

Surprise Party



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Daniel 5.*

Memory Text: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths” (*Proverbs 3:5, 6, NKJV*).

As this chapter opens, we see a great banquet hall with a thousand guests. The “thousand” is no exaggeration. Kings in the ancient world were known for their lavish banquets.

Throughout the chapter, Nebuchadnezzar is called the father of Belshazzar (*Dan. 5:2, 11, 13, 18, 22*), referring to the fact that his mother, Nitocris, was probably Nebuchadnezzar's daughter. The word *father* in the Semitic languages can refer to any ancestor or predecessor, not only to the immediate parent. Mephibosheth is called the son of Saul (*2 Sam. 19:24*), whereas he was really the son of Jonathan (*2 Sam. 9:6*). Christ was called the Son of David (*Matt. 9:27*), not because David was His immediate human father but because He was from the lineage of David (*Luke 2:4*).

The Week at a Glance: What was the king'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 sense are we all, as Romans 1:20 says, “without excuse”?

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

The Handwriting on the Wall (*Dan. 5:1-9*).

When in 539 B.C., Cyrus, the Persian king, marched against Babylon, King Nabonidus, of Babylon, met him with his forces at Opis, on the Tigris, in an attempt to prevent Cyrus from crossing the river. The Babylonians suffered a disastrous defeat, and the Persians pushed immediately through to Sippar, on the Euphrates. Cyrus captured Sippar without a fight in October of 539 B.C. According to the Babylonian chronicle, Nabonidus fled south. Belshazzar, his son, stayed in Babylon, about thirty-five miles south of Sippar, trusting in its strong fortifications.

Surrounded by the enemy, why would Belshazzar give such a banquet and send for the vessels from God's temple (*Dan. 5:1-4*)?

Was it an act of defiance aimed at the Persians and a show of confidence in the strong walls of Babylon? Or was it simply a festival that happened to fall on this particular date? Whatever the reason, Belshazzar's pride and reckless state of mind are shown by his command to bring the vessels from the house of Yahweh.

Read **verse 4. Though they were praising the gods of the vessels, how was this an act of defiance against the God of the temple from which those vessels were taken?** See *Exod. 20:4, 5; Isa. 45:5; Col. 1:15; 1 Tim. 1:17*.

No matter how drunk the king and his guests were, they quickly sobered up when they saw the "fingers of a man's hand" writing something on the wall. All of a sudden, the revelry stopped, and a deathly silence filled the room.

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

Belshazzar calls for an interpretation, but once again, as in the case of his grandfather, the wise men of Babylon are unable to help the king. The inscription was in Aramaic, which, like Hebrew, is written only in consonants, and it was so short that though they could read the individual words, they did not understand their meaning.

Look at the reaction of the king to the writing that he didn't understand (vs. 6). Without even knowing what the words meant, he was afraid. What does that reaction imply?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Key Text: *Proverbs 3:5, 6.*

Teachers Aims:

1. To understand the wisdom in learning from our parents and grandparents.
2. To show that God's mercy is not without boundaries.
3. To see the pernicious results of reducing the sacred to the profane.

Lesson Outline:

I. The Party's Over (*Dan. 5:1-9*).

- A. Belshazzar's sensual feast insults the living God.
- B. Belshazzar sobers up when a disembodied hand scrawls strange words on the wall of the palace.
- C. The king's wise men are unable to translate the handwriting.

II. The Queen Mother's Counsel (*Dan. 5:10-12*).

- A. News of the mysterious handwriting on the wall reaches the queen mother, who calms Belshazzar.
- B. She recalls Daniel's ability to decipher dreams.
- C. She urges Belshazzar to call Daniel to interpret the handwriting on the wall.

III. Weighed and Found Wanting (*Dan. 5:25-29*).

- A. Belshazzar knows of Nebuchadnezzar's experience and still refuses to humble his heart.
- B. Consequently, Belshazzar is without excuse.
- C. God gives Babylon into the hands of Darius, the king of Media.

Summary: "We are living in the time of the end. The fast-fulfilling signs of the times declare that the coming of Christ is near at hand."—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9, p. 11. "We have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and His teaching in our past history."—Page 10.

COMMENTARY

I. Ignorance Is Not Bliss.

It is common in Christian and particularly in Seventh-day Adventist circles to say that people are responsible only for the knowledge available to them. It is comforting to think that God does not hold us accountable for things we could not have known.

