

Finger of God Writes

Mene Mene Tekel Upharsin

I pray that you have been enjoying our study in the book of Daniel. It has been both an encouraging and challenging book at times. Our study is in Daniel, chapter 5. Between Daniel chapters 4 and 5, there is a gap of about twenty-three years. Historical records tell us there were four kings that reigned over the neo-Babylonian empire during those years. Three of them lived and reigned during a period of six years (Evilmerodach, Neriglissar, and Labasli-marduk). One of the kings, the last one in our study, was Belshazzar, the son of Nabonidus. He became king in 556 B.C. Then he reigned for seventeen years until 539 B.C., which is where we are in Daniel 5.

Daniel Is Historically Accurate. The date is October 12, 539 B.C. Daniel 5:1 is the first verse of our text.

Belshazzar the king held a great feast for a thousand of his nobles, and he was drinking wine in the presence of the thousand.

Daniel 5:1 (NASB)

There are a number of things I want you to see in this verse. First of all, we are told of a man named Belshazzar, who is the king. Critics over the centuries have ridiculed the book of Daniel for supposedly creating Belshazzar. They say that

there was no king known as Belshazzar. Critics have said this is a fictitious name, and that Daniel just invented him for his story. They claimed that there has been no archaeological proof that Belshazzar ever existed. That would be a great blow to the credibility of the book of Daniel and to the Word of God if anyone believed that. That would mean we cannot trust the Bible and the book of Daniel. At the time the critics first said there was no archaeological proof, they were correct. There was not yet any archaeological support.

But in 1881, there was a discovery in the temple of the sun god in Sippar, Iraq, the Nabonidus Cylinder was discovered. The cylinder is clay and it has cuneiform impressions all over it. Archaeologists started translating it, and they found the

name Belshazzar. Anyone is on very dangerous grounds when they start criticizing the Bible and claiming the Bible is not true because they have no yet found proof for a statement made in the Bible. It is a little embarrassing when you discover that



you are wrong! The critics found out they were wrong. In fact, there were thirty-seven different cuneiform clay tablets on which the name Belshazzar appeared.¹ There is much evidence that Belshazzar existed. The critics then just invented

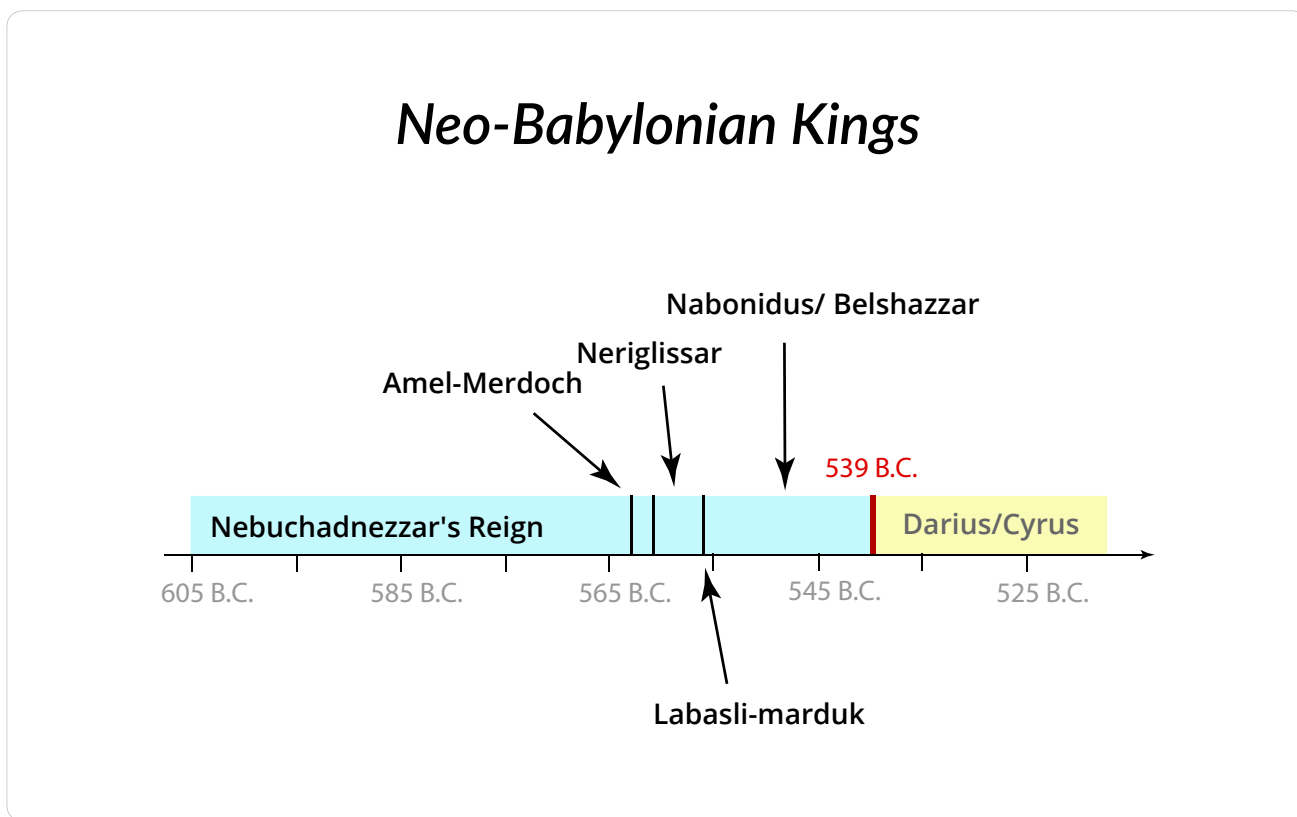
¹ Paul-Alain Beaulieu. The Reign of Nabonidus King of Babylon: 556-539 BC. 1985. pp. 156-157.

