

“Scales of Justice”

Daniel 5

August 19, 2007

According to the Babylonian Chronicle (the *Congressional Record* of its day), on October 12, 539 B.C., the capital of Babylon was captured by the Persian army. They captured the city and killed the reigning king while a banquet was taking place. Other sources – specifically Herodotus and Xenophon, historians – corroborate the date and the events.

We know of one source inside the capital of Babylon, who tells us the story of what happened: Daniel.

To put things into context, Nebuchadnezzar had a long and illustrious reign. He died. The events of this night took place more than twenty years after his death. It is apparent from the text that Daniel and the other exiles had fallen out of favor with the reigning powers, yet they were still in exile from Jerusalem. The king is a step-child of one of Nebuchadnezzar’s wives and his name was Nabonidus. Nabonidus, for religious and political reasons, stayed away from the capitol; thus, the reigning regent in Babylon is his son, Belshazzar.

With me thus far? Then let’s read what happened from Daniel 5.

A. The Players and What Happened

The story follows a pattern we have seen previously in Daniel. The difference is the heart of the king, in this case, Belshazzar.

In rank, Belshazzar was the second most powerful man in the Babylonian empire; second only to his father, the king. However, in reality, Belshazzar was called the king because his father did not spend any time in the capitol and left Belshazzar to rule.

On the night of the banquet, Belshazzar knew that the Persian army is camped outside the walls. He was arrogant and expected to survive this onslaught. He gathered this feast of thousands – something customary and probably related to their religion. The king and those attending got drunk. Then, the king got a really bad idea in his head, “Let’s get the stuff from the temple in Jerusalem!”

Implicit in the story is the idea that Nebuchadnezzar had put the items from the temple in Jerusalem in storage out of respect for Daniel’s God. Belshazzar, who was old enough to remember Nebuchadnezzar’s exile and insanity, knew about these items. So he calls to get them out of storage, they are brought, and he uses them to drink toasts to idols of silver and gold.

As we sit here today, reading this in the Bible, you can just feel how bad an error of judgment Belshazzar makes. It cannot turn out well for him.

Sure enough, the hand appears – by the way, this is where we get the expression about “reading the writing on the wall” – and delivers this message that Belshazzar cannot understand. Like earlier stories in Daniel, Belshazzar calls in his wise men to look at the message and decipher it for him.

The late radio evangelist J. Vernon McGee tells the story about an immigrant farmer who was visiting his favorite daughter named Minnie. He was just learning to speak English; and she took him to church one day. The sermon text was Daniel 5, and the pastor read, “MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN.” The farmer was jolted back in his seat, stood up, grabbed the hand of his daughter and dragged her out of the church. When she finally slowed him down, she asked, “What was that about?” He explained, “No daughter of mine is going to go to a church where the man in the pulpit says, “Minnie, Minnie, come tickle the parson!”

Belshazzar offered the one able to interpret the meaning of the writing on the wall the position of “third most powerful” in the kingdom – in other words, the person just under himself. For Belshazzar, this was not an idle promise because he fully expected to be reigning for quite some time; the protective walls of the city should provide for that. Even so, none of the wise men were able to make anything out of the writing.

The Queen Mother arrives; likely one of Nebuchadnezzar’s wives who still lived in the palace. She reminded Belshazzar about Daniel.

When Daniel arrived and Belshazzar repeated his promise, Daniel was not impressed. You can tell that – unlike his favorable impression of Nebuchadnezzar – Daniel did not have any respect for Belshazzar. “Keep your reward,” Daniel said, knowing that the offer was worthless.

Daniel interprets the writing on the wall for Belshazzar. In a mark of hubris, Belshazzar does not repent, he does not cry out to the living God, he simply lived up to his end of the bargain and went on. That night, he was killed.

