



Potomac Hills

Presbyterian Church, PCA



By Grace Alone ~ Through Faith Alone ~ In Christ Alone

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Daniel 5:1-31

March 8, 2009
English Standard Version

“The Writing on the Wall”

This is the 9th sermon in the series on the book of Daniel entitled,
“A Broken World and a Sovereign God.”

Daniel 5:1-31

“King Belshazzar made a great feast for a thousand of his lords and drank wine in front of the thousand.

² 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. ³ 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. ⁴ They drank wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone.

⁵ 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. ⁶ Then the king’s color changed, and his thoughts alarmed him; his limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together. ⁷ 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.” ⁸ Then all the king’s wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or make known to the king the interpretation. ⁹ Then King Belshazzar was greatly alarmed, and his color changed, and his lords were perplexed.

¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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,¹² because an excellent spirit, knowledge, and understanding to interpret dreams, explain riddles, and solve problems were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Beltshazzar. Now let Daniel be called, and he will show the interpretation.”

¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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.”

¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ O king, the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father kingship and greatness and glory and majesty.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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.²¹ 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.²² And you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this,²³ 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.

²⁴ “Then from His presence the hand was sent, and this writing was inscribed.²⁵ And this is the writing that was inscribed: Mene, Mene, Tekel, and Parsin.²⁶ This is the interpretation of the matter: Mene, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end;²⁷ Tekel, you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting;²⁸ Peres, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.”

²⁹ 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.

³⁰ That very night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was killed.³¹ And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old.”

Heavenly Father, once again we have come to Your Word and we're amazed to see the hand of Your providence at work. There are people here this morning who need to hear the message of

this Word, Lord, so open our ears to truly hear. And we ask that by the power of the Holy Spirit, humble us before Your sovereignty, that we might taste of Your grace and not of Your judgment. Do this for each of us, this morning, in Jesus' name, and for His glory, Amen.

INTRODUCTION: *The Saga of the Bat Man*¹

What's your life worth?

What would it be worth if the value of your life were measured in wooden baseball bats? The best aluminum bats go for about \$400, the best wooden bats go for about \$90, but if you buy them in bulk, it's a little cheaper. And if you're not sure how many bats you're worth, then last year you could have asked John Odom.

Ask the most hard-core baseball fan about John C. Odom and most likely you'll get a blank stare. Yet millions of people have heard of the slender right-hander. He was "Bat Man" or "Bat Guy" or "Bat Boy," the minor league baseball player traded for 10 maple baseball bats. It became a big joke last May when word of the unusual swap jumped off the sports pages, and the former San Francisco Giants prospect went from pitcher to punch line.

"People are like, 'I'd kill myself' and stuff," Odom said at the time, dismissing any such notion.

Three weeks after the trade, he abruptly left the team.

Six months after the trade, he was dead.

The medical examiner said Odom's death in Georgia on Nov. 5th at age 26 was caused by an overdose from heroin, methamphetamine, the stimulant benzylpiperazine and alcohol. Odom's death had drawn little notice by the start of spring training this year. Now, former teammates, managers and club officials keep asking a question for which there is no satisfying answer.

"I guarantee this trade thing really bothered him. That really worried me," said Dan Shwam, who managed Odom last year on the Laredo Broncos of the United League. "I really believe, knowing his background, that this drove him back to the bottle, that it put him on the road to drugs again. But there's no way to really know whether the trade did it, is there?"

The Giants released Odom in spring training last year. The Calgary Vipers offered him a job, but because of a 1999 conviction for assault when Odom was a minor, he couldn't get into Canada. On May 20, the team made the famous trade. The Laredo Broncos general manager proposed buying Odom's contract for \$1,000. The Calgary Vipers rejected that, saying they didn't do cash deals because they made the team look financially unstable. Bats, though, the Vipers could use. At \$665 for 10 bats — made by Prairie Sticks, double-dipped black, 34 inches long, model C243, Laredo agreed to the unusual deal.