It is true that some passages, such as Leviticus 5:16, 17, suggest it is possible for one to commit sins in ignorance, but perhaps we can attribute that to the peculiarities of the sacrificial system in place at the time. In commenting on this passage, the *Seventh-day*

The Queen's Counsel (*Dan. 5:10-12*).

The confusion of Belshazzar and his nobles must have lasted for some time. The news of what had happened was carried throughout the palace and reached the ears of the “queen,” who had not been present in the banquet hall. Her identity is uncertain. It was not one of Belshazzar’s wives, because they and his concubines were already at the feast (*vs. 3*). Scholars are divided as to whether it was Belshazzar’s mother or his grandmother, the wife of Nebuchadnezzar.

The importance of queen mothers is widely attested to in ancient Near Eastern sources. Often the mother of the reigning king held a more important position at the court of her son than his own wife. An inscription from Haran speaks of the influence Belshazzar’s mother had on the career of her son, and the Greek historian Herodotus reports that Nebuchadnezzar’s wife was renowned for her wisdom. He credits her with the development of the defenses of Babylon.

The king called in all the wise men but Daniel. What does this omission imply about how far removed the king was from the past and the spiritual lessons that he should have learned?

When the queen mother entered the banquet hall, she was able to calm the frazzled king. She remembered that on at least two prior occasions Daniel had been able to interpret Nebuchadnezzar’s dreams, and she must have concluded that if anyone could solve this riddle, it would be Daniel. He evidently was in retirement at that time, though he still lived in Babylon. At the right time, God had the right man ready.

What reasons did the queen give for her confidence that Daniel could decipher the handwriting on the wall? *Dan. 5:11, 12*.

Before urging her son to call Daniel, the queen mother sang the praises of the aged prophet. Her words remind us of Nebuchadnezzar’s confession in Daniel chapter 4. The fact that she mentions the name of Daniel twice indicates that she was well acquainted with him. If she was Nebuchadnezzar’s widow, it is possible that she shared her husband’s conviction regarding Daniel’s God.

What lesson do her words about Daniel suggest regarding the power of personal influence? Be honest with yourself: What kind of influence do your words project upon those with whom you come in contact? What do you need to change?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Adventist Bible Commentary points out that “a man might be ignorant and his act therefore considered excusable. But though ignorant, he might yet become a menace to others as a carrier of infection. Hence, in certain cases he might not be entirely innocent, and must be taught a lesson designed to impress him and others.”—Vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1978), p. 734. So, we see that the sanctions in such instances served a social function.

However, some people understand the “ignorance clause” to mean they can refuse to absorb knowledge readily available to them without bearing any responsibility for their ignorance. This is a form of spiritual sloth (laziness), and sloth is a particularly deadly sin (*Prov. 21:25, Matt. 25:14-30*). The “ignorance clause” also is quite distinct from the case of someone who would like to know more about God and His will but who does not have the resources available. We are responsible to seek the truth. Failure to do so is itself a sin. Belshazzar was raised in the palace with Daniel and the eventually God-fearing Nebuchadnezzar. Yet, he chose to pretend that the knowledge available to him did not exist. Although he did not seek knowledge, knowledge sought him. By then, however, it was too late.

Ignorance is not bliss. The truly ignorant want to replace ignorance with knowledge. The willfully ignorant try to shut out the truth, but fail. So, follow the advice of Isaiah: “Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near” (*Isa. 55:6, NIV*).

II. Useful Quotes About Ignorance, Knowledge, and Wisdom.

“Wisdom must be welcomed into our lives daily. When crises come, wisdom will carry us through if we have allowed her to teach us daily lessons. But she will not be called in as a means of rescue just to be abandoned as soon as the crisis is past. . . .

“Life is full of chances to learn the life-code God recommends. If we spurn them, our refusals will snowball until when we need help, we have nothing and no one to turn to.”—David Wright, *Wisdom as a Lifestyle* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987), p. 39.

“For all knowledge that we might have gained but did not, there will be an eternal loss, even if we do not lose our souls.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 147.

“A fool may be merely simple and uninstructed, young and susceptible. . . . But he may also be willfully perverse, ill-natured like Nabal or like Saul in their behavior toward David . . . or a prey to cupidity like Achan . . . and hating knowledge or reproof, his way being ‘right in his own eyes.’”—“Folly,” *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1962), vol. 2, p. 304.

