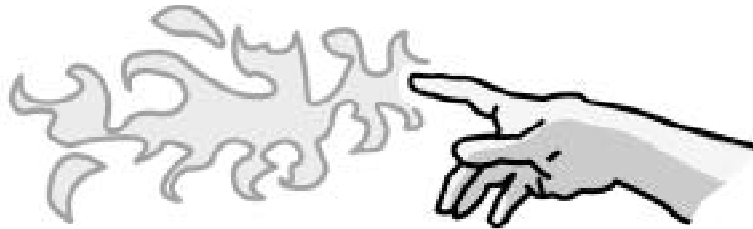


Surprise Party



SABBATH—OCTOBER 23

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Daniel 5.

MEMORY VERSE: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart. Do not depend on your own understanding. In all your ways remember him. Then he will make your paths smooth and straight” (Proverbs 3:5, 6, NIV).

AS DANIEL 5 OPENS, WE SEE A GREAT BANQUET HALL WITH A THOUSAND GUESTS. A thousand guests is not really a lot. Kings in the ancient¹ world were known for their grand banquets. At the beginning of the book of Esther, we find King Ahasuerus giving a feast for all his nobles and servants that lasted 180 days (Esther 1:3, 4). The historian Ctesias tells us that Ahasuerus fed 15,000 men daily. And at the wedding banquet of Alexander the Great, “10,000 guests were present.”—J. A. Montgomery, *The International Critical² Commentary: The Book of Daniel* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clarke, 1927), p. 250.

Throughout Daniel 5, Nebuchadnezzar is called the father of Belshazzar (Daniel 5:2, 11, 13, 18, 22). The word *father* in the Hebrew language can mean a person's grandfather or great-grandfather. For example, Mephibosheth is called the son of Saul (2 Samuel 19:24). But Saul was really Mephibosheth's grandfather (2 Samuel 9:6).

Now let us join what truly can be called “a surprise party.”

A LOOK AT THIS WEEK'S LESSON: What was King Belshazzar's sin? Why did he react as he did to the handwriting on the wall? Why was the king “without excuse” for his actions? In what way are we all “without excuse” (Romans 1:20)?

Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 30.

¹ancient—very old.

²critical—being important to something.

SUNDAY—OCTOBER 24

THE HANDWRITING ON THE WALL (Daniel 5:1-9).

In 539 B.C., Cyrus, the Persian king, marched against King Nabonidus, of Babylon, at Opis, on the Tigris River. Nabonidus tried to stop Cyrus from crossing the Tigris. But the Babylonians suffered a terrible defeat. The Persians pushed quickly through to Sippar, on the Euphrates River. Cyrus captured Sippar without a fight in October, 539 B.C. According to Babylonian history, Nabonidus fled south. Belshazzar, his son, stayed in Babylon about thirty-five miles south of Sippar. Belshazzar trusted Babylon's strong walls.

Why would Belshazzar give a banquet and send for the vessels (cups) from God's temple, when he was surrounded by the enemy (Daniel 5:1-4)?

Was the banquet an act of disrespect for the Persians and a sign of false faith in the strong walls of Babylon? Or was the banquet a holiday that happened to fall on this special date? No matter why Belshazzar gave the banquet, he showed too much pride and a careless state of mind when he commanded the vessels to be brought from God's house.

Read Daniel 5:4. The Babylonians

were praising the gods of the vessels. But how was this an act of rebellion against God, whose vessels were taken from the temple? (Read Exodus 20:4, 5; Isaiah 45:5; Colossians 1:15; 1 Timothy 1:17.)

The king and his guests were drunk. But they quickly became sober when they saw the "fingers of a man's hand" writing something on the wall. All of a sudden, the celebration stopped. Silence filled the room.



What was the king's first reaction when he recovered from shock? Daniel 5:7.

Belshazzar called for an interpretation of the writing. But once again, the wise men of Babylon could not help the king. The writing was in Aramaic.³ Because Aramaic used only consonants,⁴

³Aramaic—the everyday language of the Jewish people.

⁴consonants—all letters that are not vowels. In English, the vowels are a, e, i, o, u, and y.

the writing was too short for them to understand the meaning of the words.

Study the king's reaction to the writings. Daniel 5:6. What does his reaction suggest? Suppose that a hand wrote unknown words on your wall. How would you react, and why?

MONDAY—OCTOBER 25

THE QUEEN'S ADVICE (Daniel 5:10-12).

The confusion of Belshazzar and his nobles must have continued for a while. The news of what happened spread throughout the palace to the queen. Nobody knows who she really was. She was not one of Belshazzar's wives, because they and his concubines⁵ were already at the feast (Daniel 5:3). Bible scholars⁶ disagree on whether the queen was Belshazzar's mother or his grandmother, the wife of Nebuchadnezzar.

The importance of queen mothers is well known in the Mid-East. Often the mother of the ruling king held a more important position at the court of her son than his own wife. A record from Haran speaks of the influence Belshazzar's mother had on him. The Greek historian Herodotus reports that Nebuchadnezzar's wife was well known for her wisdom. He credits her with the development of Babylon's defenses.