another criticism, because they are not really looking for evidence to believe. They are looking for evidence to not believe.

It is not just recent critics that have criticized the book of Daniel for having invented the name Belshazzar, but secular historians, such as Herodotus, who lived about 484-425 B.C. He confused the father of Belshazzar with Belshazzar, himself. He called both of them Labynetus, in the Greek.² That is, he did not know about Belshazzar. Amazingly, Herodotus lived only about a hundred years after the events here in Daniel 5. Do you realize what that means about the author

prophecies that follow are true prophecies because the book had to be written near 539 B.C. It was a great discovery that proves the book of Daniel is God's prophetic word.

In Deuteronomy 18, God said that if He has a prophet who speaks, you will know that he is a prophet of God because what he says comes true. What the critics have wanted us to believe for years is that the book of Daniel was written after the fact and is just recorded history. The Nabonidus Cylinder proves to us that the book of Daniel is prophecy and that God has spoken.



of the book of Daniel? If he had lived in the 400 B.C. era, he would *not* have known about Belshazzar. If he had written after the time of Christ, he would not have known about Belshazzar. He had to have written during the 500 BC era, during the time that the events occurred to have known about Belshazzar. Do you realize what that means about the authenticity and the authorship of Daniel? It was written roughly 539 B.C. The author had to live in that time frame. This is another proof that Daniel is the Word of God, and the

There are other Babylonian texts that reveal Nabonidus lived in Tema of Arabia. Tema of Arabia was about 500 miles southwest from the city of Babylon. We understand that he was there primarily for religious reasons. It becomes rather apparent in historical studies that Nabonidus was not really devoted to the Babylonian gods. So, his son became the crown prince. He was essentially given the kingship of the empire, while Nabonidus was away for a long time. That is the setting of our study. Nabonidus was the real king and Belshazzar is his son, the crown prince. He has assumed the role of king while his father is away. So in verse 1, we were told

² McClintock and Strong. Belshazzar. Cyclopedia of Biblical theological , and Ecclesiastical Literature. Baker Book House. 1981. vol. 1. p. 740.

that Belshazzar was the king. That is accurate.

The second amazing statement made in verse 1 is that there was a great feast for a thousand of the king's nobles. History tells us that extremely large feasts were very common in those days. For example, Alexander the Great reportedly held a wedding feast for 10,000 guests. Now how long it lasted, we do not know. In Esther 1:1-4 we are told of a feast held for 180 days!

