

Can Anyone Read The Handwriting On The Wall?

This morning I want to take you back to 539BC living in Babylon which is ruled by King Belshazzar, successor to King Nebuchadnezzar. Don't get confused by this name, for the new name given to Daniel was spelt Belteshazzar.

Now imagine that you are one of the elite – you know – a nobleperson, proud to be living in Babylon, the world's greatest city. But lately there have been increasing tensions, both internal and external and a lot of grumbling.

But King Belshazzar isn't at all worried. In fact his name Bel means he is protected. The name Bel was another name for Marduk, one of the Babylonian gods. Not much of a god, really—none of them are when you get right down to it. They were made of gold & silver, bronze & iron, wood & stone. They may look great with commanding faces, striking poses, and strong hands. But if you pray to them they couldn't listen; if you need guidance, they can't speak; and if you need a miracle, they can't deliver. So at that level, they aren't really great gods, but they are convenient, and easy on the conscience. They make no demands. They are safe—unlike the Hebrew God.

As a noble person, you are aware of the Hebrew captives that were taken from Jerusalem, many years before and that they were the internal problems as they worshipped one God, the

Most High, whom they claim is superior to all other gods. And both the king and yourself, as a noble person, have an intense dislike for these Hebrew's because they were different and you labelled them as being closed minded & intolerant, for claiming to know the truth.

Sometimes we Christians are labelled like that – sometimes we are told we are arrogant because we claim the only way to God is through Jesus. But this is what God's word tells us, what Jesus told us while on earth and what we are told through the Holy Spirit – this is the truth. If you reject the truth, I urge you to listen closely to today's Scripture and see what happened to King Belshazzar.

Now of the many Hebrews captured, Daniel and his friends had gained a lot of knowledge and thus influence in Babylon under King Nebuchadnezzar, but with his death this dramatically changed. Belshazzar lived for power, lived for riches, lived for glory, and so couldn't live with this God of the Hebrews. So for many years Bel DOES "protect the king." He protects him from Truth. But truth has a funny way of catching up with you and asserting itself, as we'll see from Daniel 5.

Try and imagine you have been invited to a religious festival, it's October and this is the festival to Marduk, the god after whom Belshazzar was named. The King knew that there was unrest and disturbance because the city was under siege by

the Persian Army. But really, the city was surrounded by enormous fortified walls of stone, thrusting upward from the ground 150 feet high! These defences were ringed with 270 guard towers. The city had enough food & supplies to withstand an assault for 20 years. And the waters of the Euphrates River ran underneath the walls into the city, so the water supply was unending. Plus, they had history on their side. No army had taken the city of Babylon for ten centuries. Those Persians weren't going to get in by force, and they weren't going to starve them out. But still, you and the rest of the people in the city were getting restless.

So here you are, entering the King's Palace, dressed in all of your finery. At one end of the area sits Belshazzar's golden throne and you take your seat alongside other noble people, men and women and yes, concubines.

And there is plenty to eat and lots to drink and the party is in full swing. You relax as you are surrounded by the god Marduk and other idols that are guarding the doors and corners of the great hall. Belshazzar was shouting toasts in defiance of the Persians but also to the power of God as well.

And to add to this disrespect and defiance, he gets his servants to retrieve the gold and silver goblets that Nebuchadnezzar had stolen from the temple at Jerusalem – golden vessels taken out of the House of God. And it wasn't just because they were

valuable, but also that Belshazzar wanted to make a statement—about who was king; about who was in power; about which gods would be honoured this night.

Repeatedly you and the other people dip the Hebrew goblets into your wine, laughing and shouting praises to Marduk and the other gods assembled there.

And then it happened. A scream!

Over the music, talking & laughter, someone had screamed. And then others! People with shock on their faces were looking and pointing at the front of the hall. Belshazzar rose quickly from this throne, turned and saw it. The blood drained from his face, and his body went numb with horror. Just then, the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace opposite the lampstand, so that the king could see the hand as it wrote.

What do you do now? You join the others who are running away, racing to get as far away as possible. Belshazzar's face is dark and his thoughts alarming, his muscles and legs go weak. He is scared! He had never known fear like this before.

Then as quickly as the hand came, it was gone. The screaming stopped; everything stopped. Had it been an hallucination? A spiked batch of wine? No! For there on the wall were four

words that had been scrawled into the plaster by the invading, vandalizing hand: “**MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN.**”

Nobody knew what the words meant so Belshazzar called for his exorcists, Chaldeans and diviners to interpret the words – but none of them could. And he got mad and sent everybody home.

