

DANIEL — WEEK 6

ARROGANCE



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The cover image is Daniel in the Lions' Den by Peter Paul Rubens

Belshazzar seems to be celebrating the failure of Jeremiah's prophesy of a 70-year exile. He pulls out the treasures that his forefather Nebuchadnezzar removed from the temple and uses them as utensils.

Then everything starts to go wrong.

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1 Daniel 5:1–4

Belshazzar the king made a great feast for a thousand of his lords, and drank wine in the presence of the thousand. 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 which has been in Jerusalem, that the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them. Then they brought the gold vessels that had been taken from the temple of the house of God which had been in Jerusalem; 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.

What’s up with this in-your-face desecration of the treasures of the God of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego?

As a child, Belshazzar should have heard the stories about what happened to Grandpa Nebuchadnezzar¹. Heck, we’re reading about them thousands of years later. That kind of family history doesn’t get ignored.

Except that it did. Belshazzar barely knows anything about Daniel. That seems impossible, but the same thing happened to Joseph in Egypt. A new pharaoh came along and suddenly Joseph was a nobody.

We live in an information age. Gutenberg made information plentiful and thus more appreciated. We don’t just hear stories about our ancestors, we read them.

People also now live long enough to spend time with their grandchildren. It was only a couple of centuries ago that the average lifespan worldwide was less than 30 years. (See the purple line on this graph.)

<https://ourworldindata.org/life-expectancy#life-expectancy-has-improved-globally>

Belshazzar may not have even met Nebuchadnezzar. That would explain a lot.

Belshazzar’s arrogance is more important than his ignorance. He’s showing off to *a thousand of his lords* here. The temple artifacts are valuable and were stored somewhere secure, yet he treats them like common pottery, letting *his lords, his wives, and his concubines* drink from them. Even his concubines?

Lastly, and more specifically insulting, they *praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze and iron, wood and stone*. This all adds up to something very different from the errors Nebuchadnezzar made. He had a false understanding of who God is, but he wasn’t hostile and arrogant about it.

St. Jerome noted that many see this as Belshazzar celebrating the end of Jeremiah’s prophesied 70-year captivity. Since the Jews are still captive, he’s mocking that prophesy’s failure.

Hang on there, Belshazzar. God will confirm Jeremiah’s prophesy in just a moment.

¹ The Aramaic word that’s translated as “father” here can mean “ancestor.” Nebuchadnezzar was either his grandfather or great-grandfather. Belshazzar’s father was Nabonidus.

2 Daniel 5:5–9

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. 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. The king cried aloud to bring in the astrologers, the Chaldeans, and the soothsayers. The king spoke, saying to the wise men of Babylon, "Whoever reads this writing, and tells me its interpretation, shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around his neck; and he shall be the third ruler in the kingdom." Now all the king's wise men came, but they could not read the writing, or make known to the king its interpretation. Then King Belshazzar was greatly troubled, his countenance was changed, and his lords were astonished.

Notice the timing. *In the same hour*, the writing on the wall appears. That's the key to this passage.

Why does this make Belshazzar afraid? Magical writing on a wall isn't necessarily a bad thing, yet it scares him so much that *the joints of his hips were loosened and his knees knocked against each other*. It may be bad news, but he doesn't know that. What's so scary?

The timing. The immediacy of the writing's appearance connects it to Belshazzar's act of using the temple treasures for common use. He knew they were from a temple and thus had religious significance. He knew his acts were symbolic. He was celebrating his "triumph" over "their" gods. (Never mind that he didn't triumph over anything; he inherited the throne.) Then they *praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze and iron, wood and stone*.

Immediately after that, something supernatural and mysterious happens before their eyes. Supernatural events display supernatural power.

Belshazzar should be scared.

It's curious that *all the king's wise men came, but they could not read the writing, or make known to the king its interpretation*. As we'll soon see, the writing is in Aramaic—the mother tongue of Babylon.

As we'll see, it uses some tricky analogies, but the words are clear enough. It's interesting that all the wise men, "*could not read the writing*." Belshazzar can read the writing.

That's why he doesn't offer a reward for just reading it. The reward is for "*Whoever reads this writing, and tells me its interpretation*."

The king knows what it says; he just doesn't know what it means. Still, he knows enough to be petrified.

The *wise men* also can discern a lot. Using that discernment, they decide that they wouldn't touch this with a ten-foot pole.

That is wise.

3 Daniel 5:10–12

The queen, because of the words of the king and his lords, came to the banquet hall. The queen spoke, saying, “O king, live forever! Do not let your thoughts trouble you, nor let your countenance change. 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; and King Nebuchadnezzar your father—your father the king—made him chief of the magicians, astrologers, Chaldeans, and soothsayers. Inasmuch as an excellent spirit, knowledge, understanding, interpreting dreams, solving riddles, and explaining enigmas were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Belteshazzar, now let Daniel be called, and he will give the interpretation.”

The queen isn't Belshazzar's wife; his wives, and his concubines were already there in verse 5:2. The queen is his mother. That's why she knows more family history than he does. She knows from that history that Daniel is the one who can solve this riddle.

So, the queen-mother gives Daniel the perfect introduction. She introduces him the way we introduce keynote speakers, by listing his noteworthy accomplishments—in a sense, his resume.