Banquet of October 12, 539 B.C. The third thing we are told in verse 1 is that he was drinking. We know now of a banquet held on October 12, 539 B.C. What is important about this date is that the city was defeated that evening during the night hours. It was Belshazzar's last orgy, his last big party. The Persians had surrounded the city.³ Xenophon tells us that the Persian army had surrounded the city.⁴ The date is October 12, 539 B.C., and that is the setting of our study.

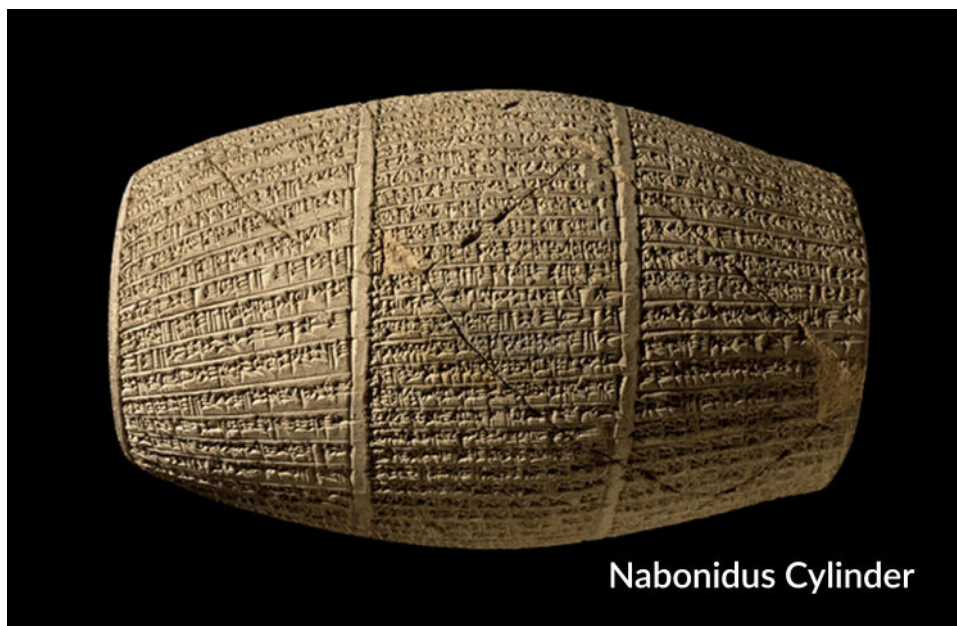
Why would anyone hold a large banquet when the Persian army has surrounded your city? Does that not seem inappropriate? That reveals that Belshazzar did not think he was about to be defeated. I can give you two reasons why he might have held his banquet.

The first reason is that Belshazzar held the banquet to build up the morale of his leadership and troops. That was important because he had just received reports that Nabonidus had moved up to Sippar, which was roughly 50 miles north of Babylon. But he had already been defeated by the

Medo-Persians. The Medo-Persian army was north of the city of Babylon. Nabonidus had already lost—but he was not killed. He was allowed to live. Apparently that was a Persian practice. How do you think the leadership and the army would have felt if they knew that the real king had already been defeated? So one possibility why the banquet was held was to bolster everyone's morale.

The second reason is that Herodotus and Xenophon say that this was an annual feast. It may have been held for both reasons. Belshazzar held the annual feast, even though the troops were around the city. He did it to bolster morale. It also showed that Belshazzar had great confidence in the mas-

sive walls around the city. We understand they were roughly 25 feet wide. They were dual walls, roughly 50-100 feet high. There are different reports about the dimensions. But the reports are that the walls were massive. That is the setting as we get



Nabonidus Cylinder

into our study.

The Foolish Drunken Orgy. Now verse 2 says,

When Belshazzar tasted the wine, he gave orders to bring the gold and silver vessels which Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken out of the temple which was in Jerusalem, so that the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines might drink from them. Daniel 5:2 (NASB)

We are told that Belshazzar tasted the wine. Then he ordered all the vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had brought from Jerusalem to Babylon to be brought in so that they could use them.