Odom did more than change teams. He changed identities. One day a ballplayer, the next day an answer to a trivia question.

Eager to play somewhere, Odom packed up after the trade and drove 30 hours, nearly 2,000 miles, to Laredo. When he arrived in Texas, everyone wanted to ask him about the bats. At first, Odom lapped up the publicity. "Batman survives," he said. His first outing went OK, too. He seemed to handle it well. He gladly agreed to interviews. He kidded about the kooky deal and said it would make a better story if he reached the majors someday.

Then came a particularly bad night in Amarillo.

¹ The Introduction is adapted from the article, "*Tragic End for John "Bat Man" Odom*" by the Associated Press, 11/5/08, updated 4/3/09, found at <http://sports.espn.go.com/mlb/news/story?id=3950464>

Baseball isn't always the warm and fuzzy game of *Bull Durham*, *For the Love of the Game*, and *Field of Dreams*.

It can also be cruel and unforgiving.

On June 5 in Amarillo, the "Batman" theme played while Odom warmed up for Laredo, and he tipped his cap to the sound booth. But he was battered for eight runs and mercilessly taunted by the crowd. The manager went to the mound. "The chants, the catcalls, they were terrible. I had to get him out of there for his own good. He was falling apart, right in front of our eyes," he said.

When Shwam, the manager of the Laredo Broncos, noticed Odom becoming more withdrawn, he called a team meeting. The message: No more talking about the trade or the bats by anyone.

Odom pitched five good innings at San Angelo on June 10 in what turned out to be his third and last start. On the bus after the game, Odom said he needed to speak with Shwam the next day. "He came in and said, 'Skip, I'm going home. I just can't take it. I've got some things to take care of. I've got to get my life straightened out,'" Shwam recalled. And with that, Odom disappeared.

Details of his final days are elusive. His death was obscure. There is no record on where he was living, no explanation of how his body wound up at a hospital, no police report, no public record of where he is buried.

The 10 bats that Odom got traded for, they're easy to discover. An Internet search shows a picture of them, stamped with "John Odom Trade Bat." They were never used. The Vipers planned to auction them for charity. When Ripley's Believe it or Not! heard about the trade, it offered \$10,000 to the team's children's charity. So the bats are now stored away at a warehouse in Orlando, FL.

One blog by a PCA pastor, which I'm deliberately leaving nameless because it's often mean-spirited, wrote this about John Odom's death ...

"We can spill a lot of words talking about justice and mercy, AIDS orphans, and being missional while not giving a tinker's cuss about the man next to us on the bus, in the carpool, or sitting by himself Sunday morning during Lord's Day worship. If they checked John Odom's cell phone, would they find a single call from a follower of Jesus Christ during this poor man's last week of life? One of us had a chance with him. One of us knew – I'm sure of it."

I don't know if any follower of Christ knew John Odom or not, so I'm not going to throw out the guilt so cavalierly, however, I do believe that in our world, there are lots of John Odom's out there. And we need to notice them.

One of the people involved with John Odom's career made this comment, "We should have seen it coming. The writing was on the wall. We just missed it."

According to Wikipedia, that phrase, "*the writing on the wall*," is a sign of doom or misfortune. It originates in the Book of Daniel, chapter 5, our passage for this morning — where supernatural writing foretells the demise of the Babylonian Empire. The phrase is widely used in language and literature. "*The writing on the wall*" has come to signify doom—or the end of an organization or activity. To attribute to someone the ability to "*read the writing on the wall*" has come to signify the ability to foresee an inevitable decline and end.

And so, with that in mind, let's continue our study of the Book of Daniel, since we're not following this in chapter order but chronologically, now we're back to chapter 5, and now we're

dealing with the interpretation of a very strange event. The story starts with ...

v. 1-4: IDOLATRY AT A FEAST²

“King Belshazzar made a great feast for a thousand of his lords and drank wine in front of the thousand.² 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.³ 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.⁴ They drank wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone.”

