

A Banquet of Warning

Daniel 5

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Good morning. Welcome to Christ the King. If we haven't met, my name is Penny and I'm the senior pastor here. And friends, it's great to be with you. I'm glad that we can gather together. If you are a guest or visitor, welcome. We're glad that you're here. This morning, we are continuing in our series in the book of Daniel and we'll be looking at Daniel Chapter 5. So if you have a Bible, you can turn to Daniel 5. If you don't have a Bible, there are Bibles in the chairs in front of you and the passage is found on page 742 of those Bibles. Now, as we've been going through the book of Daniel, you remember that this is the story of God's people living in Babylonian exile. They have been taken away from their home. They're no longer living in Israel. They're no longer near the temple which they're to worship at. They're living in a foreign land under a foreign ruler. And we've seen as they've been living in this foreign land as exiles that Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, right, Daniel's three friends, they aren't assimilating to the world around them, nor are they separating from it. And that has been a theme that we've been trying to emphasize over the last number of weeks, that this is how God's people are to live in the world.

That as we live in exile, because that's what we are, we are an exilic people, we are living in Babylon, not the New Jerusalem, right? Heaven is where our citizenship is, and this is not our home. As we live as exilic people, we are to be people who don't assimilate nor separate from the world. Instead, we're supposed to be a people who live faithfully in the world for the sake of the Lord. And that's what we've seen from Daniel and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. It's what we've seen in the first five chapters. Now we come to chapter five, and as we enter into chapter five, the same themes continue. However, there are some new characters that are showing up, and so we need to understand a little bit of historical background. You see, between chapter four and chapter five, Nebuchadnezzar has died, okay? So Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, the chief foil to Daniel, he has passed away, and there have been subsequent kings that have risen up after him. And now we come to this new king, this new ruler named Belshazzar. But that's not the only change that has taken place. There's also geopolitical changes that are taking place. You see, Babylon has been the world power up until now.

But now in chapter 5, we have another power knocking at the door. So if you remember from a few weeks ago in Daniel chapter 2, Nebuchadnezzar had this dream, this vision of a statue, right? And Daniel said that the interpretation of the statue is that the gold head is Nebuchadnezzar and it's Babylon, but that all the other parts of this statue, the body of this statue, are different empires, different kingdoms that are going to come after Babylon. And so that's starting to happen. Because in chapter 5, Darius and the Medo-Persian empire are outside the walls of Babylon. Okay, so that's the historical setting that we find ourselves. And so I want to ask you, as we come to the text, if you were the king, you were the ruler, you were put in charge of Babylon, and there is war coming, there is an army outside the city walls, the end is drawing near, what would you do? Well, you would probably call men to arms, you would sound the alarm, you would maybe get your affairs in order, maybe you would have those last conversations that you've been waiting to have, right? Because you don't know what tomorrow might bring. That's what probably most of us would do. That's what a good leader, a good king, a good ruler would do. Well, let's see what Belshazzar does.

Let's read Daniel chapter 5.

“King Belshazzar made a great feast for a thousand of his lords and drank wine in front of the thousand. Belshazzar, when he tasted the wine, commanded that the vessels of gold and of silver that Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken out of the temple in Jerusalem be brought, that the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them. Then they brought in the golden vessels that had been taken out of the temple, the house of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines drank from them. They drank wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone.

Immediately the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace, opposite the lampstand. And the king saw the hand as it wrote. Then the king's color changed, and his thoughts alarmed him; his limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together. The king called loudly to bring in the enchanters, the Chaldeans, and the astrologers. The king declared to the wise men of Babylon, “Whoever reads this writing, and shows me its interpretation, shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around his neck and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom.” Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or make known to the king the interpretation. Then King Belshazzar was greatly alarmed, and his color changed, and his lords were perplexed.

The queen, because of the words of the king and his lords, came into the banqueting hall, and the queen declared, “O king, live forever! Let not your thoughts alarm you or your color change. There is a man in your kingdom in whom is the spirit of the holy gods. In the days of your father, light and understanding and wisdom like the wisdom of the gods were found in him, and King Nebuchadnezzar, your father—your father the king—made him chief of the magicians, enchanters, Chaldeans, and astrologers, because an excellent spirit, knowledge, and understanding to interpret dreams, explain riddles, and solve problems were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Belteshazzar. Now let Daniel be called, and he will show the interpretation.”