The king called in all the wise men except Daniel. What does this show about the king's respect for the past and the spiritual lessons he should have learned from the past?

When the queen mother entered the banquet hall, she was able to calm the frightened king. She remembered that at two different times, Daniel had been able to interpret Nebuchadnezzar's dreams. She must have decided that if anyone could solve this problem, it would be Daniel. Now he was probably retired. But he still lived in Babylon.

What reasons did the queen give for her faith that Daniel could interpret the handwriting? Daniel 5:11, 12.

Before encouraging her son to call Daniel, the queen mother praises Daniel. Her words remind us of Nebuchadnezzar's words in Daniel 4:1-3, 34-37. She mentions Daniel twice. This shows us that she knew Daniel well. If she was Nebuchadnezzar's widow, it is possible she shared her husband's belief in Daniel's God.

What lesson do her words about Daniel suggest about the power of personal influence? What kind of influence do you have on the people you meet?

⁵concubines—women who belonged to Belshazzar, but who were not his wives.

⁶Bible scholars—people who study the Bible as their profession.

TUESDAY—OCTOBER 26

WITHOUT EXCUSE (Daniel 5:13-24).

How King Belshazzar greeted Daniel tells us that Belshazzar maybe did not know Daniel well. Or the king's greeting may tell us that the king had not seen Daniel for many years. It seems that when Nebuchadnezzar died more than twenty years earlier, Daniel retired from public service. But in his old age, Daniel again served the Persian king (Daniel 6:1-3). This shows that his retirement from Babylonian politics was not a result of sickness or old age. Daniel's refusal to work for Belshazzar (Daniel 5:22, 23) may have been why Darius decided to hire Daniel.

Why could Belshazzar offer Daniel only the third place in the kingdom (Daniel 5:16)?

Officially, Belshazzar's father, Nabonidus, was still the king of Babylon. As co-king, Belshazzar was second in command. For this reason, Belshazzar could offer only the third place to Daniel.

As we see later, Daniel had no problem interpreting the words. But before Daniel interpreted the words, he wanted the king to know the reason for the upcoming punishment. By repeating the history of Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel reminded King Belshazzar that it was the Most High God who had given Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar the authority (power) to rule Babylon (Daniel 5:18, 23). Daniel pointed

out that at the end of Nebuchadnezzar's insanity, Nebuchadnezzar admitted that " 'the Most High God rules over all the kingdoms of men. He puts anyone he wants to in charge of them [the kingdoms of men]' " (Daniel 5:21, NIV).

What was Belshazzar's great sin? Daniel 5:22, 23.

Belshazzar knew from experience what had happened to his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar. But Belshazzar failed to learn from Nebuchadnezzar's experience. Nebuchadnezzar had been proud. But he had repented.⁷ Yet Belshazzar chose to rebel against God's law and authority. His sin was great. His punishment was quick.

In a way, Daniel was telling Belshazzar that Belshazzar was "without excuse" (Romans 1:20). Why are we all "without excuse"? Why does the fact that we are "without excuse" make the Cross even more important to us?

WEDNESDAY—OCTOBER 27

WEIGHED AND FOUND WANTING (Daniel 5:25-29).**What was the message of the handwriting? Daniel 5:26-28.**

In Aramaic, the writing included four words. Because Aramaic was written only

⁷repented—to have said you were sorry for your sins and that you want to stop sinning.

with consonants, the words depended on what vowels were added. To the wise men, the letters M N M N T Q L P R S N did not make sense. Some of the wise men may have seen the names of three common weights on the wall: “a mina, a mina, a shekel, and a half-shekel.” But translated into modern weights, what did “a pound, a pound, an ounce, and half an ounce” mean? Daniel read the words as “*mene, mene, tekel, upharsin.*” He then gave the interpretation: “numbered, numbered, weighed, and divided.” The first word was repeated to make a point, just as when Jesus said “*verily*” (truly), “*verily*” in the New Testament (John 3:11; John 5:24).

Mene means “numbered.” The days of Belshazzar’s rule had been numbered. God had decided to bring Belshazzar’s rule to a stop. *Tekel* means “weighed.” Belshazzar’s life and actions were placed on one side of the scales (weight), and God’s law on the other side of the scale. Belshazzar’s side, unfortunately, was found wanting (lacking). *Upharsin* means “broken” or “divided.” Belshazzar’s kingdom was about to be broken and given to the Medes and the Persians.

The message was clear and pointed. God had numbered or added up Belshazzar’s crimes. The period of Babylon’s powerful kingdom was coming to an end. The dreams of Nebuchadnezzar, the rescue of the three Hebrews from the furnace of fire, and the mysterious handwriting on the wall are examples of God’s direct action in human affairs.

