# The Handwriting is on the Wall – Daniel 5

For years, sceptics and scholars have dismissed the Bible as myths and legends, perhaps of religious interest, but of no scientific or historical value. Many of their arguments are easy to ignore. A page on the American Humanist website claims the Bible is full of contradictions. But each one listed is a place where they purposely misinterpret the language. A couple of the common attacks that are used by people who want to deny the bible come from the passage we are studying this week. As part of this study, not only will you see how the Bible is accurate, but see that it has proven more correct than secular history.

While answering the attacks of critics is important, the primary thrust of this passage is God’s authority over the rulers and nations of the world. In this light, we will see 3 actions of the world and 3 actions of God. The world will scorn Holiness. The world will entice you with power. In the face of judgment, the world will remain proud. God will make Himself known. God will provide a way of understanding His message. God will set a value on the heart of kings and nations.

## The world will scorn Holiness Daniel 5:1-4

“**1** ¶ Belshazzar the king held a great feast for a thousand of his nobles, and he was drinking wine in the presence of the thousand. **2** When Belshazzar tasted the wine, he gave orders to bring the gold and silver vessels which Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken out of the temple which was in Jerusalem, so that the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines might drink from them. **3** Then they brought the gold vessels that had been taken out of the temple, the house of God which was in Jerusalem; and the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines drank from them. **4** They drank the wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone.

Quick side note: Daniel was given the Babylonian name Belteshazzar, this passage refers to the king Belshazzar. The names are similar enough to be easily confused, but they are different.

In this passage, Belshazzar gets a drunk and then calls for the Holy dishes that had been stolen from the Jewish Temple. Rather than praise God using His Holy things, they used it as an opportunity to praise the things that the dishes were made of. This is normal for the world, to ridicule the Holy. Belshazzar may even be asserting his own power as being greater than the power of God whose vessels he is defiling.

This same attitude of ridicule is seen today, even in the way the world approaches this passage. They attack the first three words, saying, “there is no evidence of a Babylonian king named Belshazzar, so the Bible must be false.” When we get to verse 16, we will see how the Bible is more accurate than secular histories ever imagined possible.

Some ridicule, like drinking from the holy vessels might be passive, other ridicule is active like saying the Bible must be false. As Christians, we can fall. We may not ridicule God, but are we guilty of ridiculing those made in His image. Do you ridicule the politicians you disagree with? When you pray about them, do you pray for them or pray against them? Perhaps you even unintentionally ridicule God by failing to pray for them at all.

## God will make Himself known Daniel 5:5-9

**5** Suddenly the fingers of a man’s hand emerged and began writing opposite the lampstand on the plaster of the wall of the king’s palace, and the king saw the back of the hand that did the writing. **6** Then the king’s face grew pale and his thoughts alarmed him, and his hip joints went slack and his knees began knocking together. **7** The king called aloud to bring in the conjurers, the Chaldeans and the diviners. The king spoke and said to the wise men of Babylon, "Any man who can read this inscription and explain its interpretation to me shall be clothed with purple and have a necklace of gold around his neck, and have authority as third ruler in the kingdom." **8** Then all the king’s wise men came in, but they could not read the inscription or make known its interpretation to the king. **9** Then King Belshazzar was greatly alarmed, his face grew even paler, and his nobles were perplexed.

I have no idea why God chose to use writing, but I do see an interesting pattern. When God speaks to those He has called, He makes himself understood. He spoke to Moses from a burning bush. He spoke to Saul/Paul in a blinding light while his companions only heard a thundering noise. In contrast, when God communicates with non-believers, He often uses messages that shake their confidence, but that they cannot understand until God reveals the meaning through believers. Pharaoh did would not understand the Plagues without Moses. Nebuchadnezzar would not understand his dreams without Daniel. In this case, Belshazzar cannot understand the writing on the wall.

In English, we miss how much this really shook the king. Going pale, alarmed thoughts and knocking knees all make sense to us. The hip joints going slack, however, is a phrase that doesn’t mean what you think. A more modern usage may be that his bowels were loosened. In other words, he was so scared that he soiled his royal robes. When he messed his robes, the Bible describes his thoughts as alarmed. But then he called for his advisors, who between them likely knew every known language, and they couldn’t explain it to him. At this point he is described as “greatly alarmed” and even paler.

God made Himself known to Belshazzar in undeniable ways. If He does this for a non-believer, how much more will He do it for you? Sometimes when we are stubborn, God has to use harsh ways to get our attention, but isn’t it better if we take time to listen to His still, small voice in our hearts?

## God will provide a way of understanding His message Daniel 5:10-15

**10** ¶ The queen entered the banquet hall because of the words of the king and his nobles; the queen spoke and said, "O king, live forever! Do not let your thoughts alarm you or your face be pale. **11** "There is a man in your kingdom in whom is a spirit of the holy gods; and in the days of your father, illumination, insight and wisdom like the wisdom of the gods were found in him. And King Nebuchadnezzar, your father, your father the king, appointed him chief of the magicians, conjurers, Chaldeans and diviners. **12** "This was because an extraordinary spirit, knowledge and insight, interpretation of dreams, explanation of enigmas and solving of difficult problems were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Belteshazzar. Let Daniel now be summoned and he will declare the interpretation." **13** Then Daniel was brought in before the king. The king spoke and said to Daniel, "Are you that Daniel who is one of the exiles from Judah, whom my father the king brought from Judah? **14** "Now I have heard about you that a spirit of the gods is in you, and that illumination, insight and extraordinary wisdom have been found in you. **15** "Just now the wise men and the conjurers were brought in before me that they might read this inscription and make its interpretation known to me, but they could not declare the interpretation of the message.

Nebuchadnezzar had his own harsh wakeup calls, but eventually seems to have listened to the advice God gave through Daniel. Belshazzar seems to have rejected that lesson and rejected the advice of Daniel, but when God wants to speak, He brings Daniel back into the picture. The queen points Belshazzar to the person who helped Nebuchadnezzar to understand God’s messages and implores Belshazzar to do the same.

I once heard Steve Hayner talking about hearing God’s message and following His will. Steve said, “God is more interested in you following His will than you are. While you may choose to ignore God’s will, if you are willing to see it He is faithful to reveal His will through your life.”

## The world will entice you with power Daniel 5:16-21

**16** "But I personally have heard about you, that you are able to give interpretations and solve difficult problems. Now if you are able to read the inscription and make its interpretation known to me, you will be clothed with purple and wear a necklace of gold around your neck, and you will have authority as the third ruler in the kingdom." **17** Then Daniel answered and said before the king, "Keep your gifts for yourself or give your rewards to someone else; however, I will read the inscription to the king and make the interpretation known to him. **18** "O king, the Most High God granted sovereignty, grandeur, glory and majesty to Nebuchadnezzar your father. **19** "Because of the grandeur which He bestowed on him, all the peoples, nations and men of every language feared and trembled before him; whomever he wished he killed and whomever he wished he spared alive; and whomever he wished he elevated and whomever he wished he humbled. **20** "But when his heart was lifted up and his spirit became so proud that he behaved arrogantly, he was deposed from his royal throne and his glory was taken away from him. **21** "He was also driven away from mankind, and his heart was made like that of beasts, and his dwelling place was with the wild donkeys. He was given grass to eat like cattle, and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven until he recognized that the Most High God is ruler over the realm of mankind and that He sets over it whomever He wishes.

Belshazzar thinks he can gain his desires if he offers enough wealth and power. Daniel immediately reminds him of what happened to Nebuchadnezzar when he got too prideful. Daniel demonstrates that such self-reliance is useless.

I told you that when we got to this verse we would see how the Bible shows that it knows more than secular historians. Notice that Belshazzar tries to induce Daniel by offering to make him third highest ruler in the nation. Why third?

History records that Nebuchadnezzar’s son and heir was king Nabonidus. He ruled Babylon until it was conquered by the Persians. This was all that was known of the royal line, so sceptics denied that Belshazzar was a real person.

In 1854, documents were discovered describing Nabonidus’ son Belshazzar. Then in 1924, an archaeologist found a Chronicle written in the time of Nabonidus. While He was king, he cared more about art and gardening than about being king. He neglected ruling to pursue his interests and spent much of his time in other areas of the kingdom writing poetry and investigating plants. Historians now believe that he allowed his son Belshazzar to rule in his place, but maintained his title as king for himself. The reason that Belshazzar offered to make Daniel third highest is because Belshazzar was number 2.