Outwardly, this was a glorious event, full of pomp and circumstance, in which a thousand nobles were invited to drink wine with the king. Greek historians recorded many such lavish feasts on the part of the Babylonians, and this was one of the best. And yet, by focusing our attention on this elaborate feast as the sole event worth mentioning, the emptiness of the rest of Belshazzar’s life and reign is emphasized.

Since we’re going through Daniel in chronological order, some explanation is needed for why we’re going back to chapter 5 now. It appears that chapters 7 & 8, which we’ve already covered, were given as flashbacks to an earlier time. And chapter 5, with its story of Belshazzar’s feast, is placed next to chapter 4 and its story of Nebuchadnezzar in order to contrast these two kings.

Unlike his illustrious predecessor, King Nebuchadnezzar, who destroyed cities (Daniel 1), made statues (Daniel 3), and built the wonders of Babylon (Daniel 4), the only thing Belshazzar could do was have a feast. The former built an empire, the latter planned a party. Even the centerpiece of Belshazzar’s feast — the golden vessels taken from the Temple in Jerusalem — had been carried off by Nebuchadnezzar, not Belshazzar. Belshazzar’s only contribution was to **profane** these sacred vessels taken from the Lord’s house by using them for a feast in which he praised his own gods — gods made out of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone.

One king, Nebuchadnezzar, was great, and then was humbled. The other, Belshazzar, was never great, though very proud, and he was humiliated. This contrast is **the key** to understanding Daniel 5.

So let’s look at what happened next ... and so we see ...

v. 5-9: HUMILIATION AND FEAR

Belshazzar didn’t have long to enjoy his feast, however. Because even while he and his nobles were praising their man-made gods, a revelation from the One True God broke up the party, starting at verse 5, *“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.⁶ Then the king’s color changed, and his thoughts alarmed him; his limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together.⁷ 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*

² The Exposition of the text, Applications, and Conclusion are adapted from *Daniel: Reformed Expository Commentary* by Dr. Ian Duguid, pages 77-89; *The NIV Application Commentary: Daniel* by Tremper Longman, page 136-154; the sermon, “*The Handwriting on the Wall*,” by Dr. J. Ligon Duncan, First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, MS; *ESV Study Bible*, Daniel study notes by Dr. Duguid and Dr. Paul Wegner.

neck and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom.”⁸ Then all the king’s wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or make known to the king the interpretation.⁹ Then King Belshazzar was greatly alarmed, and his color changed, and his lords were perplexed.”

The fingers of a mysterious hand wrote on the plaster of the palace wall opposite the lampstand, where its message could be clearly seen, though not easily understood

Belshazzar’s response to this writing on the wall once again shows the difference between him and Nebuchadnezzar. When Nebuchadnezzar had dreams in chapters 2 and 4, they “troubled” and “frightened” him; however, when Belshazzar receives this revelation from God, he’s totally undone by the experience. The text says, verse 6, *“Then the king’s color changed, and his thoughts alarmed him; his limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together.”* The Aramaic of this passage literally says that the “knots of his joints were loosened.” Most commentators think that this essentially meant that he lost control of his bodily functions.

And then, when his wise men couldn’t interpret the dream, he was left pale-faced and indecisive, at a loss to know how to proceed. And it was left to a powerful woman, the queen-mother, to solve the problem, a dilemma which would have been humiliating in an ancient culture.

And so we read next about . . .

v. 10-16: A FORGOTTEN PROPHET

“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.¹¹ 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,¹² because an excellent spirit, knowledge, and understanding to interpret dreams, explain riddles, and solve problems were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Beltshazzar. Now let Daniel be called, and he will show the interpretation.”¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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.”

It seems, since verse 2 tells us that the king’s wives were already present, that the queen in this case, is the queen mother, which explains how she was able to remember the role of the prophet Daniel during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar many years ago. Belshazzar was the son of Nabonidus [Nab-o-ni-dus], with whom he shared co-regency during the closing years of the Babylonian monarchy.

