

Daniel 5:1–31

“Weighed in the Balances”

The Setting: A Party on the Brink of Judgment

“Belshazzar the king made a great feast for a thousand of his lords, and drank wine in the presence of the thousand.” (Daniel 5:1 NKJV)

Daniel 5 drops us into the last hours of the Babylonian Empire. Belshazzar, the ruling king in Babylon, hosts a lavish, drunken feast for a thousand of his nobles. Ancient historians like Josephus, Herodotus, and Xenophon describe Babylon’s splendor and refer to such royal banquets—rooms filled with music, luxury, incense so heavy in the air that people were nearly intoxicated by it, trays of delicacies paraded about, and an atmosphere of arrogant security.

For many years, critics claimed Daniel 5 could not be trusted because secular records mentioned no king named Belshazzar. They said Daniel must be late and unreliable. But archaeological work—especially that of Sir Henry Rawlinson and others—uncovered Babylonian tablets that mentioned Belshazzar by name. These records showed that **Nabonidus** was the senior king, and **Belshazzar**, his son, served as co-regent in Babylon. That is why Belshazzar could only promise Daniel the position of **third** ruler in the kingdom: first Nabonidus, second Belshazzar, third Daniel.

Once again, the spade of the archaeologist has confirmed the reliability of Scripture. The problem was not the Bible; it was incomplete human knowledge.

Belshazzar is called Nebuchadnezzar’s “son,” but in their language “son” could also mean “descendant.” Historically, he was likely Nebuchadnezzar’s grandson. He ruled in Babylon while his father campaigned with the army elsewhere.

Open Blasphemy: Holy Vessels and False Gods

“While he tasted the wine, Belshazzar gave the command to bring the gold and silver vessels which his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple... that the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them.” (Daniel 5:2 NKJV)

As the wine flows, Belshazzar crosses a terrible line. He orders the sacred vessels that Nebuchadnezzar once took from the temple in Jerusalem—vessels consecrated to the worship of the LORD—to be brought into his hall so he and his guests can drink from them.

“Then they brought the gold vessels... 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 and iron, wood and stone.” (Daniel 5:3–4 NKJV)

This is not simple foolishness; it is deliberate profanity. He is **mocking** the true God by using holy vessels to toast lifeless idols.

Prophecy Anticipated This Night

The prophet Isaiah, writing more than a century and a half earlier, described the fall of Babylon in striking terms:

“My heart wavered, fearfulness frightened me;
The night for which I longed He turned into fear for me.” (Isaiah 21:4 NKJV)

He also declared:

“Babylon is fallen, is fallen!
And all the carved images of her gods He has broken to the ground.” (Isaiah 21:9 NKJV)

Later Isaiah even names the instrument God will use:

“Who says of Cyrus, ‘He is My shepherd,
And he shall perform all My pleasure...’” (Isaiah 44:28 NKJV)

And:

“Thus says the Lord to His anointed,
To Cyrus, whose right hand I have held—
To subdue nations before him...
I will... loose the loins of kings.” (Isaiah 45:1 NKJV)

Daniel 5 shows us this very thing: the “loins” of Belshazzar are literally “loosed” in fear as he sees the handwriting on the wall. God had foretold not only Babylon’s fall, but the **name** of the conqueror—Cyrus—long before Cyrus was born.

Historically, Babylon was considered impregnable. Its massive walls, inner defenses, and the Euphrates River flowing through it seemed to guarantee safety. But that very river became the entrance for the invading army. Cyrus diverted the Euphrates into channels, lowering the water level so his soldiers could march under the wall along the riverbed. For reasons likely related to drunken carelessness, the inner river gates were left unlocked. The army entered the city with little resistance—**on the very night** of Belshazzar’s feast.

God’s Word had spoken; history simply caught up.

The Handwriting on the Wall

“In the same hour the fingers of a man’s hand appeared and wrote opposite the lampstand on the plaster of the wall of the king’s palace; and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote.”
(Daniel 5:5 NKJV)

In the midst of the revelry, a hand appears and begins writing on the wall, illuminated by the light of a lamp. No body, no voice—just the fingers of a hand.

“Then the king’s countenance changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his hips were loosened and his knees knocked against each other.” (Daniel 5:6 NKJV)

The man who seemed so bold and blasphemous is suddenly undone. His face drains of color. His thoughts overwhelm him. His legs shake uncontrollably. He has just seen the hand of God break into his secure little world.