“These fearful words of doom [*found wanting*, Dan. 5:26, ed.] . . . condemn all who, like Belshazzar, neglect their God-given

Without Excuse (*Dan. 5:13-24*).

From the way Belshazzar greeted Daniel, we may conclude that Belshazzar was not personally acquainted with Daniel, or he had not seen him for many years. It seems that when Nebuchadnezzar died more than twenty years earlier, Daniel retired from public service. However, the fact that Daniel, in his old age, entered the services of the Persian kings (*Dan. 6:1-3*) indicates that his retirement from Babylonian politics was not a result of ill health or old age. His public censure of Belshazzar (*Dan. 5:22, 23*) may have been one of the factors that led Darius to hire the services of Daniel.

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

Officially, Belshazzar's father, Nabonidus, was still the king of Babylon. Belshazzar, as coregent, was second in command; therefore, he could offer only the third place to the person who could interpret the writing on the wall.

As we see later, Daniel had no difficulty interpreting the words; but before he did so, he wanted the king to know the reason for the impending tragedy. By recounting the history of Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel reminded King Belshazzar that it was the Most High God who had granted Nebuchadnezzar, and by implication also Belshazzar, the authority to rule Babylon (*Dan. 5:18, 23*). He pointed out that at the end of Nebuchadnezzar's insanity, the king acknowledged that "the Most High God rules in the kingdom of men, and appoints over it whomever He chooses" (*vs. 21, NKJV*).

What was Belshazzar's great sin in the sight of God? *Dan 5:22, 23*.

Although Belshazzar knew firsthand what had happened to his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar, he failed to learn from Nebuchadnezzar's experience. His grandfather had been proud, but he had repented and had become a child of God. Belshazzar, on the other hand, chose to defy God's law and authority and refused to humble himself. His sin, therefore, was great and the judgment speedy.

In a sense, Daniel was telling the king that he was "without excuse" (*Rom. 1:20*). Why, in the end, are we all "without excuse"? Even more important, why does the fact we are "without excuse" make the Cross even more crucial to us?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

opportunities. In the investigative judgment now in progress . . . men are weighed in the balances of the sanctuary to see whether their moral character and spiritual state correspond with the benefits and blessings God has conferred upon them.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, p. 805.

“The wise man is one who fears God, whereas the fool has no fear of God in his heart. He either neglects God because of a love of ease and pleasure, or willfully defies Him. Foolishness and wickedness are thus almost synonymous expressions.”—*The SDA Bible Dictionary*, p. 385.

Inductive Bible Study

Texts for Discovery: *Ecclesiastes 12:1-7, Daniel 5, Romans 1:18-23, Revelation 18:1-8.*

- ❶ The incident recorded in Daniel 5 is about judgment—there was nothing redemptive about it (at least as far as Belshazzar was concerned). What should Belshazzar have known about Daniel’s God? How should he have known about Him?
- ❷ The crowning act of Belshazzar’s defiance against God was the use of temple utensils for idolatrous and profane purposes. What, in today’s society, does God consider truly offensive? *Read Galatians 5:19-21 and 1 Timothy 3:1-9.* Are these the sins of only really bad people? Or is there anything here that we could all be guilty of? What is the antidote to these negative traits?
- ❸ Daniel’s influence in Babylon had by now spanned several decades. His was a trusted voice. How does one get that kind of reputation? Is it something we can all have? *Read Matt. 7:15-20.*
- ❹ The words, “You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting” (*Dan. 5:27, NIV*), remind us that our lives are not without meaning. The world is either a better place for us being here, or it is not. Belshazzar’s material blessings did not prevent him from living a life of disgrace. Who do you know who has had far fewer resources but uses what he or she has to honor God and serve others? Be specific.
- ❺ If God really keeps track of what we do, how can we be confident that we have done enough to please Him? *Read Rom. 8:1-4.* Our actions do not save us. So, what purpose do they serve? How do they reflect only the extent we have been captivated by God’s grace and transformed by His Spirit?

Weighed and Found Wanting (*Dan. 5:25-29*).

What was the message of the handwriting on the wall? *Dan. 5:26-28*.

In Aramaic, the inscription consisted of a series of four words. Because Aramaic, like Hebrew, was written only with consonants, the way in which the words were to be read depended on which vowels were supplied. To the wise men, the letters M N M N T Q L P R S N did not make sense. Some of them 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 them out as “*mene, mene, tekel, upharsin*” and then gave the interpretation: “numbered, numbered, weighed, and divided.” The repetition of the first word is a solemn emphasis, just like Jesus’ words “*verily, verily*” in the New Testament (*John 3:11, 5:24*).

