

Daniel 5, The Writing on the wall. Speaking boldly

The writing's on the wall. Or maybe a modern equivalent of the expression is "smell the coffee" meaning someone should be aware they are wrong and/or about a situation that is not good.

Or perhaps I could feel this morning a bit like Private Fraser in Dad's Army whose favourite words of comfort in a crisis seemed to be "we're *doomed!*". Because the well-known incident of the writing on the wall was interpreted as a warning of judgement against a proud and arrogant king, and that judgement fell on that king. He was slain, and his kingdom fell.

Pride led to a downfall in a big way.

It's interesting what the writer CS Lewis says about pride. In his "Mere Christianity" he says, "There is no fault that makes a man more unpopular, and no fault which we are more unconscious of in ourselves. And the more we have it ourselves, the more we dislike it in others." . Lewis goes on, "If I am a proud man, then, as long as there is one man in the whole world more powerful, or richer, or cleverer than I, he is my rival and my enemy." And he adds, "Pride is not only enmity between man and man, but enmity to God. In God you come up against something that is in every respect immeasurably superior to yourself. Unless you know God as that – and, therefore, know your-self as nothing in comparison – you do not know God at all. As long as you are proud you cannot know God."

It is how pride affects our relationship with God that we see God addressing in this story. Because pride means we do not honour God as we should, preferring to honour ourselves.

This is more serious than Private Fraser's proclamations of doom, as this passage shows us that continued pride and arrogance against God brings judgement.

It's about who's ultimately King – yes, God or a human king like Belshazzar? But to bring it home to us, it's about whether we acknowledge and honour God as king in our lives, or go on living independently of Him rejecting His rule – which is pride and arrogance against God.

But we'll see there's hope because of Jesus.

But let's think about Daniel for a moment. He was faithful in proclaiming such a message of judgement to a pagan king who despised God and His people. He needed boldness!

This is another example of Daniel living faithfully for God while in exile in the alien land of Babylon. And speaking God's word boldly, even when it's unpopular, is an aspect of living faithfully in an alien anti-God culture, as we do.

Since the end of Chapter 4, we have fast-forwarded on about 23 years to the very last night of King Nebuchadnezzar's main successor, Belshazzar, and indeed the last night of the Babylonian empire. Now Daniel would be about 80 years old.

What we're going to do is first of all look at the scene at which the writing on the wall appeared – a drunken party, then a lesson not learned, then the interpretation of the writing on the wall – a message of judgement, and lastly an example to encourage us.

First, a drunken party.

Can you imagine the scene. The drunken revelry. The ribald laughter. This is what the great banquet King Belshazzar had put on that Daniel 5 tells us about, would have been like. And there would have been more than a thousand people there - this was a party for a thousand of the king's nobles, his senior officials, as well as all his wives and women. Imagine the noise of the revelry, the rowdiness. And what's worse, he used the goblets from the temple in Jerusalem to drink from.

Then suddenly the fingers of a human hand appear from nowhere and begin writing on a wall. The hand wrote on the wall near the lampstand in the royal palace, perhaps ensuring the writing was clearly seen. The king froze in terror – at least at the spookiness of it. If this were a horror movie, the background music changes to magnify the sense of fear.

King Belshazzar watched the hand as it wrote. His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his legs became weak and knees were knocking. In fact the ESV version says his limbs gave way. He was so terrified that his legs couldn't support his weight.

So what does Belshazzar do? He summoned the enchanters, astrologers and diviners, the so-called "wise men of Babylon". But they unable to tell the king what the writing meant.

Then the queen, who may actually have been Belshazzar's mother told the king to send for Daniel, as she remembered from Nebuchadnezzar's time that Daniel could interpret dreams, explain riddles and solve difficult problems.

But Daniel was to bring God's word to Belshazzar. And he begins with a **lesson not learned. This is our second point.**

And the lesson is about Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel sums up in vs18-21 what happened in Chapter 4 – we heard about this last week from Dan.

Daniel recalls that when Nebuchadnezzar's heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his throne, and driven away to live and behave like an animal, until... until when? Until he acknowledged it was the true God, not him, who's sovereign, over all kingdoms on earth and sets over them anyone He wishes.

Daniel compares this with Belshazzar. Look down with me at vs22-23. Daniel tells Belshazzar: "You have not humbled yourself, *though you knew all this.*" That is, he knew what had happened to Nebuchadnezzar, but failed to learn the lesson and respond accordingly. Instead Belshazzar set himself up against God. His using of the goblets from the temple in Jerusalem to drink from, and praising false gods epitomised his failure to honour the true God. That's why, as v24 says, God sent the hand that wrote on the wall. So the problem was more than too much wine!

Can you see the comparison? Nebuchadnezzar humbled himself and acknowledged it was God, therefore not him, who's King over all kingdoms on earth. But Belshazzar continued in his pride and arrogance against God. He did not learn the lesson of Nebuchadnezzar. Maybe when he was originally told the story, he clearly rejected God. Or maybe he just let the message pass over him not seeing its importance, as he was distracted by other things.

Perhaps there's a warning for us, particularly if you've heard the good news of Jesus before, but have not really responded and have not truly turned in your heart to Jesus to live with Him as Your Lord and King, and so don't know Him personally. It may be you have just not particularly engaged with the message as your life has been focussed on other things.