Then Daniel was brought in before the king. The king answered and said to Daniel, “You are that Daniel, one of the exiles of Judah, whom the king my father brought from Judah. I have heard of you that the spirit of the gods is in you, and that light and understanding and excellent wisdom are found in you. Now the wise men, the enchanters, have been brought in before me to read this writing and make known to me its interpretation, but they could not show the interpretation of the matter. But I have heard that you can give interpretations and solve problems. Now if you can read the writing and make known to me its interpretation, you shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around your neck and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom.” Then Daniel answered and said before the king, “Let your gifts be for yourself, and give your rewards to another. Nevertheless, I will read the writing to the king and make known to him the interpretation. O king, the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father kingship and greatness and glory and majesty. And because of the greatness that he gave him, all peoples, nations, and languages trembled and feared before him. Whom he would, he killed, and whom he would, he kept alive; whom he would, he raised up, and whom he would, he humbled. But when his heart was lifted up and his spirit was hardened so that he dealt proudly, he was brought down from his kingly throne, and his glory was taken from him. He was

driven from among the children of mankind, and his mind was made like that of a beast, and his dwelling was with the wild donkeys. He was fed grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, until he knew that the Most High God rules the kingdom of mankind and sets over it whom he will. And you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this, but you have lifted up yourself against the Lord of heaven. And the vessels of his house have been brought in before you, and you and your lords, your wives, and your concubines have drunk wine from them. And you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which do not see or hear or know, but the God in whose hand is your breath, and whose are all your ways, you have not honored. Then from his presence the hand was sent, and this writing was inscribed. And this is the writing that was inscribed: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, and PARSIN. This is the interpretation of the matter: MENE, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; TEKEL, you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting; PERES, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.”

Then Belshazzar gave the command, and Daniel was clothed with purple, a chain of gold was put around his neck, and a proclamation was made about him, that he should be the third ruler in the kingdom. That very night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was killed. And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old.”

Friends, this is the word of the Lord. Let me pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your kindness to us, that you are the revealer of mysteries, that you show us the depth of your word, that you do not hide yourself from us, but you reveal your goodness. And so we pray, Father, that we would behold it again this morning. Open our eyes, unclog our ears, soften our hearts, that we would behold your glory. We ask that you would meet with us now, and we pray this in Christ's name. Amen.

The Feast

Well, the years between World War I and the Russian Revolution, the country of Russia was in steep decline. Millions of Russian soldiers were killed during World War I. The army was in disarray, and the then capital city of Petrograd, which had been called St. Petersburg and would later be renamed St. Petersburg, in that capital city there were food shortages and hunger, and many, many people were dying. The city and the country were falling to ruins. And in the midst of this, this chaos, this dismay, hidden away in their rooms and their places of ease was the Russian aristocracy. While the people were dying in the streets, while their bellies were going hungry, the aristocracy was throwing balls in dinner parties and receptions. Tsar Nicholas II, the king of Russia at the time, he wrote many entries into his diary during this season, but his diary was filled not with the plight of the people or with the political crisis that was about to ensue. No, he wrote instead about the weather and about the long walks he took through the woods and about what he had with his tea that day. The king, the leader, the one who was supposed to care for the people, to protect the people in the time, their time of need, he was detached, oblivious. He threw parties and drank tea.

And that's what we see with Belshazzar. The Medo-Persian army is knocking at the door, and yet Belshazzar is throwing a feast. He's throwing a celebration for thousands of lords to eat and to drink. He feasts. Now, why would he do this? Because this seems bizarre to me, right? And I'm sure it seems strange to you. Like, why would the king be throwing a party when an

army is ready to break through the walls? Maybe he's oblivious, right? Maybe he's just, well, silly. That's the word I was looking for. Maybe he's trying to dull his senses about what's about to come. Maybe he's in denial, or maybe he's just plain arrogant. But what I think this ultimately points to is that Belshazzar, these feasts point to where Belshazzar is putting his trust. And I say this because of both historical as well as theological realities that we know were occurring at this time. So the historical reality is that Babylon was surrounded by these two massive walls, and on these walls were 250 towers, and a hundred bronze gates. And these walls of defense, they were so thick that it was said that a four-horse chariot could turn around on top of one. And so they had this massive thick wall, and then space, and then another massive thick wall.

And on top of that, the river Euphrates was running right into the center of the city. And so that meant even if the city was under siege, they could still have water, and they could still have agriculture within the city. They could hold out as long as they needed, and the river could be used to fill the moat around the city walls. You see, the historical reality of Babylon, the defenses that they had, it would have meant, it would have caused Belshazzar and his lords, and his wives, and his concubines, it would have made them believe that the city was impregnable. It was safe. And so of course they could feast with war looming, because they trust in their defenses. But they're not just trusting in their defenses, there's also a theological aspect to their trust as well. You see, this feast shows that they're trusting in their gods. We see this in verses 2 through 4. He drinks some wine, he tastes it, and he commands that the vessels of gold and silver taken from Jerusalem, taken from the temple dedicated to Yahweh, be brought. And he takes these vessels and fills them with wine, and they all drink from these cups. The lords, and the concubines, and the wives, that they toasted to the gods of gold and silver, of bronze and iron, of wood and stone.