It seems, if you can follow the historical record, that Nebuchadnezzar was actually the great-grandfather of Belshazzar, which would mean that now the prophet Daniel is a very old man.

And so, Belshazzar, a weak king, is presented with an unreadable message. None of the Babylonian wise men were able to interpret the writing, in spite of the generous reward offered

by Belshazzar. Anyone who interpreted the writing would be clothed with purple, a fabulously expensive color in the ancient world, and would wear a chain of gold, a mark of high rank. He would also be the third ruler in the kingdom, because Belshazzar was only the second ruler, after his father, King Nabonidus.

But now, the queen mother reminds Belshazzar of the existence of Daniel, whose ability to solve problems had been repeatedly demonstrated during the time of the great king, Nebuchadnezzar. And actually there's a pun here, an Aramaic wordplay that doesn't translate well in English. If Belshazzar's fear was seen in that the "knots of his joints were loosened," then the queen is saying that Daniel is a man who has the ability to interpret the "knots of these problems."

The implication of the queen's speech is that Belshazzar should have known whom to turn to when there's a need for divine illumination — and he would have known, if he were only more like Nebuchadnezzar. In any event, he takes the queen mother's advice and calls for the prophet Daniel.

The queen mother's implicit rebuke somewhat explains the defensive tone in Belshazzar's voice when Daniel is finally brought before him. He addresses him, not as the Daniel whom Nebuchadnezzar made the chief of the wise men, but as the Daniel who was one of the exiles brought from Judah. It seems that he wants to put Daniel in his place right from the start.

But much to his surprise and dismay, Daniel stands up to him by ...

v. 17-24: **EXPLAINING THE PRESENT**

"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. ¹⁸ O king, the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father kingship and greatness and glory and majesty. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ 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. ²² And you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this, ²³ 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. ²⁴ "Then from His presence the hand was sent, and this writing was inscribed."

Daniel is blunt with this pretend king, telling him that he can keep his rewards: Daniel's services are not for sale to the highest bidder. And then, before he interprets the message, he puts it into context, a context that once again compares and contrasts the greatness of Nebuchadnezzar with the weakness of Belshazzar, finally condemning him with these words, verses 22-23, *"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 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.***"

The point of Daniel's speech is pretty clear: Nebuchadnezzar had something to be proud of, and yet the Lord still humbled him. Belshazzar, who had none of Nebuchadnezzar's achievements, should have learned from the great king and humbled himself as well. Instead, despite knowing what happened to Nebuchadnezzar, chose to exalt himself against the Lord, profaning the sacred vessels from the Temple in Jerusalem, using them in idolatrous worship, praising lifeless idols, while neglecting the One True God who is the very giver of life.

And only after explaining how wrong Belshazzar has been, does Daniel move to ...

v. 25-29: **REVEALING THE FUTURE**³

*"And this is the writing that was inscribed: Mene, Mene, Tekel, and Parsin. ²⁶ This is the interpretation of the matter: Mene, God has **numbered** the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; ²⁷ Tekel, you have been **weighed** in the balances and found wanting; ²⁸ Peres, your kingdom is **divided** and given to the Medes and Persians." ²⁹ 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."*

If read as they stand, without regard to the context, *Mene, Mene, Tekel, and Parsin* form a sequence of weights, decreasing from a mina to a shekel to a peres, or a half-shekel. But read in context (and with a different vocalization of the Aramaic letters), the sequence becomes a series of verbs: "**Numbered, Numbered, weighed, divided.**"

As Daniel himself explained it, the Lord had numbered the days of Belshazzar's kingdom and brought it to an end ... because Belshazzar had been weighed in the balance and found wanting. As a result, his kingdom would be divided and given to the Medes and the Persians ("Peres," the singular of "Parsin," sounds like the word for Persia). And so, that sets us up for the conclusion of the chapter where we find Belshazzar ...

v. 30-31: **MEETING HIS FATE**

"That very night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was killed. ³¹ And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old."