³ Herodotus. Histories. 1. pp. 190-191.

⁴ Xenophon. Cyropaedia. 7.5.15-25.

In Exodus chapters 25-29 we are told these vessels included dishes, pans, jars and bowls. They were used to make shewbread, to hold ashes, and for clean up. Apparently these were the vessels for which he asked.

Notice that we are told Nebuchadnezzar was his father. Some critics have said, "That just shows Daniel does not know what he is talking about again. Nebuchadnezzar was not Belshazzar's father." And they are right. Nebuchadnezzar was not Belshazzar's father, Nabonidus was. There were three kings who ruled between Nabonidus and Nebuchadnezzar. But there is a problem with their criticism. The Aramaic word for "father" in this passage and in Ezra 4:15 and Ezra 5:12, is a word that means more than "father." It can mean ancestor. So "father" was a general term referring also to an ancestor in your past.

We have been told Belshazzar tasted the wine, ordered the vessels to be brought and that Nebuchadnezzar was his "father." We are told the vessels were brought so that his wives and concubines could drink from them. This is an orgy. Verses 3-4 say,

Then they brought the gold vessels that had been taken out of the temple, the house of God which was in Jerusalem; and the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines drank from them. They drank the wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone. Daniel 5:3-4 (NASB)

When it says "the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone," we should understand these gods to be their idols. They praised their idols. They brought in the vessels from the true God, Jehovah God, and then used them as they praised their idols. What a contrast!

They were feasting and partying as the armies surrounded the city. It is just like our leaders today. God is not really important to them. Our leaders are involved in their idols of money, sex, power, votes, and pride. They are ignoring God. They are promoting Islam. We have recently heard some interesting reports that reveal we are rejecting the true God in our country. When you think about Belshazzar, the parallel is incredible. They were blaspheming and showing disrespect

to God. Yet, they are praising their own gods. That is what is happening in our country today. The parallel is incredible between the two. God has a message for our leaders. Read Daniel 5. You see how God will deal with the United States eventually. God is no fool and does not delight in fools.

A Finger Writes On the Wall. Verse 5 is a shocking surprise.

Suddenly the fingers of a man's hand emerged and began writing opposite the lampstand on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace, and the king saw the back of the hand that did the writing. Daniel 5:5 (NASB)