MENE means “numbered,” because the days of Belshazzar’s reign had been numbered, and God had decided to call a halt. *TEKEL* means “weighed.” Belshazzar’s life and actions were placed on one side of the scales, so to speak, and God’s law on the other side. Belshazzar’s side, unfortunately, was found wanting. *PERES* means “broken” or “divided.” Belshazzar’s kingdom was about to be broken and given to the Medes and Persians. There is a play on words here, because the consonants for the word *divided* are the same as for the name Persian (*paras*).

The message, then, was clear and specific. God had numbered or added up the crimes of the king and completed their tally. The period of Babylon’s political supremacy was coming to an end. Besides the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar and the deliverance of the three Hebrews from the fiery furnace, the mysterious handwriting on the wall was another example of God’s direct intervention in human affairs.

If our lives, like Belshazzar’s, were placed on a balance (our life on one side and God’s law on the other), would we fare much better? And even if we fared better, would we fare well enough? After all, whose life—even that of the most saintly Christian—can stand before God’s holy law (*Rom. 3:23*)? In that sense, we aren’t all that different, really, from Belshazzar. However, we believe that there is a crucial and defining difference between us as Christians and this king: our faith in the God in “whose hand thy breath is” (*Dan. 5:23*). Read the following texts: Psalm 130:4, John 5:24, Romans 8:1, Ephesians 1:7. How do they explain what we have in Christ that makes all the difference between us and this king, who was doomed now and forever?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

III. What the Bible Says About Ignorance, Knowledge, and Wisdom.

“My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also reject you as my priests; because you have ignored the law of your God, I also will ignore your children” (*Hos. 4:6, NIV*).

“For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge. . . . For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and

Witnessing

Never underestimate the power of influence. In the right hands, influence can keep the course of our lives heavenward; in the wrong hands, it can open wide the doors of hell. If fortunate, we are influenced at an early age by committed Christian parents, whose power of example leads us ever closer to our heavenly Father. The following example illustrates just that.

U.S. attorney general and former senator John Ashcroft grew up in a strong, nurturing Christian family. His father, a pastor and the president of a Christian college, always asked for God’s special blessing on memorable events in the family’s life. So, it was natural that just before John was sworn in as a U.S. senator the family gathered for a special consecration service. At the beginning of the service, John’s dad asked for all present to sing the song “Holy Ground.” He told those assembled he had chosen this song because Washington, D.C., held a reputation as an arrogant city, and John was being called there to model a life filled with humility and to stand for what is right. Therefore, God’s holy ground was indeed needed.

John goes on to say, “We knelt together, knee to knee. . . . And I . . . thanked God for my legacy, my rich inheritance. . . . I [thanked] God for the lessons my father taught me—some by his words, and some by his life. . . . My father prayed as if his family’s life and vitality were even then being debated on high as he bowed low. . . . Sitting so close to him provided a serenity and comfort and captivated my heart.”—Ruthie Jacobsen with Penny Estes Wheeler, *Because You Prayed* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1999), pp. 19, 20.

What an example has been set by this earthly father! His Christ-centered influence stretches into the highest levels of government—just as the faithful Daniel’s did so many centuries ago.

No question about it. Never underestimate the power of influence.

Babylon's Fall (*Dan. 5:30, 31*).

While at times God delayed judgment to give people the opportunity to repent (*Jonah 1*), in Belshazzar's case the time of probation was closed.

How the Persians were able to penetrate the seemingly impregnable defenses of the city is explained by the Greek historian Herodotus, who wrote some eighty years after the event happened. He writes that Cyrus diverted the river Euphrates by redirecting its flow, causing the river level to drop as it went beneath the city wall. When the water reached about midway up a man's thigh, the Persian soldiers entered the city via the riverbed. So sure the city could not be taken, the Babylonians grew careless. Thus, the Persians came upon them by surprise and so took the city.—Herodotus, *The Histories* (Baltimore, Md.: Penguin Books, 1954), pp. 90, 91.