Belshazzar's party is thus exposed as the ultimate act of folly: he was feasting on the brink of extinction and dancing on the edge of his own grave ... and he never even knew it. And with Belshazzar's death, the Babylonian empire came crashing to the ground. Like the sequence of weights in the message, the once mighty kingdom became insubstantial and insignificant, **lightweight**, and was blown away by the judgment of God.

So all of that is good to know, but what do we do with it? What lessons does this ancient narrative have for us, who live in an altogether different place and time in history? And since the Bible serves as more than a historical lesson ... let's make some applications from Daniel 5.

APPLICATION #1: ACTING LIKE BELSHAZZAR

The story of Belshazzar's feast reminds us not to be awed and impressed by earthly wealth and power. God weighed it in the balance and found it wanting. One of the central themes of the Book of Daniel has been **God's sovereign power** to bring down the mighty.

And yet, in our culture, I think we're **even more apt** to elevate others, not only those with **real accomplishments**, but even those with empty pretensions. We're way too easily impressed by all that glitters, whether it's really gold or not. In our culture we idolize those who

³ The meaning of the writing on the wall is taken from the *Word Biblical Commentary: Daniel* by John Goldingay, pages 110-111.

are physically attractive, those who've acquired great wealth, and even those who are famous simply for being famous. Belshazzar's feast is set before us every day, and many of those around us are mortgaging their futures just to get an invitation to the ball.

And it's not just the rich and famous we idolize. Our envy operates at far more mundane levels as well. We covet not only the lifestyles of millionaires, but those of our neighbors as well. We want their car, house, good looks, successful career, or obedient children. In the same way, if we have any small success of our own, we glorify in our own petty assets. The reality is that we're all tinpot Belshazzars, puffed up by our minor achievements. And God's judgment on our empty pride is severe: our deeds and accomplishments have been weighed in the balance and found wanting. When we stand in the presence of God, we have **NOTHING** in which we can boast.

Just as Belshazzar feasted while the Persians were camped outside his gates, so too, man in his rebellion actively suppresses the truth about God even though it bombards their senses from every side. **Romans 1:18** says, *"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth."*

But that's not the only issue we have to deal with. Because not only do we act like Belshazzar some times, but sometimes we can be found ...

APPLICATION #2: BELIEVING LIKE BELSHAZZAR

Because it's not only Belshazzar who's been weighed in the balance and found wanting, but his gods have failed the test too. Belshazzar, verse 4, *"praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone."* He ascribed to them glory and honor, and yet his gods couldn't keep the Lord's message from disturbing the peace of the kingdom. Not to mention that they couldn't keep him safe from the Medes and the Persians.

The reality is that the God of Israel could effectively defend the honor of His sacred vessels and the lives of His faithful servants, while Babylon's gods were impotent, lacking both power and knowledge. The Lord God Almighty was able to save Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the fiery furnace, but the gods of Babylon, Bel and Marduk, had no power to save Belshazzar from the Persians.

Though his own profound humbling, Nebuchadnezzar came to understand that truth and bow his knee to the God of Israel. In contrast, Belshazzar didn't live long enough to learn that lesson. He was humbled and crushed rather than being humbled and restored.

In the West, we're tempted to idolize **freedom** and **democracy**, as if these virtues had the power within themselves to transform the world. Yet, in the last analysis, these things are no more substantial than Belshazzar's idols of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone. Freedom and democracy are great blessings when they come to us from the hand of the Most High God, who made the heavens and the earth. Yet if we turn these good things, these created things, into our gods, then we're just as foolish as Belshazzar was, and we stand under the same judgment that he did. The Lord is the one before whom you should stand in awe. He holds your breath in His hands, just as He did with Belshazzar.

As followers of Christ, we say we believe these truths, but in practice, we often act as if they're not true. Why are we completely undone by scenarios that are far less threatening than that which faced Belshazzar?

