

# **The Party's Over**

## **Daniel 5:1-31**

**A sermon by Dr. Calvin Warpula preached at the  
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For years Don Meredith announced Monday night football. In many games late in the fourth quarter when one team was far enough ahead of the other, Don would sing, "Turn out the lights, the party's over." It was his way of saying this game is history. It's finished. In Daniel chapter 5, it seems to me that God says to Belshazzar and his one thousand guests, "Turn out the lights, the party's over."

That very night, the king, Belshazzar, was killed, and the Babylonian kingdom was overthrown by the Medes and the Persians.

Belshazzar, grandson of Nebuchadnezzar, was ruling in Babylon, the capital city, while his father, Nabonidus, was ruling from another city in southwestern Arabia named Teima. Belshazzar was co-regent with his dad. He was in charge now that his father was away.

I know that the text says here several times that Nebuchadnezzar was the father of Belshazzar and that Belshazzar was his son. The Hebrew word for "father" can mean "progenitor, ancestor" and the Hebrew word for "son" can mean "successor or descendant" such as a grandson. For example, in Genesis 28:13 and 32:9 Jacob refers to his grandfather Abraham as his "father." In I Kings 15:10-13, David is called the father of Asa, but in reality he is his great grandfather. In Luke 1:32 David is called the father of Jesus, which simply means that David is an ancestor of Jesus. In Semitic languages any predecessor in office is called the "father" of his immediate or mediate successor. So even if Belshazzar was not a direct descendant of Nebuchadnezzar, he still would have been in this sense Belshazzar's father.

The Jewish people had grievously sinned against God. In 605 B.C., God had sent them into Babylonian captivity. Babylon was 750 miles to the east from the Jewish homeland. Nebuchadnezzar was the crown prince when he first conquered Jerusalem but his father died that year and he became king of Babylon. Daniel was one of the Hebrew youths Nebuchadnezzar had captured and taken to Babylon. Our last story in

Daniel chapter 4 occurred toward the end of Nebuchadnezzar's reign, possibly from 582 to 575 B. C. Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 B.C. after reigning for 43 years.

Following Nebuchadnezzar there were three minor rulers until 556 B.C. when Nabonidus usurped the throne. Nabonidus ruled for 17 years until 539 B. C. when the kingdom collapsed and was overthrown as told here in Daniel chapter 5. Nabonidus had married the daughter of Nebuchadnezzar and they had a son named Belshazzar. In 553 B. C. Nabonidus shared the kingship with his son, Belshazzar. Nabonidus had many interests and he wanted to go to Teima several hundred miles away. Here he worshipped the sun god and the moon god. According to Greek historians Herodotus and Xenophon, Belshazzar ruled in Babylon for 14 years until the fall of the kingdom which occurred on the night of October 12, 539 B. C. In 539 B. C., Daniel had been in Babylon since 605 B.C., or 66 years. If he was a teenager about 16 years old when he was captured and transported to Babylon, he would now be about 82 years old when our story occurred.

A few years before this time, some several hundred miles north of Babylon, Cyrus led a rebellion of the Persians against the old regime. Cyrus united with the Medes from the east and formed the Medo-Persian empire. Cyrus wanted to conquer Babylon so he moved south to battle against them.

His army defeated King Nabonidus in a battle north of Babylon and Nabonidus retreated westward toward Teima. Cyrus then was free to move south and siege the city of Babylon. At the time of our story Babylon had been surrounded by the Persians for three months. No one could go out or come into the city. The massive city of several hundred thousand people was surrounded by the Persians. But Babylon felt secure. They had walls that were 87 feet thick. Their gates were massive brass doors. Some of their walls were three hundred feet high. They had 250 towers that were 100 feet higher than the walls. They had storehouses of food to last for twenty years. They had gardens to grow their own food. The Euphrates River flowed north to south through the middle of the city underneath some massive water gates. A thirty-foot moat surrounded the city. Babylon was solid, secure, and safe, so they thought, and it could stand forever.