B. Despite appearances, God is always sovereign.

The reality is that this last night event with Belshazzar was not the only night. Nothing in Daniel’s interpretation suggests that Belshazzar would have been ok if he simply had not taunted God by using the vessels dedicated to God to toast idols. It was not a bright idea, but for Daniel it was an easy illustration and evidence of a life lived with reckless disregard to the sovereignty of God than a statement that God is waiting for us to mess up.

Reckless disregard. It is one of those legal terms that we hear enough that we do not hear it any more.

Disregard is ignoring something. Some things are worthy of being disregarded; others are not. On a foggy night at sea, the sailor on watch reported a light in the distance that was

getting closer. The captain on the helm ordered a message to be radio'd ahead, "Change your course." The message came back, "You change your course." The captain was irked. "Change your course, I'm a captain." The message came back, "You change your course. I'm a petty officer, second class." Outraged, the captain sent the message, "Change your course, I'm on a destroyer." The message came back, "You change your course, I'm in a lighthouse."

How often do we act foolishly because we do not see things the way they really are? Story after story in Daniel makes clear that God is sovereign, despite appearances.

It takes an act of faith to remain obedient to God when it seems God is not near. There are many times when God does not seem near. There are many times when situations seem to justify the question, "Is God real or am I just pretending? Have I been fooled and am I wasting my time?" Either we ask those questions in our minds or someone around us gives voice to them. It usually happens at times when being faithful means doing something that does not make sense in human terms.

"Give up your career to go into ministry?"

"Give up your vacation to go on a mission trip?"

"Give up your money to the church instead of buying yourself...."

Many times, the questions come in a much more subtle form, "C'mon, you can overlook this; everyone else is doing it." Last year, as we were looking for a home loan, several people told us that, "People put whatever they want on the income line; nobody checks, they just want to see a number there." Once you begin to walk down that road and nothing happens, each step is a little bolder and bolder.

In human terms, nothing may happen; but in God's time, they are moving father and farther away from him. It is the process of a hardening heart.

Yet we can kind of understand why people would be led astray. Things are not always as they seem to us. It is hard to remember that God is sovereign when everything looks like He is not around. The Jews were in exile. The temple had been raided, looted, and left in shambles. The Northern Kingdom, Israel, was gone. The Southern Kingdom, Judah, had only the lowest and weakest remaining.

It remains true today. God is sovereign despite what we see, what we hear, what powers seem to be acting in the world. The writer of Hebrews says it this way, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

As we look at our world, we can wonder if God is really sovereign. Why can't the people in the Middle East work out a solution that does not lead to violence? Why do we have to deal with terrorism? Why can't the Padres hit?

As we look at American culture, it does not seem that God is sovereign. There are grand forces out to remove God from our cultural experience, from our historical remembrance, as the foundation for our community. We deny the importance of our relationship with God and look at it as an antiquated mythology that was helpful to an extent. Does this sound familiar? Is this not exactly what happened to Israel when it entered the Promised Land?

Friends, when we sideline God in our thinking, God is not sidelined. Disregarding God is reckless. Reckless means that we know better or choose not to know better. As a culture, we can see how that is happening.

As a culture, we fail to pray at our own risk. To most Americans, praying sometimes seems like a waste of time, like you are not doing anything. We are big on “doing.” Unfortunately, the truth is that praying *is* doing something, it is doing the only thing that can make a difference.

I am not a big fan of mandating prayer – for example, in schools. Mandated prayer very quickly becomes rote prayer, where we are saying the words without meaning to communicate. It is the heart of prayer, the heart that seeks God which is important. Think about it this way: Daniel and his friends were persistent in prayer. They remained exiles. Yet their lives were heroic, were important, and most significantly, were transformative. When we fail to pray, we rely on ourselves and find out that we are not able to do much of anything at all.

As a culture, we fail to worship God at our own risk. We received in the mail an invitation for Little League Baseball for girls and boys. We have been looking to get Abby signed up; we were encouraged until we read, “All games to be played on Sunday morning.”