From the Babylonian chronicles we learn that Babylon fell on the sixteenth day of Tishri, or on October 12, 539 B.C., in terms of our calendar. Belshazzar was slain, but his father, Nabonidus, who had fled south, surrendered and committed himself to the mercy of Cyrus. According to a Greek report, Cyrus spared his life and gave him a residence in Carmania, a Persian province located along the north shore of the Persian Gulf.

What are some parallels between the fall of literal Babylon in 539 B.C. and the fall of spiritual Babylon in the time of the end? *Jer. 51:8, 13, 45, 60-64; Rev. 14:8; 17:1; 18:4; 18:21-24.*

Around 597 B.C., when Babylon was at the pinnacle of its power, Jeremiah prophesied that Babylon would become “ ‘a heap, a dwelling place for jackals, an astonishment and a hissing, without an inhabitant’ ” (*Jer. 51:37, NKJV*). Yet, after its fall to the Persians, it remained an important city. Alexander the Great planned to make it the capital of his empire, but he died prematurely. One of his generals, Seleucus Nicator, chose Opis, to the north, as his capital, which he named Seleucia after himself. He used millions of bricks from Babylon to help build his new capital. Babylon, therefore, sank slowly into obscurity. As century succeeded century, it gradually fell into decay. By A.D. 200 the place was deserted. Covered by the shifting sands of the desert, it became a lost city until archaeologists uncovered it in the nineteenth century.

TEACHERS COMMENTS

blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins” (2 *Pet. 1:5, 8, 9, NIV*).

“For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles” (*Rom. 1:21-23, NIV*).

Life-Application Approach

Icebreaker: Children love riddles. Riddles pique their curiosity and imagination. Children love trying to unscramble and untangle what may appear to be isolated and perplexing bits of nonsense. Little ones are comfortable with the ridiculous—adults generally are not. Adults most often prefer the predictable and explained rather than the unpredictable and the unexplained. They want messaging and language units to be whole and precise, not fragments that are incomplete. Adults like straightforward communication, and they value the human skills required for decoding complex messages. God, too, has a particular use for cryptology from time to time. He also has promised to reveal all in His own way, at His chosen time.

Thought Question:

God’s message to Belshazzar was clear and unequivocal: “I’ve given you the past to draw from and have allowed you time to correct your behavior and get to really know Me. You’ve not done so—you’ve been found wanting; you will have no further chances.” We also have the past to draw from and the eternal future of heaven to focus on. Are you satisfied with your Christian progress? What more must you do to be ready to meet Jesus?

Application Question:

Queen mothers, whether in ancient or modern times, are revered for their station and position within the royal household. Their wise counsel and experience are treasured by those who would learn from them. Is this so different from the Christian mother’s role in the family unit? What an opportunity she has to mold and structure young lives, and what an impressive responsibility she has to prepare her children for heaven. Look for ways to encourage and uplift mothers whenever possible, knowing that such efforts honor God.

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 522–538.

“Belshazzar had been given many opportunities for knowing and doing the will of God. He had seen his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar banished from the society of men. He had seen the intellect in which the proud monarch gloried taken away by the One who gave it. He had seen the king driven from his kingdom, and made the companion of the beasts of the field. But Belshazzar’s love of amusement and self-glorification effaced the lessons he should never have forgotten; and he committed sins similar to those that brought signal judgments on Nebuchadnezzar. He wasted the opportunities graciously granted him, neglecting to use the opportunities within his reach for becoming acquainted with truth. ‘What must I do to be saved?’ was a question that the great but foolish king passed by indifferently.”—Ellen G. White, *Bible Echo*, April 25, 1898.

Discussion Questions:

- 1** Belshazzar was acquainted with many of God’s actions; yet, he deliberately chose to ignore them. Why do we all tend to do the same thing; that is, ignore what God has done in our life or in the lives of others? What’s the main reason?
- 2** What practical steps can we take when we weigh our lives in the balances and find that they are wanting? Why is the Cross the first place we must go if we want to change?
- 3** What is the relevance of this chapter to the second angel’s message, in Revelation 14:8?
- 4** In Daniel 5:23, Daniel tells the king that he has ignored the God “in whose hand thy breath is.” What does that statement mean? How does it fit in with the overall context of the previous chapters?

Summary: In spite of the experiences of his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar, with which Belshazzar was acquainted, the king chose to defy the God of heaven and suffered the consequences. It is a sad commentary on the fact that the wisdom of parents and grandparents cannot always be passed on to the next generations. The individual’s eternal destiny rests on his or her own choice.