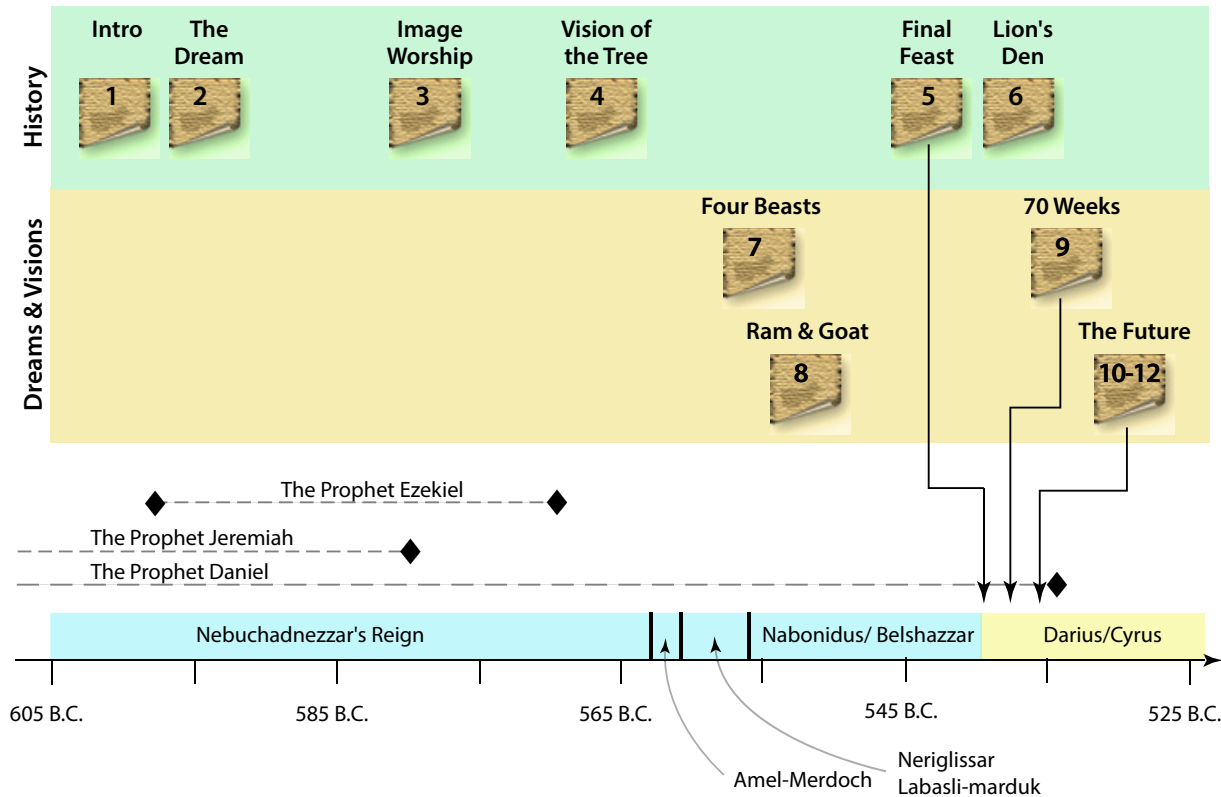
I call this "finger, finger, on the wall." Remember the fairytale about Snow White and "mirror, mirror, on the wall"? This is "finger, finger, on the wall." In March of 1899, some archaeologists were digging and discovered a massive room. The room was 175 feet by 56 feet. It was in Babylon, and they discovered it had plaster on the walls. Of course the walls had been demolished, but they were able to figure out the layout of the walls. They were able to examine the walls and to discover the plaster all over the exterior of these walls had crumbled and fallen. But we believe this was the room where the banquet was held and that the white plaster on the walls is where the inscription that we are going to be read about, appeared.

When we take archaeology and line it up with the book of Daniel, it all comes alive. When I first read the book of Daniel, I just assumed it was true; but there are other people who read the book of Daniel and they think it is myth. Daniel is not fictitious or just legends — it is history! There was a real room with white plaster on the walls. There was a real banquet where people were having an orgy together. The king that was there was Belshazzar, and it was 539 B.C., October 1. The Persian army has surrounded the city, and trouble is coming.

Verse 6:

Then the king's face grew pale and his thoughts alarmed him, and his hip joints went slack and his knees began knocking together. Daniel 5:6 (NASB)

Outline of Daniel



Copyright © Like The Master Ministries. All Rights Reserved.

How would you feel if all of a sudden a hand appears out of nowhere? The hand has no arm or body attached to it and its fingers are writing on the wall. How would you react? There was no pen or phone, just a finger. God is writing with His finger on the wall. When we are told that the king's knees began knocking together, it has the idea that his legs were limp. They started hitting one another. That is how nervous and out of control Belshazzar was,

Verse 7 records the first words that we hear from Belshazzar.

The king called aloud to bring in the conjurers, the Chaldeans and the diviners. . . Daniel 5:7a (NASB)

Now, the phrase “called aloud” is interesting. The word “aloud” has the idea of power or strength. He was shouting. You can just imagine drunken stupors as the result of an orgy.

Everyone is there. There is noise in the room. The king sees writing taking place on the wall, and what does he do? He yells loudly! He asks for all the conjurers, the Chaldeans, the diviners, the wise men.

. . . The king spoke and said to the wise men of Babylon . . . Daniel 5:7b (NASB)

The implication is that he is repeatedly speaking. Apparently these men are coming in. As they trickle in, he is yelling at them as follows.

. . . “Any man who can read this inscription and explain its interpretation to me shall be clothed with purple and have a necklace of gold around his neck, and have authority as third ruler in the kingdom.” Daniel

5:7c (NASB)

He offer three things to anyone who will explain the meaning of the writing. The first thing he offers is “we will clothe him in purple.” Purple spoke of royalty. The necklace of gold was only given to people of importance. When we are told “the third ruler,” just remember that Nabonidus is the real king and Belshazzar is the son, the crown prince. The third person will be whoever can interpret the dream.