Belshazzar and the Babylonians knew that the Persian army surrounded their city but what did they care? They had the strongest city, the largest city in the world, and nothing could topple them. So to build up morale and to display their arrogant confidence, Belshazzar threw a big party. Archaeologists have excavated Babylon and found a hall 165 ft. long and 55 feet wide. Today, if you visited the excavated ruins of old Babylon

you could stand in the very place where this hall existed. It was probably here that Belshazzar, his nobles, and their wives celebrated the greatness of Babylon. The wine flowed freely. This was a drinking party. Five times in four verses the Bible mentions they were drinking wine. To add to the power of the evening and to show that the Babylonian deities were stronger than all other gods, Belshazzar asked that the cups and vessels that his grandfather had brought from the Jewish temple in Jerusalem be brought out and used as drinking cups.

Let's read chapter five, verses one through four: [read the verses].

Five thousand four hundred golden vessels from God's temple in Jerusalem had been stored away for forty seven years since they were taken from Jerusalem in Nebuchadnezzar's raids (Ezra 1:7). Belshazzar's grandfather, King Nebuchadnezzar, had enough sense to confess the God of heaven and to admit that he was the supreme God above all gods. Nebuchadnezzar respected the God of heaven enough that he safely stored these golden vessels and would not desecrate them in a lascivious, drunken feast. The young man Belshazzar was a party animal and he had no scruples about anything holy. He was saying to all that because the Babylonians had captured the Jews that Jehovah God whom the Jews worshiped was an inferior, secondary, nothing god.

But God had enough of this sacrilege and blasphemy. Judgment came on Belshazzar and the Babylonians that night. All of a sudden, a disembodied hand began to write on the plaster wall right above the lamp stand near the king. The Bible says, [read 5:5-6].

The whole crowd got deathly quiet. Every eye was focused on the moving hand. They were all witnessing a supernatural work. They all knew something mysterious, eerie and divine was happening right before their eyes. The king dropped his drinking cup. He grew pale and trembled. His legs weakened and his muscles went limp. He was so afraid that his knees knocked together.

The king called for an explanation. He called for the magicians, the astronomers, the diviners and the enchanters to come and explain what the writing on the wall meant. The king promised them a big reward. [read 5:7bc]. Purple was the color of royalty. It was very expensive. Only the king's family and closest advisers wore purple. A gold necklace spoke of wealth and honor. Belshazzar could promise the answerer would be third in the kingdom because his father, Nabonidus, was number one, and Belshazzar was number two. Whoever deciphered the handwriting would be number three in the kingdom.

All the wise men of Babylon could not interpret the handwriting. Maybe they could read the words, especially if they were in the common language, Aramaic, but they could not understand the meaning of the words. They were confounded and confused. The Bible says, [read 5:8-9].

The queen, evidently the queen mother, Nabonidus' wife, who was the daughter of King Nebuchadnezzar and the mother of Belshazzar, told her son to be strong and to call for Daniel. This queen is not Belshazzar's wife because she remembers the past when Nebuchadnezzar was king and Belshazzar's wife was with him at the feast (5:2). [Read 5:10-12].

So the octogenarian Daniel was called in. Possibly, this young king did not have the respect for Daniel that his grandfather, Nebuchadnezzar, did. Maybe by this time, Daniel, because of his advanced age, had been relegated to the background and had been forced into semi-retirement.

Daniel said he did not care anything about the reward but that he would give the king the meaning of the strange writing on the wall.

First, Daniel reminded Belshazzar of what had happened to his grandfather, King Nebuchadnezzar, some forty years previous. God had humbled him and his pride by making him go into mental insanity and eat grass like an ox and live in the wilderness for seven years.

Then Daniel leveled three charges against Belshazzar.

First, "You knew this but did not humble yourself (5:22). You celebrated your idolatry and your immorality." Later in the NT, God says that he gives up people who reject God and will have nothing to do with them (Rom. 1:21-24, 22, 26).

Second, "You committed sacrilege by feasting in a drunken party the goblets of God" (5:23a-b).

Third, you praised "nothing" gods (5:23-24).

Daniel then read the inscription which said, "Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin" (KJV).

