting a reliable mouthpiece of God. Rather than rejecting men of God, Nebuchadnezzar promoted them and placed them in important positions in his kingdom. God’s Word is a sufficient source for judgment. Belshazzar knew what the Lord did to Nebuchadnezzar but he still persisted in sin. This is a strong statement against those who refuse to hear the wisdom of their father (Proverbs 2:1-5) but have to learn by “experience”. What an opportunity is wasted to go farther for the Lord when men refuse to stand upon the shoulders of others and have to learn everything the hard way – if they ever learn... The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord (Proverbs 9:10).

What is the application of this principle? today (See John 12:48)

Jesus said that a wicked and adulterous generation seeks a sign (Matthew 16:4). Men have challenged the existence and the power of God over and over again throughout history and demanded signs and wonders. God has provided sufficient revelation to man of His existence in His creation (Psalm 19:1) and of His purpose for man in His Word (Psalm 119:105). All of these things are miracles in and of themselves, but man’s spiritual eyes are blind and they worship the creation rather than the creator. Nevertheless, this Word is sufficient and it will stand in judgment on the last day!

5:24-28 – MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN

“Then was the part of the hand sent from him; and this writing was written. And this [is] the writing that was written, MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN. This [is] the interpretation of the thing: MENE; God hath numbered thy kingdom, and finished it. TEKEL; Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting. PERES; Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians.”

In all probability, this message was written in the ancient Hebrew language, which would not be known by the Babylonians. However, this would be Daniel’s native language. The words themselves are Chaldean, which is the Babylonian native tongue. Their literal definitions are as follows:

MENE – Number

TEKEL – Weigh

PERES³ / UPHARSIN – Division / Divisions

Daniel tells us that the first word, MENE, means that God has numbered his kingdom and finished it. What does this mean and why was it repeated twice?

It means that the days of the Babylonian Empire were numbered, that is they were finite, not infinite. The repetition implies that their number was up.

The next word, TEKEL, is said to mean that Belshazzar was weighed in the balances and found wanting. What does this mean?

God looked at Belshazzar’s heart and found that it wasn’t pure. His sin and pride were rampant and there was not even a modicum of respect for the Lord.

Finally, PERES / UPHARSIN, indicates that the kingdom is now divided and was going to be given to the Medes and the Persians.

³ Note that the word, “PERES” is the singular form of “UPHARSIN”.

The Book of Daniel: Chapter Five

Bible prophecy concerning the conquer of Babylon

The fall of Babylon should not have been a surprise to those who believed in and were studied in the revealed Word of God. The Lord had revealed its demise in prophecy over one hundred years before the events of this night unfolded. Belshazzar's feast occurred in 539 B.C. Read the following prophecies from Isaiah, given sometime before 681 B.C. and discuss their fulfillment.

Isaiah 13:1, 17-22

What nation would rise against Babylon?

The Medes are specifically mentioned in this passage.

What would be the future state of Babylon?

It would become desolate, a place where no one dwells.

Concerning the current state of Babylon, the Encarta On-Line Encyclopedia says⁴, "The Neo-Babylonian Empire was of short duration. In 539 bc, Cyrus the Great captured Babylon and incorporated Babylonia into the newly founded Persian Empire. Under the Persians, Babylon for a time served as the official residence of the crown prince, until a local revolt in 482 led Xerxes I to raze the temples and ziggurat (temple tower) and to melt down the statue of the patron god Marduk. Alexander the Great captured the city in 330 BC and planned to rebuild it and make it the capital of his vast empire, but he died before he could carry out his plans. After 312 bc, Babylon was for a while used as a capital by the Seleucid dynasty set up by Alexander's successors. When the new capital of Seleucia on the Tigris was founded in the early 3rd century BC, however, most of Babylon's population was moved there. The temples continued in use for a time, but the city became insignificant and almost disappeared before the coming of Islam in the 7th century ad."