Verse 8 reveals the response of the Chaldeans and the diviners.

Then all the king’s wise men came in, but they could not read the inscription or make known its interpretation to the king. Daniel 5:8 (NASB)

Nobody could do it.

Then King Belshazzar was greatly alarmed, his face grew even paler, and his nobles were perplexed. Daniel 5:9 (NASB)

There has been much debate as to why they could not read the inscription. Some people have said they could not read the writing because it was in an old Aramaic script. Others have said, “It was a new script, but the letters were reversed, the words were backwards, the words were upside down, the words were vertical instead of horizontal.” There are all kinds of crazy ideas. I read a number of commentaries, and everybody has a different idea. There are just about as many ideas as you probably have fingers on your hand as to what actually happened. All that is really important to know is that they could not do it. We are going to find out in verses 25-27, that the writing was in Aramaic, but why they could not understand it, we do not know.

Verse 10 introduces the queen who provides a solution to the problem.

The queen entered the banquet . . . Daniel 5:10a (NASB)

Debate has also occurred about the identity of the queen. I think most scholars have concluded that she was his mother, Nitocris. As we read the next three verses, it becomes clear that she enters and takes control. She gives commands to the king as to what to do. So watch her behavior. It is obvious she must have been mom, because only moms can do that and get away with it.

The queen entered the banquet hall because of the words of the king and his nobles; the queen spoke and said, “O king, live forever! Do not let your thoughts alarm you or your face be pale.” There is a man in your kingdom in whom is a spirit of the holy gods; and in the days of your father, illumination, insight and wisdom like the wisdom of the gods were found in him. And King Nebuchadnezzar, your father, your father the king, appointed him chief of the magicians, conjurers, Chaldeans and diviners. This was because an extraordinary spirit, knowledge and insight, interpretation of dreams, explanation of enigmas and solving of difficult problems were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Belshazzar. Let Daniel now be summoned and he will declare the interpretation.” Daniel 5:10-12 (NASB)

That is the setting. Mom comes to the rescue. She entered the banquet because of the words of the king. The king’s face is pale at this point. He is afraid, and his knees are knocking. She said, “He will tell you the interpretation.”

Daniel Arrives At the Banquet. Verse 13 tells us that Daniel entered, and the following are the king’s comments.

Then Daniel was brought in before the king. The king spoke and said to Daniel, “Are you that Daniel who is one of the exiles from Judah, whom my father the king brought from Judah? Now I have heard about you that a spirit of the gods is in you, and that illumination, insight and extraordinary wisdom have been found in you. Just now the wise men and the conjurers were brought in before me that they might read this inscrip-

tion and make its interpretation known to me, but they could not declare the interpretation of the message. But I personally have heard about you, that you are able to give interpretations and solve difficult problems. Now if you are able to read the inscription and make its interpretation known to me, you will be clothed with purple and wear a necklace of gold around your neck, and you will have authority as the 1third ruler in the kingdom.” Daniel 5:13-16 (NASB)

The king repeats the offer. In verse 17, Daniel responds.

Then Daniel answered and said before the king, “Keep your gifts for yourself or give your rewards to someone else; however, I will read the inscription to the king and make the interpretation known to him.” Daniel 5:17 (NASB)

Now some people have said, “I like the way Daniel responded to the king.” The New American Standard, unfortunately, does not give us the right sense as to how Daniel responded. The ESV is more accurate. Daniel is actually more diplomatic, with a softer approach. Daniel appeared to be saying, “Thank you, I am not really interested. You can give it to somebody else. But I am still willing to interpret the inscriptions for you.” In reality, Daniel knew what was happening. He knew the Neo-Babylonian Empire was about to come to an end.

Verse 18 says,

O king, the Most High God granted sovereignty, grandeur, glory and majesty to Nebuchadnezzar your father. Daniel 5:18 (NASB)

Now that is an important verse, because what Daniel reminds the king that Nebuchadnezzar had great majesty, that God had treated him really great.