There are people today who speak boldly against God, mocking His name, laughing at His Word, trampling what is holy. But when God begins to move in judgment—when He writes on *their* wall—courage vanishes. God knows how to strip away the illusion of control.

Belshazzar now does what his predecessors did: he calls in the astrologers, enchanters, and wise men and promises great rewards to anyone who can read and interpret the writing, including the position of third ruler in the kingdom (Daniel 5:7). But once again, the wisest of Babylon are useless. They cannot decipher the words or give their meaning (Daniel 5:8–9).

The Forgotten Man of God

The queen mother (likely a senior royal, perhaps linked to Nebuchadnezzar’s line) enters and reminds Belshazzar about Daniel:

“There is a man in your kingdom in whom is the Spirit of the Holy God. And in the days of your father, light and understanding and wisdom, like the wisdom of the gods, were found in him... an excellent spirit, knowledge, understanding, interpreting dreams, solving riddles, and explaining enigmas were found in this Daniel.” (Daniel 5:11–12 NKJV)

Daniel, now probably in his eighties, is summoned. The king says he has heard that “the Spirit of God” is in Daniel and that he can interpret mysteries (Daniel 5:14–16). He offers Daniel royal clothing, a gold chain, and the position of third ruler if he will interpret the writing.

A Fearless Message Before the Interpretation

Daniel’s first response is telling:

“Let your gifts be for yourself, and give your rewards to another; yet I will read the writing to the king, and make known to him the interpretation.” (Daniel 5:17 NKJV)

Daniel refuses to profit personally from the gift God has given him. He will speak God’s truth, but he will not “sell” it. Spiritual gifts and ministries are not merchandise; they are stewardship.

Before he interprets the writing, Daniel preaches a brief but powerful sermon.

He reminds Belshazzar of Nebuchadnezzar:

“O king, the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father a kingdom and majesty, glory and honor. And because of the majesty that He gave him, all peoples, nations, and languages trembled

and feared before him. Whomever he wished, he executed; whomever he wished, he kept alive... But when his heart was lifted up, and his spirit was hardened in pride, he was deposed... Then he was driven from the sons of men, his heart was made like the beasts, and his dwelling was with the wild donkeys... Till he knew that the Most High God rules in the kingdom of men, and appoints over it whomever He chooses.” (Daniel 5:18–21 NKJV)

Nebuchadnezzar learned the hard way that God rules over human kingdoms. Belshazzar knew this story well.

Daniel says:

“But you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, although you knew all this.” (Daniel 5:22)

This is the heart of his sin: **willful rejection of truth he already knew.**

Then Daniel presses further:

“And you have lifted yourself up against the Lord of heaven. They have brought the vessels of His house 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, bronze and iron, wood and stone, which do not see or hear or know; and the God who holds your breath in His hand and owns all your ways, you have not glorified.” (Daniel 5:23 NKJV)

Belshazzar exalts blind idols, while ignoring the living God who holds his very breath. That is still the world’s problem today: honoring created things, ignoring the Creator.

Daniel’s phrase is sobering: **“the God who holds your breath in His hand.”** We breathe automatically; our heart beats without conscious effort. The most vital systems of our body are not left to our mental control. Our life is far more fragile—and far more dependent on God—than we usually admit.

Paul later tells the philosophers in Athens that God is the One “in whom we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28 NKJV). We are never outside His presence. David recognized this in Psalm 139: there is nowhere we can flee from His Spirit. Yet Belshazzar has acted as if God were far away and powerless.

The Words on the Wall

Daniel now explains the origin and meaning of the writing:

“Then the fingers of the hand were sent from Him, and this writing was written.

And this is the inscription that was written:

MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN.” (Daniel 5:24–25 NKJV)

Then he gives the interpretation:

“This is the interpretation of each word.

MENE: God has numbered your kingdom, and finished it.

TEKEL: You have been weighed in the balances, and found wanting.

PERES: Your kingdom has been divided, and given to the Medes and Persians.” (Daniel 5:26–28 NKJV)

- **MENE** – God has *numbered* your days and **finished** your kingdom. Your time is up.
- **TEKEL** – You have been *weighed* in God’s scales and found **too light**. Whatever you thought you were, you do not measure up to God’s standard.
- **PERES (UPHARSIN)** – Your kingdom will be **divided** and handed over to the **Medes and Persians**.

