

Weighed in the Balance and Found Wanting Daniel 5

Introduction

The third commandment given to Moses and the Hebrew people after they were delivered from the slavery of Egypt was simply this: **“You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain”** (Exod. 20:7). What does it mean to take the name of the Lord your God in vain? The NIV translates the third commandment a little differently: **“You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.”**

I think the way the NIV translates Exodus 20:7 is better than the way the ESV translates it. Here is why I feel that way. To take the name of the LORD your God in vain is much more than to use the word God or Jesus in the form of a curse. To misuse the name of the LORD is to treat him as weightless or even profane. To misuse the name of the LORD is even more than to treat him as weightless or profane as we will see in the story of Belshazzar in Daniel 5.

The Arrogance of Belshazzar

Belshazzar was the son of Nebuchadnezzar III; the Hebrew word used here for “father” can also be translated “predecessor.”¹ Belshazzar’s predecessor, who was Nebuchadnezzar II took the vessels of gold and silver that were used in Solomon’s Temple for the worship of Yahweh. The vessels were what was left of the Temple after Nebuchadnezzar II destroyed the Temple and forced Daniel and many others into exile in Babylon. The Vessels were to be treated as sacred and with great care.

Belshazzar threw a party for a thousand of his lords (v. 1). This was no small party! Also invited to the party were the king’s wives and concubines. The wine that the king tasted was not intended for a wine tasting party, they intended to get drunk among other things. At some point during the party, Belshazzar decided to use the sacred vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had stolen from the holy temple, to drink their wine. We are told that they, **“drank wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone”** (v. 4); they did this as they drank from vessels that were designed to be used for the exclusive worship of Yahweh.

Unlike his father and those who preceded him, Belshazzar accomplished very little in his lifetime. Belshazzar lived off the spoils and successes of those before him, what he could do was make a feast and throw a party. What Belshazzar did that his predecessors did not do, was profane the sacred vessels taken from what was holy by using them for a house party in his dad’s home, at which he praised the gods of Babylon while drinking from the Most High’s cups.

¹ See the sermon in this series on Daniel 4.

What Belshazzar did not know, was the history of God's own people and the dangers of profaning what God has called sacred. Belshazzar did not know that centuries before his party, one of the priests, known as Aaron, whom God set apart to handle the sacred vessels of God, learned first-hand of what can happen when one profanes the sacred. Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, for whatever the reason, offered on the altar of Incense while administering the worship of God's people something foreign and alien from what God had prescribed to be offered as a part of their worship. The Bible says that Aaron's sons, "**offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, which he had not commanded them**" (Leviticus 10:1). What followed was something the left Aaron speechless: "**And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD**" (v. 2). Aaron could have protested: "That's not fair! I gave my life to serve you God, and you killed my two sons because they offered something other than what you prescribed!" Aaron didn't say anything, in fact Leviticus 10:3 tells us that "Aaron held his peace." Aaron kept quiet because he knew that his sons received the instruction of the LORD: "**You shall not offer unauthorized incense on it, or a burnt offering, or a grain offering, and you shall not pour a drink offering on it.**"¹⁰ **Aaron shall make atonement on its horns once a year. With the blood of the sin offering of atonement he shall make atonement for it once in the year throughout your generations. It is most holy to the LORD**" (Exod. 30:9).

The altar of incense was to be treated as most holy, but Nadab and Abihu acted arrogantly and profaned what God called holy.

In an arrogant display of hubris, and no regard for the Most High God who humbled his father for seven years, Belshazzar and his drunken wives, concubines, and guests praised the idols of their city while using the sacred to sin against the Holy.

The Holy Tolerance of God

Immediately, as the party continued, fingers of a human hand appeared and began to write on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace. We are told that when the king saw the fingers begin to write that his, "**color changed, and his thoughts alarmed him; his limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together**" (v. 6). And just like his predecessors before him, he sought the help of his dead gods:

The king called loudly to bring in the enchanters, the Chaldeans, and the astrologers. The king declared to the wise men of Babylon, "Whoever reads this writing, and shows me its interpretation, shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around his neck and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom." Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or make known to the king the interpretation. (Daniel 5:7–8)

For the third time in the book of Daniel, the religious elite of the gods of Babylon were brought in to solve the king's spiritual and emotional crisis, and they were found to be useless. So, the king was, "**greatly alarmed, and his color changed, and his lords were perplexed**" (v. 9). When Nebuchadnezzar II had his dream of the statue, he was troubled, when Nebuchadnezzar III had his dream in Daniel 4, he was afraid, but the handwriting on the wall caused Belshazzar to become completely undone. According to one commentator, the original language (Aramaic)

literally says that the “knots of his joints were loosened”, which possibly is a wordplay indicating not that his legs gave way, but that he lost control of his bodily functions.²

May I suggest that for the first time in Belshazzar’s life, he responded rightly to the display of a holy God who had had enough of the king’s profane treatment of the holy? The irony here is that in his display of authority as king in Babylon through his lavish party, he was reminded of how little power he really had. Belshazzar was helpless as was everyone else who witnessed the mysterious handwriting on the wall, and no one seemed able to read it until the mother queen of one of Belshazzar’s predecessors entered into the banquet hall and said:

“O king, live forever! Let not your thoughts alarm you or your color change. There is a man in your kingdom in whom is the spirit of the holy gods. 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, enchanters, Chaldeans, and astrologers, because an excellent spirit, knowledge, and understanding to interpret dreams, explain riddles, and solve problems were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Belteshazzar. Now let Daniel be called, and he will show the interpretation.” (Daniel 5:10–12)

The king agreed to have Daniel called, and after he was brought in to appear before the king, he was promised a superficial prize of being clothed in purple, a chain of gold around his neck, and a promotion to third ruler in the kingdom if he was able to read the handwriting on the wall (v. 16). Daniel’s response was respectful, but direct.