Verse 19 continues,

Because of the grandeur which He bestowed on him, all the peoples, nations and men of every language

feared and trembled before him; whomever he wished he killed and whomever he wished he spared alive; and whomever he wished he elevated and whomever he wished he humbled. Daniel 5:19 (NASB)

Now, verses 18 and 19 are really important. We believe that God is sovereign and does what He desires. Some people struggle with God being in control and with how much freedom we may not have. We have found so far in Daniel that God is in total, absolute control. In the last chapter, we spent time looking at different verses that made the point that God is totally in control.

Look at verse 19 again. Notice what it says in the middle. Speaking of Nebuchadnezzar, it said whomever he wished, he killed and whomever he wished, he spared alive. Whomever he wished, he could elevate; whomever he wished, he could humble. Nebuchadnezzar was given the freedom to kill whomever he wanted, to keep alive whomever he wanted, to elevate whomever he wanted, and to humble whomever he wanted. This is another statement that God is sovereign. He defines our boundaries, but there is freedom within the boundaries. I do not think God cares whether I have spaghetti tonight, or whether I have eggs tonight. Maybe on some occasion He might. If He does, He will then move and make sure that happens. There is freedom in verse 20:

But when his heart was lifted up and his spirit became so proud that he behaved arrogantly, he was deposed from his royal throne and his glory was taken away from him. Daniel 5:20 (NASB)

Now, God is not responsible for his sin either. So he had freedom to sin. Verse 21 states,

He was also driven away from mankind, and his heart was made like that of beasts, and his dwelling place was with the wild donkeys. He was given grass to eat like cattle, and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven until he recognized that the Most High God is ruler over the realm of mankind and that He sets over it whomever He wishes. Daniel 5:21 (NASB)

The sovereignty of God is all over these verses, and yet man has some freedom within that sovereignty. Scripture teaches that there are times when we bump up against His sovereign boundaries, but God wins.

Daniel Warns Belshazzar. Verse 22 is really important. Watch the next two verses:

Yet you, his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, even though you knew all this . . . Daniel 5:22 (NASB)

Daniel said, “Belshazzar, you knew all this. You knew what God did for King Nebuchadnezzar. You know what King Nebuchadnezzar did, and what happened to him. You know the end result. He put the timeline all together. Belshazzar knew about the events in King Nebuchadnezzar’s life. It had only been twenty-three years from the death of King Nebuchadnezzar to the time of this feast. Twenty-three years have elapsed. If Belshazzar had been thirteen or fourteen, he would have been about thirty-six or thirty-seven years of age. He would have known what happened to King Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel said, “You did not humble your heart, even though you knew about it.” Now that is important, I want you to remember that. We are going to finish our study with that thought.

Verse 23 continues Daniel’s warning.

. . . but you have exalted yourself . . . Daniel 5:22 (NASB)

Did you catch the contrast? Verse 22 said, “You have not humbled yourself,” and verse 23 said,

. . . but you have exalted yourself against the Lord of heaven and they have brought the vessels of His house before you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines have been drinking wine from them . . . Daniel 5:23b (NASB)

When Belshazzar asked for the vessels that were taken from the temple in Jerusalem to be brought into the feast so they

could drink from them, it was an act of blasphemy. It was an act of disrespect. Do you know why he did it? We know from archaeological data that Belshazzar was a worshiper of the moon god. He may have done this to show the moon god that he was really committed to the moon god. He may have hoped to gain the favor of the moon god against the Persians. He said,

. . . and you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which do not see, hear or understand. But the God in whose hand are your life-breath and all your ways, you have not glorified. Daniel 5:23c (NASB)

I could not help but think about the leaders of our country. We started as a Christian nation. But what are we today? The changes in our leaders is incredible. Today they are more like Belshazzar than Nebuchadnezzar. The contrast between Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar is incredible. At the end of Daniel, I believe Nebuchadnezzar became a follower of God. But Belshazzar is a rejector of God. In fact, he insults God just like our leaders today—not all—but more and more we are becoming an anti-Christian country. We are abandoning our roots.