You see, Belshazzar took the things of God, the things set apart for holy use, and used them for idolatry. Now theologians tell us this isn't simply desecrating the things of the Lord, it is declaring their belief that the gods of Babylon were greater than Yahweh. Because by using the plunder from the temple in the service of pagan gods, he is saying that the gods of Babylon not only defeated Israel, but defeated Israel's God. And the gods of Babylon, they will protect us now. And so, because he put his trust in his gods, he put his trust in his defenses, though the storm clouds of war are gathering, he can feast. He has trust in his fortress, he has trust in his gods. But what Belshazzar didn't expect was for the true God to crash his party. Because that's what happens, right? As he's desecrating the vessels of God, fingers of a human hand appear, and right on the wall, so that Belshazzar can see. And we're told in verse 6, "the king's color changed, and his thoughts alarmed him, his limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together." Belshazzar is terrified. In fact, that phrase, "his limbs gave way," the Hebrew literally, it means the knots of his loins were loosed, which is another way of saying he soiled himself. This great king is overwhelmed with fear. He can't go back to feasting. And so, what does he do?

The Judgment

Well, he does what Nebuchadnezzar had done. He calls for the astrologers, the wise men, the magicians, the Chaldeans, he calls for them to come and to give the interpretation. But just like before, right, have we seen a pattern here? They can't interpret what they're seeing. They can't interpret what the king needs them to interpret. And so the queen, we're told, it's probably the queen mother, because she wasn't there, and we're told that his wives were, the queen mother comes and urges for him to call Daniel. And so he does. And it seems like

there's some skepticism. Did you notice the way he spoke about Daniel and spoke to Daniel? It feels like there's a little dig here with his words, right, because he says Daniel is simply Daniel, one of the exiles of Judah, not the trusted advisor, not the sure interpreter. You see, Belshazzar doesn't think that Daniel, the prophet of God, can actually help him. He's just an exile. He's just a captive. But the irony here is that the captive, the exile, is the one who's going to speak words of judgment over the mighty king. And that's what we see happening in verses 17 through 21. We see the judgment beginning. But before Daniel, did you notice how he didn't go straight to the interpretation? What does he do first? Well, first he says, "hey, Belshazzar, I know you said you would give me robes and gold and a place of, but I don't want what you're selling," right? That's basically what he said, didn't he? He said, "you're going to give us these gifts, but you can keep them for yourselves, for yourself. I don't want anything that you are offering." And then he recounts the history with Nebuchadnezzar, right? He reminds him of what had happened. "Your father," now this isn't literally his father. It was a way of describing someone who comes after, someone who is descending from another. He says, "Nebuchadnezzar, your father, he would not humble himself before the Lord."

And what happened to him? He was sent out into the wilderness and he acted like a beast and he went insane until he humbled himself. And he makes sure in verse 21 that he points to why it was that Nebuchadnezzar humbled himself, right? "Until he knew that the Most High God rules the kingdom of mankind and sets over it whom he will." You see, before Daniel will ever tell Belshazzar what he's wanting to know, before he gives the interpretation, he makes it clear that the true God who Belshazzar has mocked, who he has shown contempt for by showing contempt to the Lord's things, this God is the God over all. Nebuchadnezzar realized it and he confessed it. But Belshazzar in verse 22, "And you, his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this. But you have lifted up yourself against the Lord of heaven, and the vessels of his house have been brought in before you. And you and your lords, your wives, and your concubines have drunk wine from them. And you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which do not see or hear or know, but the God in whose hand is your breath, and whose are all your ways you have not honored."

Do you see what Daniel's doing here? He is pointing out the absurdity of worshiping false gods. These gods that you worship, gods of silver, of gold, of bronze, he says they do not see, they do not hear, they do not know. In other words, these gods that you are giving your life to, that you are putting your trust in, they have no power. They are lifeless. They have no awareness, no knowledge, no ability to help you. But the true God, he holds Belshazzar's breath in his very hand. In other words, he is the God who rules over life and over death. Those false gods have no power over life, but the true God takes life and preserves it. Now what's sad about this is that Belshazzar knew better. He actually knew all this. That's what it said in verse 22, right? Daniel says he recounted everything that happened in Nebuchadnezzar. You knew all this. Belshazzar knew the history. He knew that God brought the king to his knees. He knew that it was the Lord who restored Nebuchadnezzar. He knew all of this, and he still turned from that knowledge and opposed the Lord. And what Daniel declares is because you rejected the Lord, judgment will come. Mene, mene, tekel, and parson. These words, they're simply weights in their noun form, but in their verb form, they mean numbered, numbered, weighed, and divided. God has numbered the days of Belshazzar. He has been weighed and found wanting. His kingdom is coming to an end.