Then Daniel answered and said before the king, “Let your gifts be for yourself, and give your rewards to another. Nevertheless, I will read the writing to the king and make known to him the interpretation. O king, the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father kingship and greatness and glory and majesty. And because of the greatness that he gave him, all peoples, nations, and languages trembled and feared before him. Whom he would, he killed, and whom he would, he kept alive; whom he would, he raised up, and whom he would, he humbled. But when his heart was lifted up and his spirit was hardened so that he dealt proudly, he was brought down from his kingly throne, and his glory was taken from him. He was driven from among the children of mankind, and his mind was made like that of a beast, and his dwelling was with the wild donkeys. He was fed grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, until he knew that the Most High God rules the kingdom of mankind and sets over it whom he will. And you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this, but you have lifted up yourself against the Lord of heaven. And the vessels of his house have been brought in before you, and you and your lords, your wives, and your concubines have drunk wine from them. And you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which do not see or hear or know, but the God in whose hand is your breath, and whose are all your ways, you have not honored.” (Daniel 5:17–23)

Before Daniel interpreted the handwriting, he preached to the king and those in his presence, in so doing, he reminded the king of things he already knew and pointed out to the king the God

² Iain M. Duguid. *Daniel: Reformed Expository Commentary* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing; 2008), p. 80.

who he offended by his sin. Belshazzar was aware of how God humbled his father, yet he chose to dishonor God by drinking from the sacred to do what was immoral while praising his gods who were just as impotent and powerless as the king himself was. Belshazzar had lifted himself against the God of heaven (v. 20) who is “the Most High God” (vv. 18, 21), the “Lord of the heavens” (v. 23), and “the God in whose hand is your breath” (v. 23).

Daniel then interpreted the handwriting on the wall: **“And this is the writing that was inscribed: Mene, Mene, Tekel, and Parsin. This is the interpretation of the matter: Mene, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; Tekel, you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting; Peres, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians”** (Daniel 5:25–28).

Even though Daniel had no desire to receive the king’s gifts, Belshazzar gave them anyway. Daniel **“was clothed in purple, a chain of gold was put around his neck, and a proclamation was made about him, that he should be the third ruler in the kingdom”** (v. 29). Chapter five then concludes with what essentially was the final end of Nebuchadnezzar’s dynasty: **“That very night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was killed. And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old”** (v. 30).

Conclusion

I said from the beginning when we started this sermon series, that there was the physical empire of Babylon that ended, and a spiritual Babylon that exists today that will also be destroyed by the same God who stripped Belshazzar’s Babylon and gave it to another kingdom. The spirit of Babylon exists today and it is a system that postures and stands against the Most High God and his kingdom. On one degree or another, we were and still are like Belshazzar in that although God has revealed himself through the Bible, his Son, and the empty tomb, human beings continue to lift themselves against the God of heaven as was once true of every Christian:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.” (Ephesians 2:1–3)

A well-known theologian by the name of John Gerstner was a speaker at a Christian conference some time ago; his assignment was to speak on the depravity of man where he compared men and women to rats. After he was finished with his message, there was a question-and-answer time that one particular person who took great offence to Gerstner’s comparison, told the theologian that it was “insulting” to compare men and women to rats. Gerstner responded to the offended person with these words: “I do apologize. I apologize profusely. The comparison was terribly unfair... to the rats.”³ We are the only creature on Earth and in Creation that posture ourselves against the Most High because we are the only creature who are sinners in need of a savior able to redeem us.

What makes our sin great is that we bear the image of the living God. We were born to know him, yet we are all born with a heart set against him. To misuse the name of God is to posture

³ James Montgomery Boice; *Daniel: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: 2006)

ourselves against him by sinning against him. We take the name of the LORD our God in vain by elevating anything in the life he has gifted us above him.

Like Belshazzar, our days are numbered as well. This is why the Psalmist wrote, **“O LORD, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting I am”** (Psalm 39:4). The spirit of Babylon will one day be destroyed by the Kingdom of God; a day is coming for all of us that you and I will one day die. The question we need to ask ourselves in light of Daniel 5, is this: “Will God weigh you on the scales of his holiness and justice and will you be found wanting?”

The only way to be weighed in the balance of God’s scales and found to be found forgiven, pardoned, and redeemed is through Jesus who God, **“made him to be sin, who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”** (1 Cor. 5:21). This is why the Bible states of all who believe and follow Jesus as God’s remedy for our sin problem the following:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God...” (Ephesians 2:4–8)