

THE MOVING FINGER WRITES



Daniel 5:1-31
 Fifth Message
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 August 15, 2021

SERIES: ONE KING TO RULE THEM ALL

More than thirty years ago a friend gave me a copy of the children's book, *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* (1972), writing on the inside front cover, "Just to encourage you that there are others in the same boat." I cannot remember what my situation was back then. But this book came to mind this last week, so I pulled it off our shelf. For Alexander the day started badly from the moment he woke up: "I could tell it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day." At the end of the day, back in bed, he says, "It has been a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. My mom says some days are like that."

I was thinking of this book, not because I was having a bad day, but because I was thinking about King Belshazzar. Unlike Alexander, his day started out very well, but ended up being a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day, a day very much worse than Alexander's bad day. It was the worst day of his life. Indeed, it was the last day of his life, of his reign, and of the entire Babylonian Empire. How did a day that started so well go so horribly wrong?

The first four chapters of Daniel have been about King Nebuchadnezzar. But in chapter 5 we encounter a new king, Belshazzar. Who is he? Nebuchadnezzar was the second king of the neo-Babylonian Empire. Technically he was Nebuchadnezzar II, but no one remembers the "II" part. He was Nebuchadnezzar the Great, Babylon's greatest king. It was he who took the Jews into captivity in Babylon. Thus he was the first king of the Jewish exile in Babylon. He ruled for 43 years (605-562 BC). In the six years after his death there were four different kings, with the fourth, Nabonidus, being a usurper who seized the throne. After ruling in Babylon for a while he went on an extended vacation, spending ten years at an oasis in the Arabian desert. No one knows why. He left his son Belshazzar in charge in Babylon. This Belshazzar was, in effect, the king. And we'll see that he was the last king.

Chapters 2-7 of Daniel are arranged chiastically in an A,B,C, C',B',A' pattern, in which chapters 2 and 7 are paired, as are 3 and 6, and 4 and 5.

- A. Vision of 4-part statue: 4 kings/kingdoms (2)
- B. Three Jews in blazing fiery furnace (3)
- C. Nebuchadnezzar's humbling (4)
- C'. Belshazzar's humbling (5)
- B'. Daniel in lions' den (6)
- A'. Vision of 4 beasts: 4 kings/kingdoms (7)

So in these next three weeks we will revisit themes of chapters 2-4 but in reverse order. Today's chapter 5 is the counterpart of chapter 4. This means that King Belshazzar of chapter 5 is paired with King Nebuchadnezzar of chapter 4. Does he compare well?

Though dead, Nebuchadnezzar looms large over this chapter. Repeatedly Belshazzar is confronted with him. Repeatedly Nebuchadnezzar is described as Belshazzar's father. Strictly speaking he was not: Belshazzar's father was Nabonidus, lounging in his desert oasis. But father-son language is used more freely in Semitic languages. In the context of the Book of Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar

was his father as king of Babylon. Repeatedly we are invited to compare these two kings, Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar, as father and son. More particularly, an overachieving father and his underachieving son. But in the end the comparison concerns their attitude to God, the one true God, the God of Daniel and his three friends Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. It's a comparison between the first and the last kings of the Babylonian exile.

Belshazzar's Feast (5:1-4)

King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine with them. While Belshazzar was drinking his wine, he gave orders to bring in the gold and silver goblets that Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken from the temple in Jerusalem, so that the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines might drink from them. (Dan 5:1-2 NIV)

King Belshazzar made a great feast. Straight away the memory of Nebuchadnezzar is evoked, for chapter 3 begins, "King Nebuchadnezzar made a gold image" (3:1). On that occasion Nebuchadnezzar summoned all the imperial officials to the dedication of the image, and commanded all nations, peoples and languages to bow down and worship that image. Here Belshazzar gathers his nobles, his wives and his concubines for a drinking party. He commanded that the Jewish temple vessels be brought so they could drink wine from them. These are the vessels brought from Jerusalem. Brought by whom? By Nebuchadnezzar his father—here's the first of the many references to his "father." Nebuchadnezzar had placed these vessels in the treasury of his god in Babylon. He treated them as sacred. But Belshazzar his son intends to desecrate them.

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. As they drank the wine, they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone. (5:3-4)

Belshazzar carried through with his plan. He defiled the sacred vessels in two ways: by using them as wine goblets in his feast, and by praising the idols, the gods of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood and stone. He used the vessels intended for the worship of the one true God to worship created images that represent non-gods, something that his father would never have done.

Right from the start, the chapter compares Belshazzar unfavorably with Nebuchadnezzar his father. But in Belshazzar's mind his day was going very well. He was surrounded by *his* nobles, *his* wives, *his* concubines, many of each, with himself at the center. He was having a great day.