Many remember “blue laws,” laws that required businesses to be closed on Sundays. In my lifetime, many of those standards have been abandoned. We think about that with nostalgia; the only national chain of which I am aware that still abides by “Sabbath” thinking is Chick-Fil-A. Our conduct as a culture shouts out that we worship the dollar more than we fear God.

We fail to serve God at our own risk. Calls to repent of greed and to resume a good stewardship of the blessings God has provided fall on deaf ears. Instead of celebrating the goodness of God, we celebrate fame, we celebrate flesh, we celebrate fortune. America focuses its attention on “reality shows” and game shows. Remember “Survivor”? This was the show where a group was marooned on an island or out in harsh conditions. The catchwords? “Outwit, Outplay, Outlast.” The question is, how must I claw to be king of what remains? How often did people lie, cheat, betray one another’s trust in order to be “successful” in the game.

Through Amos, the prophet, God said to Israel, “You oppress the righteous and take bribes and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts. Therefore the prudent man keeps

quiet in such times, for the times are evil. Seek good, not evil, that you may live. Then the LORD God Almighty will be with you, just as you say he is. Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts.”

C. How we behave towards God matters

Lest we think we can feel good because that’s “them, out there,” and we are different in the church, we should look closely at our own lives. Belshazzar thought he was safe because of the walls that surrounded him. In the passage in Matthew that Gil read, the Jews thought they were safe because of the massive size of the temple walls. They mistook the existence of the building as meaning that God was with them.

Jesus makes clear that it is not the physical building that is important, it is the relationship and faithfulness to the living God that is important.

Belshazzar thought that the walls of the city would protect him. Aside from his rebellion against the living God, he missed the fact that the Persian army had diverted the Euphrates River that ran through the city and sent the army in *under* the wall.

What are the walls you have constructed in your life? What are the areas that you keep hidden from God, “Oh, I’m a pretty good person. Just because I (fill in the blank) do this, that doesn’t mean that I’m a bad person or that God does not love me.”

Whether it is a little vice or a big problem, we need to own up to it and lay it down at the foot of the cross. The difference between Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar was a broken and contrite heart. Nebuchadnezzar realized the error of his way, Belshazzar never cried out to God.

Friends, we are no different than the kings of Babylon when it comes to our relationship with God. How we behave and how we react matters to God. When push comes to shove, we all would suffer the judgment that Belshazzar faces, “God has numbered your days, you have been weighed on the scales and found wanting.” Paul says it this way in Romans 7, “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.” Later, “Wretched man that I am, who will rescue me from this body of sin? Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Through this sermon, through the ministries of this church, through Scripture, through the witness of saints all around us and those who have gone before us, God is calling us to a right relationship. Our days are numbered, our own efforts at righteousness will be judged to be wanting – that is the hard news.

The good news is that we worship and serve the one who is able to reckon righteousness to us. We worship and serve the one who loves us, calls us to be his own, died on the cross to wash us clean, and promises an eternal life of joy.

In the past few weeks, we have had services remembering and celebrating three of the saints of this congregation: Emma Austin, Phil Harris and Grace Johnson. There was sadness at the loss of each one; but the more important part of each service was the celebration of their life and hope in Jesus Christ. Each one bore witness in their life that Jesus Christ was their hope, the salvation, and their joy. Each one was an encouragement that the promises of God are true.

Each one experienced hard times. Each one experienced times in their lives when it seemed that the promises of God were suspect. Each one trusted God, and each one held on to Jesus. We celebrate those lives even as God crowns each one with a crown of righteousness.

As you go forward from this place, know for certain that the God who reveals himself in Scripture is fully sovereign today. He cares about his creation, he cares about you, and he cares about me. He cares about what we do and how we serve him. He is holy, he is loving, he is good.

Our role? What is the chief end of man? To glorify God and enjoy him forever.

Amen.

8:45 prayer and offering
10:00 offering