Daniel Interprets The Inscription. In verse 24, Daniel is still speaking.

Then the hand was sent from Him and this inscription was written out. Daniel 5:24 (NASB)

Daniel knew what had happened. Then he said,

“Now this is the inscription that was written out: ‘MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN.’” Daniel 5:25 (NASB)

Verse 26 gives the interpretation.

This is the interpretation of the message: ‘MENE’ — God has numbered your kingdom and put an end to it. Daniel 5:26 (NASB)

The Aramaic word *mene* here actually means fifty shekels. That is the normal meaning of the word. But Daniel gives it a different meaning. He says it means “numbered.” Daniel is saying, “You have been evaluated.” God has been looking at your heart. God has been looking at your actions, and you have been evaluated.”

Verse 27 continues,

“TEKEL’ — you have been weighed on the scales and found deficient.” Daniel 5:27 (NASB)

The Aramaic word for *tekel* means “weighed.” Verse 27 means that you have been judged.

“PERES’ — your kingdom has been divided and given over to the Medes and Persians.” Daniel 5:28 (NASB)

The Aramaic word *peres* usually means half a minute. It is like a minute that has been cut in half, or into divisions. That is, the kingdom will be divided and given to the Medes and to the Persians. Verse 29 adds,

Then Belshazzar gave orders, and they clothed Daniel with purple and put a necklace of gold around his neck, and issued a proclamation concerning him that he now had authority as the third ruler in the kingdom. Daniel 5:29 (NASB)

How long would Daniel be the third ruler? For two hours?

That same night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was slain. So Darius the Mede received the kingdom at about the age of sixty-two. Daniel 5:30 (NASB)

Herodotus tells us that on October 12, 539 B.C., the Persian army had encircled the Babylonian city. They had been in the process of diverting the Euphrates River. During the night hours, they diverted the water. They entered the city through the riverbed, under the walls. They entered the banquet room in which the king and all of his noble, wives and concubines were located. They entered without a fight.

As the Persian army was moving through the city, the people were cheering and welcoming them. Part of the reason they were cheering the Persian army was that Belshazzar was an evil king. They wanted to get rid of their leader.

Apparently, Belshazzar was in the process of trying to commit suicide when the army entered. The soldiers stopped him, and then later they avenged themselves on him. We can only imagine what that means “they avenged themselves on him.” In retribution, he really suffered in the process of dying.

Conclusion. That was a real story. So, why is this chapter here? First, when God prophesies that something is going to happen, it is going to happen. Remember the statue in Daniel 2? The head of gold, the chest of bronze, the arms of silver, and the legs of iron, and feet of iron and clay? The Babylonian Empire was at the top. The next kingdom was the Medo-Persian Empire. This chapter reveals that the first part of the prophecy has come true. Whenever God prophesies, it comes true because He is sovereign. God is sovereign. That is the first important conclusion.

Second, we must never dishonor God. Never dishonor God and exalt yourself. If you are successful at work, do not take credit for it. Remember Nebuchadnezzar? God enabled him to accomplish much. Then God humbled him because of his pride. When God wants to humble us, He knows how to do that.

Third, how much time did God give King Nebuchadnezzar to repent before he became like an animal? Twelve months. How much time did God give to Belshazzar? He was not given any time to repent. He was punished immediately. Look back at verse 22:

“Yet you, his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, even though you knew all this. Daniel 5:22 (NASB)

Luke 12:48 says, “To whom much is given, much is required.” Belshazzar knew the history of Nebuchadnezzar. Sometimes Christians say, “Oh, God is merciful. He understands. He will give me grace.” Yes, He did give mercy to King Nebuchadnezzar. But He did not give mercy to Belshazzar. If you

have already have been warned about a sin or some situation, then you have already been told how to respond. Then God may not show you mercy if you repeat the sin. Belshazzar is a good example. Watch this: Never dishonor God. Can I put it positively? Be humble. Thank God. Give Him the honor that He deserves. Remember what James said? “Every good gift comes from above.” I like that: “Every good gift comes from above.” That is what Belshazzar failed to recognize, but King Nebuchadnezzar did. Let us give our God the glory that He deserves!