The Writing on the Wall (5:5-9)

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. His face turned pale and

he was so frightened that his legs became weak and his knees were knocking. (5:5-6)

Suddenly, at that very moment, when Belshazzar and his revelers were praising the false gods with wine served in the true God's sacred vessels! At that very moment, fingers appeared out of nowhere and wrote on the wall, as the king watched. His reaction is described in four ways. His countenance changed: his face went pale. His thoughts were alarming him. "His legs became weak" (NIV), but this is a considerable under-translation. The text is literally "the knots of his loins were loosened," which CSB is bold enough to translate as "he soiled himself," which I think is about right. Finally, he was shaking so badly that his knees were knocking together. His day of celebration had suddenly taken a turn for the worse. His terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day had begun.

What was the king to do? He did what his father Nebuchadnezzar had done: he called in the experts.

The king summoned the enchanters, astrologers 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."

Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or tell the king what it meant. So King Belshazzar became even more terrified and his face grew more pale. His nobles were baffled. (5:7-9)

The king wanted the magicians to do two things: read the writing and provide the interpretation. Why did he want them to read the writing? This suggests he couldn't read it himself. The inscription would have been written without vowels, just consonants, so reading would require providing the correct vowels. Despite the great rewards offered by the king, the magicians were unable either to read or to interpret the message. By now this is what we've come to expect of these magicians. In light of their failure Belshazzar was even more shaken. His day was steadily getting worse.

The Queen's Speech (5:10-12)

Next, a formidable woman entered: the queen, or more probably, the queen mother. She had not been invited to the feast.

The queen, 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! 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. He did this because Daniel, whom the king called Beltshazzar, 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." (5:10-12)

"May the king live forever!" She wanted to help. "Don't be so alarmed. The help you need is right here at hand." But then she reminded this king about his father the king. King Nebuchadnezzar knew what to do when the magicians failed. He would call in Daniel, because he knew that the spirit of the holy gods was in him, which we heard three times in chapter 4 (vv. 8, 9, 18). So, do what your father did: call for Daniel and he'll tell you the meaning of the

writing.

The queen mother was trying to help, and indeed she provided the right help. But I'm sure her suggestion made Belshazzar's bad day even worse, by comparing him unfavorably to his father. He does not seem eager to accept her suggestion, to copy his father, because we do not read that Belshazzar called for Daniel. Nevertheless, Daniel was brought in, and Belshazzar addressed him.

Belshazzar's Speech (5:13-16)

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? I have heard that the spirit of the gods is in you and that you have insight, intelligence and outstanding wisdom. 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. 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." (5:13-16)

The king addressed him in a derogatory manner: "Oh, you're Daniel, one of the exiles my father the king brought from Judah." You're one of those refugees, a displaced person. You're not one of us. You're a nobody. Then, rather than saying, as his father had, "I know that the spirit of the gods is in you," he said, "I've heard about you: that the spirit of the gods is in you; that you have illumination, insight and wisdom." He's only just heard this, because this is exactly what the queen mother has just told him (v. 11). He next complains of the inability of the magicians. Then again he said, "I've heard about you: that you can give interpretations and solve difficult problems." Again this is what the queen mother has just told him (v. 12). In the final sentence Nebuchadnezzar would have said to Daniel, "Read this writing and tell me what it means," confident that Daniel could do so. But his son lacks this confidence: "If you can read this writing and tell me what it means." He promises the same extravagant reward that he promised to the magicians.

It is clear from this speech that Belshazzar knows about Daniel, but has chosen not to know him. Daniel has been forgotten, sidelined, marginalized, excluded. Yet again Belshazzar pales in comparison with his father Nebuchadnezzar who valued Daniel so highly. Did the Jews as a whole also feel this way? That God had forgotten them, that he no longer saw them? As the exile dragged on was there any hope for being re-included in God's purposes? Did God remember them? Would he be faithful to his promises to bring an end to that exile and bring them home? I'm sure that Daniel, during all the years that he was ignored by the king, was wondering what his purpose was.

Daniel's Speech (5:17-28)

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." (5:17)

Daniel declined Belshazzar's promised rewards, which left him free to speak his mind. And speak his mind is what he intended to do. Nevertheless, he would read the writing and tell the king its meaning. But first he had some pointed things to say to the king.

