

Repeating a Real Tragedy **Daniel 5:1-31**

I went to Google to try to find a couple of particular sayings about history. I discovered websites that had whole sections dedicated to quotes about history – with all sorts of interesting quotes.¹ There was, of course, Henry Ford's famous:

History is more or less bunk. It's tradition. We don't want tradition. We want to live in the present and the only history that is worth [anything] is the history we make today.

Every high school student knows that sentiment – even if they haven't read enough history to be able to quote it. Of course, if they studied history, they'd be able to quote it at parents nagging them to study for exams.

Norman Cousins said:

History is a vast early warning system.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe said:

Sin writes histories, goodness is silent.

Some unknown person said:

Each time history repeats itself, the price goes up.

There were all sorts of gems – but I'd better not get side-tracked.

What I was looking for were two sentiments. The first is contained in a quote from Pearl Buck:

If you want to understand today, you have to search yesterday.

The second is attributed to George Santayana:

Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

¹ www.wisdomquotes.com and www.quoteagarden.com.

Or George Bernard Shaw puts it this way:

We learn from history that we learn nothing from history.

George Wilhelm Hegel expressed it as:

What experience and history teach is this – that people and governments never have learned anything from history, or acted on principles.

It's the sort of thing Belshazzar may have written if he lived another day. But, then again, if he'd lived another day, he wouldn't have learnt the lesson, and so wouldn't have written the quote.

Belshazzar – the Illusive Man

Who was Belshazzar? We've just read Daniel 5 – it's pretty clear. He was king of Babylon. Unfortunately, not everyone thinks it's that clear. There are a couple of historical problems with this chapter. I'm very tempted not to tell you about them because some of you will think this stuff boring. You're not particularly interested in the details of history. But I once heard another preacher give a warning something like this.

Non-Christians somehow find these historical problems. These days, they can scour the internet for them. They'll raise them to show you can't rely on the Bible. If that's the first time you hear them, it may undermine your confidence in the Bible. You'll wonder why you never heard about this at church. You'll think yourself a dill. You may even wonder if preachers deliberately hid this stuff all these years. It's better to be upfront about it and forewarned.

The first problem relates to Belshazzar himself. History outside the Bible records Nabonidus as the last king of Babylon. So people say the Bible gets it wrong. What's

more, until the 1870s or 1880s, there was no independent reference to the existence of Belshazzar. That changed with the excavation of the Cylinder of Nabonidus. A few years into his reign, Nabonidus went off on military campaigns in the region of Palestine. Then he got tied up in other things in that region. He stayed away for ten years. He left his son Belshazzar ruling in Babylon during that time. Nabonidus returned to Babylon not long before its capture – but went off again with the army to meet Cyrus and his army elsewhere. Some still wish to insist that Belshazzar wasn't technically king – but I doubt those living in Babylon at the time were interested in such distinctions. As an aside, this may be why Belshazzar offers Daniel the third ranking position in the empire – since he himself only held the second ranking one.

The second problem relates to Nebuchadnezzar being called Belshazzar's father – when that was Nabonidus. Yet, it's long been recognised that these Biblical cultures used *father* more broadly than us. It could refer to male ancestors stretching back many generations.

The third problem relates to Darius – at the end of the chapter. At present, we have no other reference to this particular Darius. The armies of Cyrus capture Babylon – not the armies of Darius. There are three possible solutions:

- First, Daniel got it wrong – not an acceptable solution for Bible-believing Christians.
- Second, this is another name that hasn't come down to us from other historical records. We know the name of the general leading the army when Babylon fell – Gobryas. We know the name of the person he appointed governor of Babylon while

they waited for Cyrus to turn up – Gubaru. Perhaps it was one of them and they also had another name – like Nebuchadnezzar giving Daniel a Babylonian name. Or maybe it's someone else we don't know about elsewhere from historical records.

- Third, this may be another name for Cyrus. Have a look at Daniel 6:28.

So Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian.

Then have a look at the alternative possibility in the NIV footnote:

Darius, that is, the reign of Cyrus

Ultimately, we don't know at this point. Perhaps archaeologists will dig up something to shed more light on the matter. Maybe they won't. But there are quite acceptable explanations that fit with what the Bible says.

Belshazzar – the Arrogant Man

Anyway, we'd best get to the text itself. What's it tell us about Belshazzar? Verses 1 to 4 – we get a picture that looks very much like modern Australia.

- Partying with the free-flow of alcohol.
- A strong suggestion of immoral sexual activity.
- A thumbing the nose at tradition.
- A hint of arrogance and self-promotion.

Perhaps the big difference is Belshazzar does it all praising gods of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood and stone. Modern Australians are a bit more sophisticated – they do it praising the gods of money, pleasure, power and sport.

For the reader, the warning bells go off in verse 2:

While Belshazzar was drinking his wine, he gave orders to bring in the gold and silver goblets that Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken from the temple

in Jerusalem, so that the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines might drink from them.

And in case you only half woke up with the first warning bell, it's basically repeated in verse 3 – when they actually go ahead and do it. We tend to think of this as boring repetition. God puts it there to double-underline it. Pay attention. This is important.

But what's the problem with drinking from these cups? Surely a cup's a cup, isn't it? Why's it such a big deal? This was stuff taken from God's temple in Jerusalem. As such, it was stuff dedicated to God – made holy, set apart for God's purposes. It's not for ordinary, everyday use. It's not for ordinary people to do with it as they wish. Nebuchadnezzar showed some level of respect for it.

- Sure, he destroyed God's temple and burnt it to the ground.
- Sure, he took the valuable stuff inside the temple back to Babylon.
- Yes, putting it in the temple of his idolatrous gods has an ironic twist to it.

But he didn't profane it. He didn't bring it out for personal use.

Belshazzar thumbs his nose at God. Now, if this stuff had been plundered from some other place in his empire – if it was the Egyptian sun god's stuff or the Philistine fertility god's stuff – it wouldn't have mattered. They're fake gods. They couldn't do anything about it. But this stuff belonged to the real God – the God who made the world; the God who made him. This stuff belonged to the God who could actually do something about it. It's not too smart to thumb your nose at Him. It's the height of arrogant stupidity. But Belshazzar openly flaunts his

disrespect for God.

Now, in case you think I'm reading too much into this, look at Daniel's assessment of the situation. Verse 22:

But you his son, O Belshazzar, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this. [that is, though you knew all the stuff we looked at last week in Daniel 4.] Instead, you have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven. You had the goblets from His temple brought to you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines drank wine from them. You praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or understand. But you did not honor the God who holds in His hand your life and all your ways. Therefore He sent the hand that wrote the inscription.

Daniel 4 finished with these words:

Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything He does is right and all His ways are just. And those who walk in pride He is able to humble.

Daniel 5 opens by showing us a king walking in pride. We expect God will act.

It all looks a bit silly, doesn't it? Belshazzar should know better. He should know his recent history. He should know his family history. He shouldn't be doomed just to repeat the mistakes of earlier rulers. But he does. And so we ask: How could he be so stupid? Why does he have such a dumb attitude? Why does he do such a dumb thing?

But it's so typical. What's it like in the world around us?

- Drunken parties.
- Flagrant immorality.
- Plenty of self-promotion.
- Self-centred arrogance.
- Thumbing the nose at God.

Maybe they haven't plundered God's temple so they can use His stuff to insult Him – but they're quite happy to insult Him every other way they can. They ignore Him. They trample His laws. They promote things He says are evil. They scoff at the cross. They use His name as a swear word. They should know better.

- They have His word.
- They have lessons from history.
- They have their consciences.

But they suppress it all. They want to do their own thing. They want to run their own lives. They don't want to bow the knee to anyone else – not even God.

And we know we're not immune from such pride as well. We have God's word. We know what He wants. But sometimes we're stupid enough to think we know better. We're stupid enough to think we can thumb our nose at God, do our own thing and He won't do anything about it.

Belshazzar – the Terrified Man

So, the mighty Belshazzar thumbs his nose at God. He's king over the great Babylon – the city with impregnable defences. He's confident in his own power. While other armies gather against the city, he throws a great party. He's forgotten the most important lesson: God gives kings power and God takes that power away – the very God whose cups Belshazzar now uses in his drunken orgy.

God takes up the challenge. Some fingers appear and

write four words on the wall. We're not told how long they took to write. We're not told if Belshazzar thought he'd had one too many drinks. What we're told is verse 6:

His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his knees knocked together and his legs gave way.

These are the physical manifestations of terror. Some suggest the bit about his legs giving way refers to him soiling himself.

What's it take for God to bring this confident, powerful king to his knees? What's it take for God to have this defiant, arrogant king cowering in terror? Four words written on the wall.

Humans are good at bravado. It's the stuff we see in movies all the time. It carries over into real life. People show great confidence in their own ability to handle God and what God may say to them when they stand before Him. They think their own physical presence impressive. They think their silver tongue can sweet-talk them out of anything. They're sure they can wrap God round their little finger. And if all that fails and it comes to hell, it'll be a great time partying with all their mates. They've got no idea. Four words on the wall and this great king was reduced to abject terror. How stupid to think any mere human could get the better of God. Who do we think we are? And how much greater the terror when standing before the full majesty of the one, true, living God.

Belshazzar goes through the process we've seen twice before with Nebuchadnezzar – in chapter 2 and chapter 4. He calls in all the wise men of his kingdom – the enchanters, the Chaldeans, the diviners. He offers great reward to the person who interprets these words. But

they can't do it. They're perplexed. And so Belshazzar's even more terrified.

At that point, they turn to Daniel – who's quite an old man by now. The way they do that is different this time – it happens through the queen. Many understand this to be the queen mother – that is, Belshazzar's grandmother. It doesn't matter a great deal who she is – what's important is she remembers the good old days when people paid attention to Daniel – and Daniel's God. Daniel's called in and Belshazzar's problem's solved – at least, the one about what's written on the wall.

Belshazzar – the Judged Man

Basically, Daniel takes Belshazzar back to school. He gives him a history lesson. He tells him what God did for King Nebuchadnezzar.

- God gave him a kingdom.
- God gave him greatness and glory and majesty.
- God gave him power to rule his empire.
- And God gave him a lesson.

The lesson was to do with his arrogant pride. And the lesson was to do with God being the true King – it's God who gives men kingdoms and God who takes them away.

What's the point of Daniel's history lesson? Verse 22:

But you his son, O Belshazzar, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this.

You have no excuse. You can't plead ignorance. God provided the lesson clearly. You knew what was right – but you didn't act on it. You chose to ignore it. You deliberately turned your back on God and did what you wanted to do.

And so, this is God's response. Three different words – the first repeated.

Mene, mene, tekel, parsin.

The three words are weights – a mina, a shekel and a half (probably a half shekel). Someone likened it to a merchant giving a price: one mina, one and a half shekels. Yet, that doesn't get us very far. It doesn't help Belshazzar understand what's being said.

And so Daniel goes on to explain. There's a wordplay going on here. Some of you aren't old enough, but many can remember back to before metric. Instead of grams we had ounces. Instead of kilograms we had pounds. Think of the word *pound*. It's a measure of weight – 16 ounces. It's like these words written on Belshazzar's wall. But the word can also be used as a verb – you can *pound* something into a pulp. It means to bash, batter, pulverise.

It's like that with these ancient weights. They also had verb meanings.

- *mene* meant to count, to appoint, to destine.
- *tekel* meant to weigh, to measure.
- *parsin* meant to break in half.

And so Daniel applies God's message to Belshazzar:

- *mene* – God has numbered (or appointed) the days of your reign and brought it to an end.
- *tekel* – you have been weighed on the scales and found wanting.
- *parsin* – your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.

And that's exactly what happened. Verse 30:

That very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain, and Darius the Mede took over the

kingdom, at the age of sixty-two.

Belshazzar – the Example

What are we to learn from this narrative? It's very easy to individualise it and say: Don't be like Belshazzar. Don't follow his example. What were Belshazzar's sins?

- Drunken orgies.
- Stupid idolatry.
- Blatant sacrilege.
- Arrogant pride.

These things are common in our culture. You will be pressured to get involved. God says they're wrong. God judges those who do such things. Make sure you don't.

That's an important message. It's a Biblical message. It's certainly within this chapter.

- The warning bells go off when Belshazzar calls for the cups from God's temple.
- There is emphasis on Belshazzar treating God with contempt and thumbing his nose at heaven.
- Our attention is drawn to Belshazzar's pride – and his failure to humble himself.

And Belshazzar is judged for these things.

Yet, I think the main message of this chapter is the same as Daniel 4 – namely, that the Most High God is sovereign over His world and He puts kings in place as He chooses and He removes kings when He chooses.

- Nebuchadnezzar is taught this in his life. His kingdom's taken from him for a period and then given back.
- Belshazzar's taught this in his death. His kingdom's just taken from him – and the lesson's driven home very forcefully as he stands before his Maker.

The two chapters go together.

- Daniel 4 gives us a positive example – God brings Nebuchadnezzar to the point where he humbles himself and acknowledges the truth.
- Daniel 5 gives us a negative example – Belshazzar refuses to humble himself and is removed.

Does God treat them both the same? No.

- Nebuchadnezzar's given a dream, an interpretation, a warning to repent and ignores it all. Still God's gracious and persists with him and teaches him the lesson the hard way. How much easier it would have been if he just paid attention to Daniel in the first place.
- In one sense, Belshazzar's given all that as well. Nebuchadnezzar wrote it down and sent it throughout his empire. The lesson's quite clear. Nebuchadnezzar's repentance was clear. He ignored that. We have no record here of Daniel challenging Belshazzar to repent – just the words on the wall, the announcement of judgment and the execution of that judgment.

Has God treated Belshazzar unjustly because He didn't give him another chance? No. Belshazzar knew. One warning's enough. God is not obliged to give warning after warning after warning. On many occasions He does – but He doesn't have to. We can't presume on His grace. We can't say: I'll ignore this warning because God's sure to come back with another one in two weeks.

God's still sovereign. He puts kings and prime ministers and presidents in place – and He removes them. None of them are outside His control. None of them can thwart His purposes.

What do you feel as you look at our own world – as you think about our government?

- On the one hand, you probably feel fairly comfortable. Sure, we've just had an election – and both major parties talked about the great risk the other party was. Maybe you're a bit worried the country's heading for problems and you may be forced to tighten your belt a bit. But, even if that happens, things are pretty good. We're still far better off than most in the world.
- Yet, how does our government relate to God? Does our government promote worship of the one, true God? Has our government learnt that He alone is truly sovereign and He sets up the governments of this world – and removes them? And does it run our country on that basis? Does it encourage us to think that way?

We're in a war. A powerful anti-God philosophy's taken over our country. And it doesn't matter which party won the election, they both subscribe to it.

- You can't promote one culture over another.
- You can't promote one religion over another.
- You must keep God out of politics.
- You must keep God out of public policy.
- You must keep God in the private sphere.

What should we do?

- Sit back in comfort and go with the flow while we wait for Jesus to return? That seems the equivalent of bowing to the idols of silver and gold.
- Should we throw up our hands in despair and hide in Christian ghettos and hope this big, powerful enemy doesn't notice us?

No. We should remember that God is sovereign. Even this philosophy doesn't escape His rule. Yes, it's anti-God. Yes, it mocks God's people. Yes, it flaunts its independence in God's face. Yes, it has its own forms of idolatry. But God uses it for His own purposes – and He will bring it to judgment. Like all the other anti-God philosophies of the past, it too will fall. History's full of such things happening.

Meanwhile, we continue to trust God and God's rule. We show that by living the way He tells us – even if that means going against the ruling philosophy of our time.

One final word. You may have noticed by now that each of these incidents in Daniel makes much the same point. The same lesson is driven home again and again. Why? Two things.

- First, it's such an important lesson that it's good to emphasise it.
- Secondly, it's a lesson we tend to forget. We have an inbuilt bias against it – as shown by Belshazzar refusing to learn it from recent history. We need to be reminded of it constantly.