Critics then began to point that the Bible called Nebuchadnezzar Belshazzar’s father. What they ignored was that the word does not only mean father, but can also refer to any male ancestor, the founder of a family or the ruler of a nation. The more we learn about what scripture really says and what is truly recorded in history, the more it confirms God’s truthfulness.

Where are you doubting God? Is it because God is wrong or because you don’t have enough information?

## God will set a value on the heart of kings and nations Daniel 5:22-28

 **22** "Yet you, his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, even though you knew all this, **23** but you have exalted yourself against the Lord of heaven; and they have brought the vessels of His house before you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines have been drinking wine from them; and you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which do not see, hear or understand. But the God in whose hand are your life-breath and your ways, you have not glorified. **24** "Then the hand was sent from Him and this inscription was written out. **25** "Now this is the inscription that was written out: ‘MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN.’ **26** "This is the interpretation of the message: ‘MENE’ — God has numbered your kingdom and put an end to it. **27** "‘TEKEL’ — you have been weighed on the scales and found deficient. **28** "‘PERES’ — your kingdom has been divided and given over to the Medes and Persians."

The message that God gave is that the kingdom has been called to account. MENE, meaning numbered is also a word for a coin, so it is an accounting term. TEKEL meaning weighed or evaluated in preparation for sale in a market. But the best part is the PERES. In English it looks like Daniel interprets a different word, but in Aramaic and Hebrew, word beginnings and endings change based on the context in the sentence, so the word begins with UPH when pronounced after TEKEL, but is pronounced PERES when by itself. The word Peres itself means divided and comes from a half shekel coin, connecting us back to commerce. The word Peres is spelled differently, but is pronounced nearly identically to the word for Persian.

If we face God based on grace, he will care for us, but if we try to make our relationship with God a transaction, He will give us the value we have earned. Do you want grace or what you are owed?

## In the face of judgment, the world will remain proud Daniel 5:29-31

**29** Then Belshazzar gave orders, and they clothed Daniel with purple and put a necklace of gold around his neck, and issued a proclamation concerning him that he now had authority as the third ruler in the kingdom. **30** ¶ That same night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was slain. **31** So Darius the Mede received the kingdom at about the age of sixty-two.” (Da 5:1-31 NAS95)

God proclaimed judgment on Belshazzar, but still he insisted on promoting Daniel. If he didn’t believe Daniel, he would have executed him. He believed him, but still felt it was necessary to save face by fulfilling his promise. Maybe he thought he had some time before it would be fulfilled and wanted to look his best in the interim.

He had confidence in Babylon. It’s walls were impregnable and it was surrounded by the branches of a flowing river that made any kind of siege engine impossible to bring against the city. The gates over the river entrances went several feet below water so no army could swim in. Belshazzar was comfortable and felt safe, but that same night he was killed.

History records that Babylon was taken without a battle. Rather than directly assault the city, the Medo-Persian army dammed the river upstream and had an elite force walk under the gates through the river that was only knee high. Historians say it was three days before all the people in Babylon knew they had been captured.

But again, the skeptics would say the bible is wrong, because there is no King Darius the Mede. Obviously they are wrong, but the proof of that will have to wait for next week.

Whether God intended it for this purpose or just used it for this purpose, our country has gone through judgment. Our economy is on the edge of collapse, there is turmoil and threat of rebellion. In the book of Joel, we see Israel went through a similar time, caused by locust instead of a virus, but still destroying the economy and their way of life. God’s advice to them indicated they should not embrace the pride that accompanied the end of Babylon. Instead Joel records:

“**12** ¶ "Yet even now," declares the LORD, "Return to Me with all your heart, And with fasting, weeping and mourning; **13** And rend your heart and not your garments." Now return to the LORD your God, For He is gracious and compassionate, Slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness And relenting of evil. **14** Who knows whether He will not turn and relent And leave a blessing behind Him, Even a grain offering and a drink offering For the LORD your God?” (Joe 2:12-14 NAS95)

What will you do?

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