"Your Majesty, the Most High God gave your father

Nebuchadnezzar sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendor. Because of the high 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. But when his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory. 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.” (5:18-21)

Daniel starts by respectfully addressing Belshazzar as “You, O king.” Then, translating more literally, especially the word order, he continues, “The Most High God sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendor gave...” Gave to whom? We have to wait to the very end of the sentence to find out to whom God has given these things. Not to you, Belshazzar, but “to Nebuchadnezzar your father.” Ouch! He was the great king, not you! In his greatness he was feared by all nations and peoples of every language, terms we’ve heard several times before. He acted like God: killing and letting live, raising up and putting down as he wished. But Nebuchadnezzar had to learn that he was not God. He had to learn that his sovereignty, greatness and splendor were not his own doing, but were given to him by God.

So the Lord humbled him until he acknowledged that it is the Most High God who is sovereign. This is what the previous three chapters have been about, especially chapter 4. Nebuchadnezzar was ultimately responsive. It was a hard lesson, it took extreme measures, but he did eventually humbly acknowledge God’s sovereignty over all earthly kingdoms. Therefore, Nebuchadnezzar your father was a great king, even in God’s sight. After reviewing the positive example of Nebuchadnezzar the father, Daniel now turns to Belshazzar the son:

“But you, Belshazzar, his son, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this. 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. Therefore he sent the hand that wrote the inscription.” (5:22-24)

“But you, his son, Belshazzar.” Here we go again! The son is compared to the father and found wanting. “You have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this.” Belshazzar knew what had happened to Nebuchadnezzar, and he knew what he should have done. In the case of Nebuchadnezzar, his specific assault on the Most High was to stand on the roof of his palace, look out over Babylon the Great, and boast, “Is not this the great Babylon I have built by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?” (4:30). In the case of Belshazzar, his specific assault on the Lord of heaven was to have the temple vessels from Jerusalem brought to him and his revelers so they could drink wine from them and show their allegiance to their so-called gods which are no gods at all. For this sacrilege and for not honoring the true God, God himself has sent the hand that wrote the inscription.

Only after this stinging indictment is Daniel ready to read the

inscription and give its meaning. In giving this indictment Daniel is functioning as a prophet, not in the sense of foretelling the future, but of bringing God’s word. Though he does not say, “Thus says the Lord,” it is clear that he is delivering the divine verdict on Belshazzar and his sin.

Now we are ready for the inscription and its meaning:

“This is the inscription that was written:

MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN” (5:25)

Daniel is able to read the consonants on the wall and turn them into words. He supplies the vowels for the consonants, reading the words as nouns. *Mene, Tekel, Parsin*: these are units of weight and of monetary value. *Mene* is Hebrew *mina* that occurs in both OT and NT. *Tekel* is Hebrew *shekel*, which even today is the unit of Israeli currency. *Parsin* is the dual form of the singular *peres*, meaning “divided in half,” so two *peres*, two halves, either two half-minas or two half-shekels. This is the reading of the words.

Next Daniel interprets the three words, and now he reads them as verbs:

“Here is what these words mean:

Mene : God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end.

Tekel : You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting.

Peres : Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.” (5:26-28)

Read as verbs the three words *mene, tekel* and *peres* mean *numbered, weighed* and *divided*. In the third word there is an additional wordplay with the word for Persian.

Your days are numbered. You’ve been weighed in the balance and found wanting. The writing is on the wall. These three expressions have all entered into our vernacular today as familiar idioms. Belshazzar does not measure up to great Nebuchadnezzar. God used Nebuchadnezzar as his instrument of judgment upon sinful Judah. The great king captured Jerusalem, destroyed the temple, palace and city walls, and took the leading people captive to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar thought he was acting on his own initiative, that he was the one with agency. But at the beginning of the book of Daniel we were told that it was the Lord who delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, together with the temple vessels (1:2). It took four chapters for Nebuchadnezzar to really learn this, that his own sovereignty was delegated from a higher sovereign, from God Most High, and that his accomplishments were gifts from God. But Belshazzar was not like his father Nebuchadnezzar, as we’ve been repeatedly told in this chapter. He did not humble himself. Therefore his time was up. And Babylon’s time was up. His days are numbered. He’s been weighed in the balance and found wanting. The writing is on the wall.

I took my title for this sermon from the first line of a quatrain, a four-line stanza, attributed to the Persian poet Omar Khayyam (1048-1131):

The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it.¹

It is written. No word can be erased. The writing on the wall was indelible. Belshazzar could not erase it.

The End (5:29-31)

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.