You and the other nobles were glad to comply as you had never seen him so angry before nor so frightened. The King wasn’t in control.

At this point, the queen, Belshazzar’s mother, entered and approached the throne. This was a violation of protocol, but she heard the disturbance and wanted to support her son, so she told him of the one person she had heard of, who could interpret the writing on the wall. One who had the spirits of the gods in him. His name was Daniel, and he was one of those Hebrews. The queen urged her son to send for Daniel. And so he called for Daniel to be brought before him.

So you are now just a witness to this next section. You see an old man of 70 walk in with a grey beard on his face and just some wisps of hair left on the top of his head. This was Daniel but even though he was old, his body still showed the physique of a man who had been strong and vigorous. But he looked

tired now and it could be because all that he had won with the culture war under Nebuchadnezzar, now seemed undone.

Now Belshazzar, acting all kingly, tried to flatter Daniel by offering to make him third in line and dress him up in all finery, but Daniel wouldn't take the bait – he rejected giving in to those worldly things.

Daniel walks over to the wall, bows his head, closes his eyes then studied the writing. He then quickly turns around and marches right up to the throne and Belshazzar asked him to tell him what it was all about.

You wonder too and wonder what Daniel is going to say – is he going to burst forth with God's judgement and how would that go? But instead Daniel talks about Nebuchadnezzar.

He says "The Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar power and sovereignty and greatness and splendour. He was feared by all and he did as he pleased. But when his heart became arrogant and full of pride, he was stripped of his glory." Daniel went on to relate what had been known to only a few among the royal court—how king Nebuchadnezzar had for a time gone mad, given a mind like a beast and he fed on grass. This increased Belshazzar's fear as he stood shaking, awaiting Daniel to explain the words.

Daniel explains - the words written refer to Aramaic coins:

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.

Belshazzar's heart dropped. He felt numbed, exhausted, stunned by what Daniel had said. He might have had him executed—but instead, he kept his word. He had to try what he now knew would not work, to buy off the Most High God. Daniel was given the robe, the chain, and the promotion.

It would prove to be a short-lived promotion, however. That very night, the Persian army diverted the Euphrates by digging a canal upstream and entered the city through the riverbed underneath the walls. They snuck in while most of the city was still partying, oblivious to what had happened at the palace. Belshazzar and his drunken nobles were slaughtered, immediately by the hands of the Persians, but ultimately by the hand of God. “You did not honour the God who holds in His hand your life and all your ways.”

Boy, what an event but God’s hand was with Daniel all along, from the time he was captured and taken to Babylon, to this day, when God had had enough of the king’s evil ways.

What does this mean to us today?

God's hand will either take us or break us, cradle us or crush us. And the decision is ours to make. You see, the same hand that flung stars across the night sky and carved words of judgment on a palace wall, is the same hand that was pierced by iron nails and pinned to a dogwood tree—the Lord's open hand of love.

For those of us who follow Christ, we consider ourselves blessed. For God's hand has not written judgment against us but has instead written our names in His book of life.

Belshazzar died covered in his own blood, while we are covered in Christ's own blood.

If we refuse to acknowledge and accept God's truth at some point in the near future, we will be weighed and judged.

Do your days have weight, or are they wanting? What wine are you drinking from God's goblets?

Are you using or abusing the gifts God has given you? Will you use money for your own luxuries while people starve not only in our own community and country, but around the world.

Will you crave short term pleasures yet know nothing of true intimacy?

Will you pay lip service to love while seeking power?

Some will judge others and call it discernment.

Some will babble nonsense to get attention and call it a sign.

Some will do whatever they feel like and call it wisdom.

God has given us wonderful resources—will we drink from the cup of His new covenant or toast the gods of this world with them?

Our days are numbered—how much do they weigh? That's another decision that's ours to make, every day. If we want our days to have weight, let God's hand be on the scale. Invite Him in.

In one day by itself we can accomplish only so much; but one day in God's hand has weight.

One life by itself can only accomplish so much; but one life in God's hand has weight beyond what any scale can measure.

God's people understand this, and so their days have weight.

Let God's hand hold you; guide you; support you; and give weight to your days.

May God's hand hold us, guide us, support us, and give weight to our days.