You see, everything that Daniel is telling Belshazzar is pointing, is calling him, is inviting him to turn away from himself and turn to the Lord. The history, the example of Nebuchadnezzar, the writing on the wall, the words of the prophet, all are a warning about the judgment that will come if Belshazzar will not follow God. There are signs of warning. They remind me of the story of Bruce Herod. Bruce Herod, his story is told in John Krakauer's book, *Into Thin Air*. Maybe some of you have read that book. If you're into mountain climbing, I would recommend you not read that book because you might not want to climb a mountain afterwards. But it tells the terrible story of one of the worst accidents in the history of climbing Everest, of a climbing party that was decimated, of many people who were killed trying to ascend the mountain. And Bruce Herod was part of this party. And on the day of the final ascent, Bruce was a little bit farther back in the pack, and a ferocious storm came upon the mountain. And he heard the cries, the desperate calls on the radio of the people who went before him. And yet he continued to climb. And he climbed past people who were crippled by frostbite. And he had to climb over not just one, but two corpses of people who were part of his climbing party. He had all these warnings. The storm, the lateness of the day, the fearful calls, two lifeless bodies. And yet he pressed on to the summit. And he reached it.

He made it to the top of Everest. In fact, we know he did because from the top of Everest, he radioed down to base camp. And they heard that he had made it. And it was the last thing anyone ever heard from Bruce Herod. And his body was never found. He had all these signs warning him. Turn back. Go back to base camp. Stop the ascent. He had all these signs that warned him what would come if he kept going forward, of the impending doom that would lead to his death. He had all these signs. And like Belshazzar, he ignored them. Babylon's history, the humbling of Nebuchadnezzar, the writing on the walls, the words of Daniel, all of these spoke of the judgment to come to those who opposed the Lord. And Belshazzar ignored them all. He didn't humble himself. And that night, Darius the Mede received the kingdom. And that banquet which began as a celebration, that feast which was a demonstration of where they had placed their trust, became a feast of judgment. It's an incredibly sad story.

It's a story of warning. A story of judgment. So, what does this mean for us? Right? Because, you know, we could leave here today and we could go, well, this is just another interesting account of Israel's history, right? Like, maybe this would show up in like the rest is biblical history podcast or something like that, right? There is no podcast called that. But, you know, like, maybe that's where it would show up. Or maybe you would think, "oh, this is a really interesting," you know, fulfillment of Daniel 2. Or "now I know where that phrase, the writing is on the wall comes from," right? Maybe we would walk away and those are the things we would think about. And y'all, if that's all that we would walk away with, then we'd be like Belshazzar, also ignoring all the signs. The warning for Belshazzar is the same warning for us. Where have we put our hope? Where have we put our trust? What are we looking to? Right? Maybe it's not city walls, right? But the gods of our age. Are we putting our trust in money, in beauty, in strength, in power, in influence, in intellect, the gods of our age? Is that where we have put our trust? And if our trust, our hope is in these things, then it's misplaced. Because if we put our hope or trust in anything other than the Lord, then it is a misplaced trust. And Belshazzar knew that. And so do we.

You see, this story, it's not just inviting us to see the signs of warning, but the story is also inviting us to put our trust in the Lord. To look to Him. To trust Him, because not only does He have Belshazzar's breath in His hand, but He has ours as well. Our life is in His very hands. In John, chapter 10, Jesus said that all those that the Father gives to Him, Jesus gives

them and gives us life. He's the one who holds our lives in His very hand. And so this passage, it's inviting us. It's inviting us to hear the warning and to put our trust in Him. And friends, that's what this table is inviting us to as well. In a few minutes, we're going to come to this table and we're going to eat and we're going to drink and we're going to feast at it. And for those who are trusting in Christ, this table is not a table of judgment, but instead it is a feast of celebration. Celebration because Jesus gave up His breath and Jesus gave up His life so that we would have life. So that we would breathe as new creations. So that we wouldn't put our trust in powers or presidents. So that we wouldn't look for life in pseudo gods or ourselves, but instead that we would trust in Christ. That we would put our hope in God who holds our very lives in the palm of His hands. You see, friends, when we know the history and when we've heard the prophet and when we've beheld the cross, we don't ignore the warnings. We heed them and we put our trust in the Lord.

Amen. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you. Thank you that you have invited us to turn away from the things of this world and to put our hope and our trust in You. And so we pray is that what we would do. Not just today but all of our days. That we would turn our gaze away from the pseudo gods of this world and we would put our faith in the true God of Heaven. And so Father I pray, let us heed the warning of this passage. Let us see the goodness of your grace. Let us cling to the Savior who holds our life in the palm of His hand in His promise that nothing can remove us. Let us put our trust in Him. We ask that you would help us to do this and we pray all of this in Jesus name, and God's people said together, Amen.