These words still speak to every generation. God numbers our days. He weighs our lives. And He has the right to remove what He once entrusted.

The Sudden End

Belshazzar tries to keep his word. He clothes Daniel in purple, places a gold chain around his neck, and proclaims him third ruler in the kingdom (Daniel 5:29). But the promotion is brief.

“That very night Belshazzar, king of the Chaldeans, was slain. And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old.” (Daniel 5:30–31 NKJV)

That same night, while Belshazzar feasted and mocked, the city fell, and he died. The kingdom that seemed unshakable was gone in a moment.

Practical Application and Challenge for Believers

1. Sinning against light is serious.

Belshazzar knew the story of Nebuchadnezzar’s pride and humbling, yet he did not humble his own heart (Daniel 5:22). God is patient, but He takes it very seriously when we ignore truth we already know.

Challenge:

Are there areas where you “know better” but continue to resist God? Do not wait for His handwriting on your wall. Respond to His Word now.

2. Do not profane what God has made holy.

Belshazzar used holy vessels for sinful purposes. Today, God’s temple is not a building; it is **His people**. Our bodies and lives belong to Him.

Challenge:

Are you using what God has set apart—your body, your time, your gifts—for purposes that dishonor Him? Ask the Lord to forgive, cleanse and realign your life with His will.

3. **God weighs our lives.**

Belshazzar was “weighed in the balances and found wanting.” We cannot earn salvation by our works, but our lives are not meaningless. Our choices matter. God cares about justice, mercy, humility, integrity.

Challenge:

Let God search your heart. Not so you can earn His love, but so you can live in a way that responds faithfully to the love He has already shown you in Christ.

4. **Our breath is in God’s hand.**

Life feels routine until God interrupts. We forget how dependent we are on Him for every heartbeat and every breath.

Challenge:

Cultivate a daily awareness of God’s presence. Thank Him consciously for each day, and ask Him how He wants you to use it.

5. **We must refuse to “sell” God’s gifts.**

Daniel refused the king’s payment for God’s revelation. Ministry is not a commodity to be bought and sold.

Challenge:

If you serve in any capacity—teaching, shepherding, worship, giving—ask the Lord to guard you from using His work as a way to elevate yourself. Seek His glory, not your own.

Invitation to Non-Believers: Before the Writing Appears on Your Wall

Belshazzar waited until it was too late. He ignored warnings, he sinned against what he knew, and that very night his life ended under God’s judgment.

The same God who numbered Belshazzar’s days has numbered ours. The same God who weighed his life will weigh ours. Measured by His holiness, every one of us “comes up short.” We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

But God has not left us without hope. He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, into this world. Jesus lived without sin, yet chose to go to the cross. There He **shed His blood** for our sins, taking upon Himself the judgment we deserve. On the third day, He **rose from the dead**, and that resurrection declares that He is **God, Savior, and Lord**.

You do not have to face the final “weighing” alone. In Christ, you can be forgiven, cleansed, and made right with God. He calls you—not to earn His love, but to **receive** it.

If you sense God speaking to your heart, you can respond in simple, sincere prayer, like this:

*“Lord Jesus, I confess that I have sinned against You.
I believe that You died on the cross and shed Your blood for my sins.
I believe that You rose from the dead and that You are God, Savior, and Lord.
I turn from my sin and my pride, and I surrender my life to You.
Take my life, forgive me, change me, and make me Yours forever. Amen.”*

Those words are not a magic formula. What matters is your heart turning to Christ in trust. If you do, He will not turn you away.

Closing Prayer

*Father in heaven,
We thank You for the sobering lesson of Belshazzar and the handwriting on the wall. You are the God who holds our breath in Your hand, who numbers our days, who weighs our lives in perfect justice.*

We thank You that, in Your mercy, You sent Jesus Christ to die for our sins, shedding His blood on the cross, and that You raised Him from the dead as the clear declaration that He is God, Savior, and Lord.

For those of us who belong to You, help us not to sin against the light we have received. Teach us to walk humbly, to honor what You have made holy, and to live each day in the awareness that our times are in Your hand.

For those who do not yet know You, draw them by Your Spirit. Let them turn to Jesus while there is still time, and find forgiveness, hope, and new life in Him.

We commit ourselves afresh to You. Use our lives for Your glory, and keep us faithful until we see our Lord face to face. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.