And did you notice that Daniel says this: "But you did not honour the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways.". This choice of words is interesting! The temple vessels represented God's presence as they came from the temple in Jerusalem. So using the vessels to drink wine, Belshazzar was effectively seeking to hold God in his hands, while it's God who holds his life and ways in His hands! It's like he was using God to bring him pleasure.

I think some people, even Christians, can do something like that if we expect God just to help us to have a happy problem-free life and pleasure. Or we may want God to fit in with what we think and the way we want to live.

But living with Jesus as our Lord and King means we're in *His* hands, or to put it another way, He's in the driving seat, not our passenger. So we follow Him in all of our lives, including how we use our time, in setting our priorities, how we use our money, our career choices, who we marry, and so on.

Belshazzar didn't humble himself and acknowledge God is King. He continued in pride and arrogance against God – and this brings us to the **third point**:

The interpretation of the writing on the wall – a message of judgement

See vs 26-28 for the interpretation. It's that God has numbered the days of Belshazzar's reign and brought it to an end, and his kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians. And all this happened that very night.

And the reason for the judgement was Belshazzar had been weighed on the scales and found wanting. This means Belshazzar's life was found weightless and amounted to nothing.

Without faith in Christ, this is also true of us: God weighs us and finds us wanting – that our lives are weightless because they contain nothing from ourselves that merits God's forgiveness, and therefore we deserve judgement.

I find some believe that as long as we're not like the worst people, we'll be OK before God and although we're not perfect – we admit that – it's just His role to overlook our minor shortcomings and to forgive us. Have you heard people say things like this? Maybe you've thought it.

But the Bible teaches (in Romans 3v23) that we have all sinned and fall short of God's glory, His perfect standard. We may not have committed the worst sins, but we have all often preferred to live our own way without God as sovereign ruler of our lives. We often give our lives to false gods – maybe 'gods' like popularity, being 'in with the crowd', money, success, hobbies – remember that when even a good thing becomes a God-thing it becomes a *false* god we give our lives to.

That God weighs us and finds us wanting and that therefore we deserve judgement, is not a popular message today.

So maybe it can be tempting to teach a watered-down version of God's message that avoids too much talk of sin, repentance and the danger of judgement, saying something like this: everyone is on a spiritual journey and all the church needs to do is present a more attractive message emphasising God's love, then many people would follow Christ.

But that sort of message is like giving someone tied to a railway track a comfortable pillow to lie on when the judgement express is hurtling down the line towards them.

The Bible teaches that God will, when Jesus returns, punish with everlasting destruction and shutting out from His presence all those who do not obey the good news of Jesus (2 Thessalonians 1v8-9). It also says that without God's help, no-one seeks Him (Romans 3v11).

That night, judgement fell on Belshazzar. They were holding this drunken banquet, when actually the enemy, the Medes and Persians, were at the city gate. Perhaps Belshazzar was overconfident that the city was impenetrable. But, to quote Jesus, that night his life was demanded from him (Luke 12v20). We may think we're OK. But we never know when we'll be required to meet with God for judgement.

We never forget God is love. He gives us hope through Christ. This is because although naturally we're found wanting, with nothing in us that merits God's forgiveness, *Jesus* is not found wanting. He always perfectly obeyed God His Father as His King, and on the cross bore the judgement we deserve. This means that although we're sinful people prone to pride, God regards us, if our faith is in Christ, as being as righteous as Christ Himself. So we can be assured of God's forgiveness, that we're in the right with Him, now and on judgement day. This is what Romans 5v1 means when Paul says, "we have been justified through faith"

But we need to hear the warning illustrated in this passage: that continued pride and arrogance against God, living with ourselves as king and not trusting in Christ, brings judgement.

Yes, we *all*, even as Christians, are prone to pride and arrogance preferring to live our lives our own way without God. I find that as I go on as a Christian, I become more aware of how naturally sinful I am, that for example, I sometimes allow other things to take God's place and there can be pride in me. And I find it helpful to be reminded that I'm naturally so sinful, that I'm empty of anything within me that merits God's forgiveness, that I therefore deserve hell, and they'd be no hope for me but for the Cross. And I'm not more deserving of God's love than anyone else.

Now we turn lastly, as we close, **an example to encourage us.**

You may remember the dream Nebuchnezzar had in Chapter 2 of the four-part statue which represented 4 earthly kingdoms, which beginning with his Babylonian kingdom, all fell, and the rock which was God's eternal Kingdom, grew to fill the whole earth. So the fall of Belshazzar and of Babylon is the beginning of the fulfilment of that dream. While it was the pride of a King that was the immediate cause of the downfall, God is in control of the nations and sets over them whoever He wishes.

As Daniel was faithfully serving God in exile, God was at work. As we serve God faithfully in what often seems an alien anti-God culture, we can be sure God is in control and is building His Kingdom.

And v29 says Daniel was promoted to a high position after he interpreted the writing on the wall. He was clothed in a purple robe and had a gold chain put round his neck. The purple robe reminded me that Jesus had a purple robe placed on him by the Roman soldiers before He was crucified (Mark 15v17). That was to mock Him but the purple robe, a royal colour, was appropriate – Jesus is God’s faithful divine risen exalted death-defeating eternal King! If in our hearts we’re trusting in Jesus and living with Him as our Lord and King, we’re on the right side!