Notice too that Daniel has his Hebrew name back; “Belteshazzar” is now just a footnote. The queen-mother mentions that name presumably because some folks might only be familiar with the “legend of Belshazzar.”

It looks like Nebuchadnezzar gave up on the renaming nonsense. He gave Daniel the name “Belteshazzar” as a reference to the Babylonian god Bel, but after learning that the Babylonian gods were nothing, that name lost its meaning.

The way the queen says this is important too. She says that, “*an excellent spirit, knowledge, understanding, interpreting dreams, solving riddles, and explaining enigmas were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Belteshazzar.*”

He is Daniel, but *your father the king* named him Belteshazzar.

If the name “Belteshazzar” isn't a keeper, maybe “Belshazzar” isn't a keeper either.

The queen-mother is wrong when she says, “*Do not let your thoughts trouble you, nor let your countenance change.*” That's just Babylonian mom-speak designed to get her boy to settle down and man up.

She wasn't there when the writing appeared, so she's not aware of the timing. She may not even know about everyone partying with the temple treasures or about their praising *the gods of gold and silver, bronze and iron, wood and stone.*

Her boy's in trouble.

4 Daniel 5:13–16

Then Daniel was brought in before the king. The king spoke, and said to Daniel, “Are you that Daniel who is one of the captives from Judah, whom my father the king brought from Judah? I have heard of you, that the Spirit of God is in you, and that light and understanding and excellent wisdom are found in you. Now the wise men, the astrologers, have been brought in before me, that they should read this writing and make known to me its interpretation, but they could not give the interpretation of the thing. And I have heard of you, that you can give interpretations and explain enigmas. 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.”

Yes, he is *that Daniel*. So, Belshazzar does know something about him after all. Specifically, he has heard *that the Spirit of God is in you, and that light and understanding and excellent wisdom are found in you.*

[Note: some translations say, “the spirit of the gods,” instead of, “*the Spirit of God.*” The Aramaic is ambiguous. Given Belshazzar’s irreverence, he seems unlikely to be thinking of the Hebrew God.]

So, even if he had only heard a little bit about Daniel, he should have known not to mess with the Hebrew temple artifacts. That helps explain why his knees knocked together when the writing appeared. He knew darn well that he was testing a boundary. He was hoping nothing would come of it.

But something did come of it. He doesn’t know exactly what yet, but he has seen a supernatural hand delivering a message. Since it can’t possibly mean something like, “Gee thanks,” he’s shaking.

So, Belshazzar offers Daniel the same ridiculous reward he offered, without success, to his wise men. In doing so, he thinks he is displaying his kingly power. He has the power to just offer all these treasures and even a high office without any checks and balances.

It all feels a little desperate though.

Just imagine what *his lords, his wives, and his concubines* are thinking. They were involved in the desecration of the temple treasures, even though it wasn’t their idea. They were also involved in praising *the gods of gold and silver, bronze and iron, wood and stone.*

They have got to be nervous. They can see how shaken Belshazzar is and the fear is spreading. If they have ticked off some kind of deity, they could be in for it.

There is a lesson in this—don’t be party to something you aren’t comfortable with. All *his lords, his wives, and his concubines* were free to head off to the bathroom at any time. In a crowd of over a thousand, anyone could have chosen to step away and miss all this action.

That said, it isn’t always easy to exit an unethical situation. You may have to be politely confrontational.

Like it or not, that makes it an *opportunity*.

5 Daniel 5:17

Then Daniel answered, and said before the king, “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 declines the reward up front. He doesn't seem to be trying to insult the king, but it reflects an attitude that's unusual. Most folks would jump at the opportunity to be *the third ruler in the kingdom*. The physical gifts are none too shabby either.

But Daniel's attitude is almost like “I'm from another planet and I'm here to help you.” It shows that he's not impressed. He's not even interested.

His focus is on the message.

This is the attitude we need to cultivate. We are to be in the world but not of the world. Everyone around us seems to care about bling. Power and popularity are even more enticing. How can we resist?

It's not easy and it takes time to fully learn. The world's priorities eventually prove stupid, but only years of observation make this lesson sink in.

Daniel knew his people's history. He knew about Jeremiah's prophesy of their captivity, and he was living through its fulfillment. He had witnessed the fulfillment of his own prophesies. He experienced those years of observation.

So, Daniel's faith was more than just a theology he had memorized. He knew it in his bones, or, as Romans 10:9 puts it, in his heart. That theology clearly states that worldly things like power, popularity, and bling are not important and do not last. Daniel truly believed that, and he acted like he believed it.

But—and this is as important as it is subtle—teaching that lesson to children is essential to their knowing it in their bones later. If they haven't memorized this theology, they won't even notice when it's validated. They'll be thinking about something else.

You don't notice things when you don't know what to look for. That was the purpose of the Christian Eyes series that ran just before this Daniel series— to train our eyes to see all things in terms of His kingdom.

Things like bling, power, and popularity are distractions. Even when we've memorized the fact that His kingdom is the important thing, we tend to forget when we're dazzled by some worldly attraction. That's part of why the Babylonian kings were in the habit of offering spectacular rewards for merely interpreting a dream or some writing. They expected people to be thinking about the reward.

But Daniel wasn't distracted.

Daniel had Christian eyes.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What are we arrogant about?
2. When has the timing of an event seemed supernatural?
3. Is family history important?
4. Have you ever had to disassociate from something?
5. What worldly things impress you?

Items for prayer: