

## ST. JOHN'S LUTHERAN CHURCH- Red Bud, Illinois

### Adult Bible Class- Popular Proverbial Phrases Inspired by Bible Passages

#### Daniel Chapter Five: "The Handwriting Is on the Wall"

The phrase "the handwriting is on the wall" means that something very obvious and serious is about to happen right away. The origin of this phrase is the story in Daniel chapter five of the overthrow of the Babylonian kingdom by the Persians.

#### A. Verses 1-4

A Babylonian text gives the date for this event as October 12, 539 BC. Belshazzar is reigning as king in Babylon in place of his father Nabonidus who spent most of his time at his vacation home in Tema (the middle of Arabia). Belshazzar most likely is a grandson of Nebuchadnezzar through his mother. Babylon is surrounded by the armies of Cyrus, King of Persia. Belshazzar is not concerned. He is relying upon the thick, impenetrable walls of Babylon to keep the enemy out and his throne safe. He has such a lack of concern that he throws a big party for all his government officials even though his city is under siege. When ordering more wine he makes use of the fancy drinking cups that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple in Jerusalem decades earlier (Daniel 1:2). Belshazzar and his guests then use these sacred vessels for idolatrous and sacrilegious purposes.

*Jeremiah 52:17-19 And the pillars of bronze that were in the house of the LORD, and the stands and the bronze sea that were in the house of the LORD, the Chaldeans broke in pieces, and carried all the bronze to Babylon. And they took away the pots and the shovels and the snuffers and the basins and the dishes for incense and all the vessels of bronze used in the temple service; also the small bowls and the fire pans and the basins and the pots and the lampstands and the dishes for incense and the bowls for drink offerings. What was of gold the captain of the guard took away as gold, and what was of silver, as silver.*

#### B. Verses 5-9

God would not be mocked or ignored. The bodiless fingers of a hand appear and write on the wall of the palace near a lampstand that would illuminate the writing. The mighty king Belshazzar collapses in fear. He calls together his royal wise men to tell the king what the writing means. He offers to the one who could do so the job of third highest ruler in the kingdom (he was second, his father was first). Considering the circumstances this would be like becoming the first mate of the Titanic. Once again, we see how ineffective human wisdom and reason is when it comes to explaining the acts of God. The king's wise men are clueless as to what this writing means.

#### C. Verses 10-12

When in doubt, rely upon a woman for clear, level-headed thinking (of course, she probably had not been part of the drinking party). The queen (either Belshazzar's mother or the "queen mother," Nebuchadnezzar's widow) has the solution. King Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar's "father" (really grandfather, "predecessor"), had been served well by one whom he had appointed chief of the wise men, Daniel. She speaks of Daniel in the same words Nebuchadnezzar had used of him in 4:8-9. Perhaps Daniel (by now at least 80 years old) had "retired" from active duty or fallen out of favor with the younger generation of leaders and thus was not consulted by Belshazzar right away.

*Galatians 6:7 Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.*

**How does the queen describe Daniel?** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

#### D. Verses 13-16

Belshazzar doesn't even know who Daniel is. Even after nearly 70 years in Babylon, Daniel is still thought of as a foreigner, an exile from Judah. The king tells Daniel that he is the king's last resort. He makes the same offer to Daniel that he had made previously, to be clothed in purple (royal color), receive a gold chain, and become the third highest ruler in the kingdom.

**What list of attributes does Belshazzar give to Daniel?** \_\_\_\_\_

#### E. Verses 17-21

Daniel doesn't want anything from the king for doing God's work (what the king offers won't be worth a plug nickel by the next day anyway). No reward will influence his interpretation of this message. Again, Nebuchadnezzar is referred to as Belshazzar's father when he really was his grandfather. Daniel recounts Nebuchadnezzar's glory as king but also his fall from greatness to insanity when he got too proud (chapter four). This was reversed only when Nebuchadnezzar gave the Most High God the honor He deserves. While Nebuchadnezzar may have had human reasons for his excessive pride because of his military victories, Belshazzar has no such excuse.

#### F. Verses 22-24

Belshazzar should have learned a lesson from what had happened to his grandfather. But he did not. In his shameful pride he disgraces the sacred temple vessels with idolatrous worship of false gods. The true God had to reveal to Belshazzar a special message.

**In what two ways does Daniel describe (the true) God in verse 23?**

#### G. Verses 25-31

The message on the wall are Aramaic verbs in the passive participle form. They are words that can be used for units of money as well as their actual meanings. *Mene* means "numbered." *Tekel* means "weighed." *Parsin* (in the singular *Peres*) means "divided" (and sounds like Persian). So the message that made Belshazzar so afraid was, in essence, "Numbered, numbered, weighed, and divided." It is a message of God's judgment upon Belshazzar and the whole Babylonian kingdom. The time is up for him and his rule. Despite the gloominess of the interpretation, Belshazzar makes good on his promise and clothes Daniel in purple with a gold chain and makes him the third highest ruler in the kingdom (which at that very moment was coming to its end).

The Persians were able to breach the walls of Babylon at their weakest point, where the waters of the Euphrates River ran under them. Cyrus of Persia had his men build a dam and divert the river upstream into a marshy lake so that the river bed under the walls of Babylon would run dry. The Persians then could enter the city under the walls while the Babylonian leadership was busy partying. The Greek historian Herodotus records this event (*Histories, I, 191*).

Many critical Bible scholars point to the mention of Darius the Mede taking over the kingdom as an error. Cyrus of Persia already had defeated the Medes and made them part of his empire. There is no king by this name over Babylon until 20 years later (Ezra 4:5; Haggai 1:1). A way to explain this is that Darius was a name or a title given to a man named Gubaro (or Gobryas) whom Cyrus appointed as governor of Babylon. Another way to explain this is that Darius was another name for Cyrus himself whose mother was a Mede and did not give him the name Cyrus (Herodotus, *Histories, I, 113-114*). We will hear more of this ruler in chapter six.