It is interesting to note that Saddam Hussein has a great respect for King Nebuchadnezzar and felt that he was Nebuchadnezzar's contemporary. He rebuilt the Southern portion of Nebuchadnezzar's palace, including the throne room where the events of this chapter unfolded. However, his plans to rebuild Babylon failed due to the US invasion of Iraq.

Isaiah 44:28-45:4

Who is prophesied by name to lead the rebuilding of Israel?

Cyrus the Great was prophesied as the one who would allow the rebuilding of Israel.

How would this man conquer his enemy?

The Lord would "loosen the loins of kings", and leave the gates of the city open so that he could enter them. Essentially, the Lord would prepare the way before him. This is what we will see recorded by the Greek historian, Herodotus.

I also believe the following passage from Jeremiah was written around 593 to 594 B.C., concurrently with the events of Chapter 3 of Daniel.

Jeremiah 51:27-64

Looking at this passage, what was the motivation for the Lord to destroy Babylon?

To deliver the people of Israel from their captivity in Babylon. Also, the Lord was punishing Babylon for its idolatry and wickedness.

5:29-31 – The End of an Era

"Then commanded Belshazzar, and they clothed Daniel with scarlet, and [put] a chain of gold about his neck, and made a proclamation concerning him, that he should be the third ruler in the kingdom. In that night was Belshazzar the king of the Chaldeans slain. And Darius the Median took the kingdom, [being] about threescore and two years old."

⁴ Babylon (ancient city)," Microsoft® Encarta® Online Encyclopedia 2005; <http://encarta.msn.com> © 1997-2005 Microsoft Corporation. All Rights Reserved

The Book of Daniel: Chapter Five

Belshazzar ignored Daniel's refusal of his offer and made him the third ruler in final hours of the Babylonian Empire. A few hours later, Belshazzar was killed and Cyrus, took Babylon. The following excerpt comes from the Greek Historian Herodotus concerning the capture of Babylon:

"Cyrus... then advanced against Babylon. But the Babylonians, having taken the field, awaited his coming; and when he had advanced near the city, the Babylonians gave battle, and, being defeated, were shut up in the city. But as they had been long aware of the restless spirit of Cyrus, and saw that he attacked all nations alike, they had laid up provisions for many years, and therefore were under no apprehensions about a siege. On the other hand, Cyrus found himself in difficulty, since much time had elapsed, and his affairs were not at all advanced. Whether, therefore, someone else made the suggestion to him in his perplexity, or whether he himself devised the plan, he had recourse to the following stratagem. Having stationed the bulk of his army near the passage of the river where it enters Babylon, and again having stationed another division beyond the city, where the river makes its exit, he gave order to his forces to enter the city as soon as they should see the stream fordable. Having stationed his forces and given these directions, he himself marched away with the ineffective part of his army; and having come to the lake, Cyrus did the same with respect to the river and the lake as the queen of the Babylonians had done; for having diverted the river, by means of a canal, into the lake, which was before a swamp, he made the ancient channel fordable by the sinking of the river. When this took place, the Persians who were appointed to that purpose close to the stream of the river, which had now subsided to about the middle of a man's thigh, entered Babylon by this passage. If, however, the Babylonians had been aware of it beforehand, or had known what Cyrus was about, they would not have suffered the Persians to enter the city, but would have utterly destroyed them; for, having shut all the little gates that lead to the river, and mounting the walls that extend along the banks of the river, they would have caught them as in a net; whereas the Persians camp upon them by surprise. It is related by the people who inhabited the city, that by reason of its great extent, when they who were at the extremities were taken, those of the Babylonians who inhabited the centre knew nothing of the capture (for it happened to be a festival); but they were dancing at the time, and enjoying themselves, till they received certain information of the truth. And thus Babylon was taken for the first time."

Items for Discussion:

What is a major lesson we can learn from this chapter?

Seek the Lord while He may be found. God provided ample revelation, resources, and time for the leaders of Babylon to see the error of their ways and turn to Him. Yet they rejected His counsel and thumbed their noses at Him. God is patient, but not infinitely patient.