These are Aramaic words of measurements and units of money in descending order.

"Mene" (repeated twice) is a mina, a unit of money.

"Tekel" is a shekel, a unit of money worth one-sixtieth of a mina.

"U"-is Aramaic for "and."

"Parsin" is plural of "peres" which means a half-shekel. In Aramaic it also sounds like the word for Persia, the country that conquered the Babylonians that night.

The wise men knew these words. But what did they mean? It would be like in our language if the inscription said, "A dollar, a quarter, and a dime."

Aramaic, like Hebrew, has only consonants so Daniel supplied different vowels, and read it as verbs in the passive voice so that the inscription said, “Numbered, numbered, weighed, and divided.”

In verse 26, Daniel gives the interpretation of the strange words [read 5:26-28]. The Lord numbered Belshazzar’s days because he was weighed in the balances and found wanting. The repetition of “numbered” may suggest that it would occur quickly. “Parsin” means his kingdom would be divided or ruined.

The “handwriting on the wall” was a message of doom and wrath, the judgment of God. Today, we get the expression “the handwriting on the wall” from this story. We use the words to refer to events that indicate what’s going to happen in the future. We also refer to people as “weighed in the balances and found wanting.”

Belshazzar kept his side of the agreement and gave Daniel a purple robe, a gold chain, made him the third highest ruler in the kingdom.

Judgment struck that very night. Hear the word of the Lord: [read 5:30-31].

The record of the capitulation of Babylon is recorded in the 5<sup>th</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries B. C. by Greek historians such as Herodotus and Xenophon. Archaeologists have uncovered cuneiform tablets in this area. They have discovered the Nabonidus Chronicles that substantiate the biblical story about the relationship of Nabonidus and Belshazzar. These records tell us how the Persians captured Babylon. They dammed up the Euphrates River and diverted it into a side channel that lead to a swamp. The water level of the river lowered so much that the Persians could march in mid-thigh water under the water gates of the Euphrates. Once inside, they opened the gates to the city and the Persia army marched in. The feasting was still going on in the inner city while the outer edges were being captured. The Persians met almost no resistance. Surprise! Surprise! The impregnable, invincible, unconquerable city of Babylon fell in one night with hardly any battle at all. “Mene, mene, tekem, parsin.”

The first kingdom of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream in chapter 2, the head of gold, was now destroyed. It lasted from 605 B. C. to 539 B.C., 66 years. The second kingdom of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, the breast and arms of silver representing the Medo-Persian Empire, was now ruling this part of the world.

## **The Application**

What do we learn from all this? Is there anything here for us? Are we repeating the same mistakes of Babylon and Belshazzar?

**First, we learn that God punishes sin.** No sinner is secure against judgment. The Bible says, “Be sure your sin will find you out,” and “God is not mocked . . . Whatsoever a man sows that shall he reap.”

Belshazzar was rich, powerful, had a large army, had money, power, and strength, but God brought him down. He died that very night. He was full of pride and foolishness. He deliberately rejected God. God judged him and brought him down. “Mene, mene, tekem, parsin.” God is love but his moral nature demands that disobedience and rejection of him be punished.

In the NT, Babylon is a symbol of the wicked world organized in evil against God. The book of Revelation is the story of two cities, spiritual Jerusalem representing the people of God, and spiritual Babylon, representing the evils and wickedness of human societies. Chapters 17 through 19, say, “Fallen. . .fallen is Babylon the Great!” “Mene, mene, tekem, parsin.”

In 1988, Ivan Boesky was an investment stockbroker expert making more than \$100 million a year. With money like that you would think he would be secure for the rest of his life. But the Securities and Exchange Commission discovered that Boesky was involved in illegal insider trading, and the King of Wall Street was ruined. “Mene, mene, tekem, parsin.”