Our hearts are wracked with worry when our job is threatened or even when we can't get the car to start; we're overwhelmed with despair when our health breaks down or relationships end; we respond in anger when our pride is hurt. These responses reveal our hearts just as much

as Belshazzar's feast revealed his pride and the idols in which his trust was placed. **We're all functional Belshazzars.**

Our excessively strong negative emotions show that we have invested these things — our jobs, our health, our relationships, our comfort, our status, our achievements — with divine importance, even while we're confessing Christ as Lord. And if we were to be weighed in God's balance, we would all be found wanting, "half-shekel" believers who deserve to be blown away by God's wrath.

So why doesn't He do that?

Simply because He is ...

CONCLUSION: *The God of Sovereign Mercy*

God showed mercy to Nebuchadnezzar in spite of his earlier persecution of God's people. He humbled him and brought him to the point where he understood the reality of God's power and he bowed the knee to the Lord. But there was no such mercy for Belshazzar, whose humbling did not bring him to the point of repentance, but only to the point of death.

So God will also bring down all the proud. Some He will humble redemptively, opening their eyes to see their true need. Others will be brought down to death, ultimately shown that their life has been an empty sham. We cannot presume on God's mercy. It's a solemn and serious truth when God says, **Romans 9:15**, "*I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.*"

So the person who comes to Christ now, recognizing that you have nothing to offer Him, crying out for grace and mercy in your time of need, will find just that. And for those of us who've had our eyes opened by God's grace to see our own emptiness, this story should act as another reminder of the depth of His mercy. Why should I have been chosen to be a recipient of His grace, while others are passed over whose accomplishments far surpass my own?

There is nothing in me that makes me worthy of such a great salvation. The only explanation is God's sovereign mercy that chose me in spite of my stubbornness, my pride, and my self-centeredness, then opened my eyes to the surpassing greatness of Christ!

In contrast the kingdom of Belshazzar, which was weighed in the balance and found insubstantial, there is a kingdom which God has established in Jesus Christ wherein one finds "*the weight of glory.*"

Ironically, Jesus had none of the outward glitter for which this world clamors so loudly. He had virtually no possessions and relatively few followers. He had no outward beauty or majesty to commend Him, appearing on earth not as a mighty emperor, but as a humble carpenter. Jesus never had the resources to throw a star-studded feast for a thousand of His closest friends, though once He did brighten up a wedding banquet by turning water into Chianti Classico Riserva, the best wine.

Yet when Jesus' life was weighed in the balance, it was found to be perfect and complete, fully able to satisfy the demands of God's holiness, not just for Himself, but also for those who come to God through Him. His great banquet awaits us in the future, at the end of time; on that day, in place of Belshazzar's nobles, there will be thousands upon thousands of Christ's followers in attendance — the saints of God who have washed their robes and made them clean in the blood of the Lamb. At that banquet, there will be no place for pride, but every person present will freely confess that they've been saved by God's grace and purified by God's mercy. And on that day, there will be no interruptions of that heavenly banquet; God's rule will be finally established forever and ever and ever.

And sinners saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone are invited to come to that table.

If you have yet to come to Christ and receive Him as your Savior and Lord, then today is the day for you to learn from Belshazzar what danger you're in. Every day the Lord lets you live, you're feasting on the edge of your own grave, and as long as you refuse Christ, then as far as your destiny is concerned, the writing is on the wall. Just ask John Odom.

Think about that. You need to pray.

Take a moment to do that, and then I'll close.

Heavenly Father, You are awesome and amazing, enable us to delight in serving You. We long for that day when we see every knee bowed and every tongue confess our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. We look forward to standing on the other shore with Daniel and with all the saints of whom the world was not worthy.

In the Name of the One who lives, and reigns, and is coming again, now and forever. Amen.

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Revelation 19:9

“And the angel said to [John], “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” And he said to me, “These are the true words of God.”