If our lives were placed on one side of a scale and God’s law on the other side of the scale, would we do any better than Belshazzar? If we did do

better than Belshazzar, would we still be good enough? Romans 3:23. We are not all that different from Belshazzar. But we believe there is a very important difference between us as Christians and Belshazzar. That difference is our faith in the God “who holds in his hand your very life and everything you do” (Daniel 5:23, NIV). How do the following verses explain what we have in Jesus that makes all the difference between us and the doomed Belshazzar? Psalm 130:3, 4; John 5:24; Romans 8:1; Ephesians 1:7.



We are not found wanting when Jesus makes a difference in our lives.

THURSDAY—OCTOBER 28

BABYLON’S FALL (Daniel 5:30, 31).

At times, God delayed judgment to give people the opportunity to repent (Jonah 1). But for Belshazzar, the time of probation (testing) was closed.

The Greek historian Herodotus explains how the Persians were able to get past Babylon’s powerful walls. Herodotus writes that Cyrus redirected the water of the Euphrates River. Cyrus

caused the river level to drop as it went under the city wall. When the water reached about half way up a man's thigh, the Persian soldiers entered the city through the riverbed. The Babylonians became careless, because they were so sure Cyrus could not take the city. So Cyrus's army came upon them by surprise and took the city. (Herodotus, *The Histories* [Baltimore, Md.: Penguin Books, 1954], pp. 90, 91.)

From Babylonian history books, we learn that Babylon fell on the sixteenth day of Tishri (October 12, 539 B.C.) Belshazzar was killed. But his father, Nabonidus, fled south, and surrendered to Cyrus. According to a Greek report, Cyrus spared (saved) Nabonidus's life and gave him a home in Carmania, a Persian province (territory) on the north shore of the Persian Gulf.

What are some comparisons⁸ between the fall of real Babylon in 539 B.C. and the fall of spiritual Babylon in the time of the end?

Jeremiah 51:13; Revelation 17:1 (the prostitute⁹ in Revelation 17:1 means spiritual Babylon) _____

Jeremiah 51:8; Revelation 14:8 _____

⁸comparisons—how things are the same.

⁹prostitute—a person who gets paid for having sex.

¹⁰prophesied—said what would happen in the future.

Jeremiah 51:44, 45; Revelation 18:2-4

Jeremiah 51:60-64; Revelation 18:21-24



“ ‘Fallen! Babylon the Great has fallen!’ ”
(Revelation 14:8, NIV).

When Babylon was at the peak of its power in 597 B.C., Jeremiah prophesied¹⁰ that Babylon would have “ ‘all of its buildings knocked down. It will be a home for wild dogs. No one will live there. People will be shocked at it. They will make fun of it’ ” (Jeremiah 51:37, NIV). But after its fall to the Persians, Babylon remained an important city. Alexander the Great planned to make it the capital of his empire. But he died before he could do that. One of his generals, Seleucus Nicator, chose Opis as his capital. He changed the name to Seleucia after himself. He used millions of bricks from Babylon to help build his new capital. Babylon sank slowly into being an unknown city. After hundreds of years passed, Babylon fell

into decay. By A.D. 200, Babylon was a ghost town. Soon the desert sands covered it. Then it became a lost city until archaeologists¹¹ uncovered it in the nineteenth century (1800s).

FRIDAY—OCTOBER 29

ADDITIONAL STUDY: Read Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 522–538.

“God had given Belshazzar many opportunities for knowing and doing His will. Belshazzar had seen his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar go insane. He had seen Nebuchadnezzar driven from his kingdom and made to live like a beast among the beasts of the field. But Belshazzar’s love of good times and self-glory made him forget the lessons he learned from Nebuchadnezzar. Belshazzar did sins almost the same as the sins that brought punishment to Nebuchadnezzar. Belshazzar neglected to use the opportunities God gave him for knowing the truth. ‘What must I do to be saved?’ was a question the great but foolish Belshazzar did not take seriously.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, in *Bible Echo*, April 25, 1898.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Belshazzar chose to ignore what God had done in the life of Nebuchadnezzar. Why are we also likely to ignore what God has done in our life and in the lives of other people?
2. What useful steps can we take when we weigh our lives in the scales and

find that they are wanting (lacking)? Why is the Cross the first place we must go to if we want to change?

3. What is the connection between Daniel 5 and the second angel’s message in Revelation 14:8?
4. In Daniel 5:23, Daniel tells Belshazzar that he has ignored the God “who holds in his hand your very life and everything you do” (NIV). What does it mean that God “holds in his hand your very life and everything you do”? How do Daniel 1, 2, 3, and 4 help you to answer this question?



Our lives are in God’s hands.

SUMMARY: Belshazzar knew well the experiences of his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar. But Belshazzar chose to rebel against the God of heaven. It is sad when the wisdom of parents and grandparents cannot be passed on to their children. A person’s eternal¹² life depends on his or her own choice.

¹¹archaeologists—people who dig up the ground to find things from the past.

¹²eternal—forever; without beginning or end; lasting forever.