Ferdinand Marcos was absolute dictator of the Philippines. He had his own personal army. He had the protection of the US. Naval and air bases. Marcos bilked billions of dollars from his impoverished nation. Murder, theft, and political manipulation were such powerful tools that no one could challenge him. Marcos’ security was beyond assault. But God said, “Mene, mene, tekem, parsin.” Marcos was numbered, weighed, found wanting and divided and ruined. The Filipinos rallied behind the inexperienced widow of a slain political rival. Corazon Aquino defeated Marcos, the Filipino Belshazzar. “Mene, mene, tekem, parsin.”

For twenty years, Bernie Madoff was an amazing genius who developed the world’s largest Ponzi scheme. He bilked billions of dollars right under the nose of the Securities and Exchange Commission. But God said, “Mene, mene, tekem, parsin. Madoff, you are numbered, you have been weighed in the balances, and your kingdom is taken away from you.” He is now serving a life term in a federal prison. He will never get out till they carry him feet first to a waiting hearse.

Hushni Mubarak ruled Egypt country for thirty years. He had taken from 40 to 70 billion dollars from his country and stored it in Swiss and U. S. banks. He was beyond reach by the shoe cobblers, the bread vendors, the

taxi drivers, the street sweepers, and the students among his millions of people. But, God said, “Mene, mene, tekel, parsin.” Mubarak was weighted in God’s balances, found wanting and his kingdom was taken away from him. After forty years of oppressing his people and piling up billions in foreign banks, the same thing appears to be happening to Moammar Gadhafi in Libya right now.

The history of man is people pushing and pushing evil agendas until God says, “Enough. Mene, mene, tekel, parsin. Your days are numbered, you are weighed in the balances and found wanting, your kingdom will be divided and ruined.”

The headlines of the newspapers carry the news of the sudden fall of those heroes once though impregnable. Well-known celebrities and heroes have fallen. The list includes professional athletes, preachers, senators, presidents, congressmen, doctors, lawyers, judges and law enforcement officers. “Mene, mene, tekel, parsin.”

**Second, we learn that God will come in judgment against sin.**

None of us can sin successfully. Sin hurts and destroys. We will eventually be caught. “There is no man-made wall so high, no human fortress so secure, no activity so hidden that it can protect sinfulness from the wrath of God” [Bryan Campbell, Standing Your Ground: A Call to Courage in an Age of Compromise. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989, p. 124]

Our society is amusing itself to death. We fill our lives with sin-oriented entertainment. We ignore eternal realities. We lose sight of danger and we plunge into the abyss. Listen to these words of Jesus warning us of coming judgment: [read Matt. 24:37-42, 44].

We can flaunt God’s teachings for a while but eventually, “Mene, mene, tekel, parsin.”

**Third, we learn that we must not sentimentalize evil.**

“Mene”—God numbers our days and our deeds. They are recorded in God’s perfect memory and we will meet them in the judgment unless we turn to Jesus Christ for forgiveness. Our worldly society equates legality with morality. Many things God calls sin are applauded by movies, the media, magazines and the majority of people.

“Tekel”—God weighs our sins, our lies, our deceit, and our hypocrisy. We are condemned by our sins before God.

“Parsin”—God divides us and brings us to ruin. The righteous and the wicked will be forever divided, one to eternal punishment, the other to eternal life.

What will you say when God numbers your deeds, weighs your character and declares you wanting? “It is appointed unto man once to die and then to face the judgment” (Hebrews 9:27). Since “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23), why not quit before payday?

God loves you. He wants you to be his child. He wants to forgive your sins and give you his Holy Spirit. He wants to answer your prayers. He wants to live in you and you in him in a relationship of love, peace, and joy. He wants you to live with him forever in the world to come.

To make all this possible, God sent his beloved spiritual son, Jesus, into the world to die on the cross for your sins. We have no righteousness of our own. We are all spiritually and morally bankrupt before God. The only way we can be put right with God is through the sacrificial death of Jesus for us.

But you must trust him. You must turn from sin. You must be born again (John 3:3, 5). The Bible says, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38). God forgives and saves those who turn to him. God judges and condemns those who stubbornly resist him. We must turn to God to be saved. There is no better time to do that than right now. Come to the front. Let us assist you in submitting your will to Jesus as Lord and Savior. Whosoever will may come, while we stand and sing.

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