That very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain, and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom, at the age of sixty-two. (5:29-31)

As Belshazzar had been partying with his many nobles, wives and concubines, the Medes and Persians had been tightening a noose around Babylon—Babylon the Great, thought to be invincible, secure behind its great walls. In the middle of the night they entered the city without opposition, captured the city, killed the king and ended the Babylonian Empire. In just a matter of hours Babylon the Great had fallen. Just 23 years after the reign of Nebuchadnezzar the Great, it was all over. Babylon the city continued but now as just another city within a new empire, the Persian Empire whose capital was elsewhere. Darius took over the kingdom, or better, he received the kingdom. For in the unseen realm it was God who brought this about.

It was God who gave Jerusalem into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, along with King Jehoiakim and the temple vessels. It was God who gave Babylon into the hands of the Medes and Persians. It was God who was at work at the beginning and the end of the exile of his people in Babylon. Soon Cyrus the Persian allowed the captive Jews to return home to rebuild the temple and to repatriate the temple vessels.

At the beginning and the end of the exile God was being faithful to his covenant with his people. At the beginning of the exile he was faithful by bringing judgment upon his people for breach of covenant. They had broken that covenant and he would not allow that to happen without consequences. King Nebuchadnezzar was his instrument of judgment. At the end of the exile he was faithful by bringing his people home as he had promised. He brought judgment upon Belshazzar the king and upon Babylon the Great. Therefore it could be said of the Lord, "Give thanks to the LORD for he is good; his loyal love (*hesed*) endures forever." These words closed out our call to worship:

give thanks to him and praise his name.

For the LORD is good and his love endures forever;

his faithfulness continues through all generations.

(Ps 100:4b-5)

These stories of Daniel helped sustain God's people as they lived under a succession of pagan empires. How did Nebuchadnezzar come to know the one true God and acknowledge that he himself was not God? Because of four Jews living in Babylon who remained faithful to their God at great risk to their own lives. There would be other Jews living in subsequent empires who also remained faithful to God: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther. How did Belshazzar, a king who trivialized the one true God and his faithful servant Daniel, come face-to-face with God? He paid God and his people no attention, but God confronted him with that writing on the wall. And Daniel was faithful even though it seemed that he had been forgotten for many years. God called his people to be faithful, even when they were not in the Land. And God would show himself faithful to his covenant.

We gather on Sunday mornings to pay attention to God, the one true God who has shown his covenant faithfulness supremely in the Lord Jesus Christ. We gather to humbly remind ourselves that we are not God. During the week we tend to become self-centered, and come to believe that what we have is through our own accomplishments. But on Sunday we come collectively before God and remind ourselves that we are not God, and that God is God. We reaffirm that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is sovereign. We gather to give thanks for he is good; his loyal love endures forever. His loyal love endured throughout the Babylonian exile. His love endures through our situations: through the pandemic, through our own grief and heartache, through our terrible, horrible, no good, very bad days as well as through our days of joy and gladness. His loyal love endures when we feel forgotten and marginalized. He is faithful to his purposes.

These stories in Daniel also cultivated in his people the appetite for God's eternal kingdom. A kingdom that would not be like the Babylonian Empire, or the Persian Empire, or the Greek Empire, or the Roman Empire. We will get a glimpse of this eternal kingdom in chapter 7. There is a king who is fit to sit on the throne of God's kingdom, even our Lord Jesus Christ. We gather on Sundays to pay attention to him, to sing our praises to him, to acclaim him as King of kings and Lord of lords, and know that his kingdom is eternal.

We gather on Sundays also to affirm that God is a generous God who gives. What we have is not our own accomplishments, but the gift of God, as Nebuchadnezzar had to learn.

We have seen the advice of two mothers. Alexander's mother who said "Some days are like that." Some days are terrible, horrible, no good, very bad days. I know some of us feel this way as we endure the pandemic which goes on and on. Some face ill health. Others are grieving the loss of loved ones. There are days that are like that because here on earth we are not yet into that final eternal kingdom. But God has not forgotten us. He sees us just as he saw Daniel and his three friends in Babylon. He is able to sustain us.

The second mother is the queen mother who said to Belshazzar, "There is a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods in him." There is someone to whom we can turn. Not a human king, not an earthly sage. We have one far greater, even the Lord Jesus Christ himself, who is in God's very presence, interceding for us. Through him we can pray, knowing that we have the Father's ear. The Lord Jesus understands: he knows our struggles, our weakness, our grief, our heartache. And so we take it all to him in prayer, to our advocate, to our representative in God's presence. And we avail ourselves of the Holy Spirit whom God has poured into our hearts to be his presence with us.

Then we go out as ambassadors of this great king, seeking to flourish in whatever environment we find ourselves, whether that be conducive or difficult. Just as Daniel and his three friends flourished in the difficult environment of Babylon.

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever. Amen.

1. Edward J. Fitzgerald, *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (1859).

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