

The Writing is on the Wall

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[0 : 00] Epitaphs are very interesting. Normally inscribed on gravestones, they're a brief attempt at capturing the life of the person who has died. And I've often find myself at a graveyard whilst I'm waiting to conduct a funeral, looking around at the gravestones to see what's been written on them, to see what few words are chosen to sum up a life.

And they can range from the solemn to the sentimental to the silly. Listen to some actual epitaphs. Alexander the Great's. A tomb now suffices him for whom the world was not enough.

Or Martin Luther King Jr. Free at last, free at last. Thank God Almighty, I'm free at last. And some others. Here lies Ezekiel Eichel, age 102, the good to die young.

Or Spike Milligan, the comedian. I told you I was ill. Or John Dryden, the English poet. He wrote for his wife's epitaph. Here lies my wife.

Here let her lie. Now she's at rest. And so am I. And so today we come to Daniel chapter 5. And what we see is that God himself writes the epitaph for King Belshazzar.

[1 : 19] God summed up his life. But he didn't wait until he had died. His epitaph was written on his palace wall before his very eyes. And so Daniel chapter 5 is where we get the phrase, the writing is on the wall.

And when we use it today, we mean there's no way back. Warning that something bad is about to happen. And that's precisely what it means here. The writing was on the wall for King Belshazzar. God gave the verdict on his life and was bringing his reign to an end. His fate had been decided by God. And King Belshazzar's story is deliberately contrasted with that of King Nebuchadnezzar's. They're placed together in the book of Daniel to show God's judgment on two proud kings. So in chapter 4, God humbled the proud Nebuchadnezzar.

And in chapter 5, God punished the proud Belshazzar. Nebuchadnezzar had learned his lesson, whereas Belshazzar hadn't. And so their stories illustrate the message of the book of Daniel.

[2 : 26] And the message is, God rules. God rules over proud kings. And God rules over human kingdoms. And so Daniel chapter 5 marks the end of the Babylonian Empire.

As God removes the king and gives it to someone else. And it's all in an evening's work for God. So whether you call yourself a Christian, or even if you're not sure where you stand in relation to God, what this text teaches us is the reality of God's judgment.

We get a graphic picture of how God numbers our days, he weighs up our lives, and he gives his verdict. And so the writing on the wall teaches us two vital life lessons.

First of all, the risk of escapism. And secondly, the reality of judgment. So I'd like to look at those. The risk of escapism, and then the reality of judgment. First, the risk of escapism.

We see this in verse 1 to verse 16. The events that are recorded here take place at the very end of the Babylonian Empire. And King Belshazzar was living in his own escapist world.

[3 : 35] But in reality, he was in great danger. He was in political danger. But he was also in spiritual danger. Listen to what we read, verse 1 and 2.

King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine with them.

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 them.

King Belshazzar, sorry, King Nebuchadnezzar, had died in 562 BC. And now it was 539 BC. And King Belshazzar was ruling in Babylon.

And so who was he? Well, Belshazzar was the eldest son of Nabonidus. And according to the history books, Nabonidus was the last king of Babylon. So why is Nebuchadnezzar called the father of Belshazzar?

Well, it's because the Bible, like other ancient texts, uses father in the sense of predecessor or ancestor, not just natural father. And so Nabonidus left Babylon in the hands of his son Belshazzar as his co-regent.

[4 : 51] And this explains why Belshazzar said to Daniel, you'll be made the third highest and her third highest ruler in the kingdom. Now, Belshazzar was technically the second ruler in the kingdom, so he could only make Daniel the third.

And it was while his father was away that Belshazzar was overthrown. And so Daniel chapter 5 records the overthrow of Babylon never to rise again.

And it all happens in a day. Just listen to what's said at the end of the chapter. That very night, Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain. And Darius the Mede took over the kingdom at the age of 62.

So Darius the Mede was either knocking at the door, ready to attack, or he had already started to overthrow Babylon. But instead of defending his kingdom, what is Belshazzar doing?

Well, he's partying hard with a thousand of his nobles. This proud playboy king was having the time of his life. He was in his own escapist world with a false sense of security.

[5 : 55] Whereas his life was in real danger, and his empire was on the brink of being overthrown. Now perhaps Belshazzar partied hard, confident that Babylon was secure.

But historical records tell how Babylon easily fell in Nabonidus' absence. So the Greek historian Herodotus makes mention in his histories of the drinking parties that took place on the eve of the fall of Babylon.

And he records how the Persians easily gained access to the city. So it's like Belshazzar was having fun in the big brother house, completely oblivious to the dangers outside.

He was, you could say, just completely out of touch with reality. Not just the political reality of the fall of his Babylonian empire, but more importantly, the spiritual reality.

So more significant than any political danger he was in was the spiritual danger he was in. I'm hearing about this in verse 3 and 4. So they brought in the gold goblets that had been taken from the temple of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines drank them.

[7 : 06] As they drank the wine, they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone. So Belshazzar brought out the goblets from the temple of God in Jerusalem.

And it wasn't that he'd run out of wine glasses. This was an act of spiritual defiance against God. He used the goblets from God's temple to worship false gods.

So Belshazzar was deliberately mocking the living God with his blasphemy and with his idolatry.

And so full of bravado, in front of his party guests, he was making a statement.

He was saying, this God doesn't rule. He's got nothing over me. He is nothing to me. Now Bekhanedzer may have been deluded by that God stuff, but I know better.

I guess, like many people today, Belshazzar wasn't expecting that the living God would judge him for his defiance. And that's when he gets the shock of his life. He gets a reality check in verse 5 and 6.

[8 : 07] Suddenly, the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall, near the lampstand in the royal palace. The king watched the hand as it wrote.

His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his legs became weak and his knees were knocking. And so the awesome reality of the real world, smashing into his escapist world, was a shock.

God was confronting him. The writing on the wall was God's verdict on Belshazzar's life. It was literally a sobering moment for him.

The living God had gatecrashed his party. God is being the ultimate party pooper here, an unexpected guest. And he threw Belshazzar into a complete state of shock.

The author mocks the king's reaction there in verse 6. Our English translation puts it politely, whereas Robert Alter, a distinguished Hebrew scholar, translates as this.

[9 : 10] The cords of his loins went slack and his knees knocked together. And so the point is, this proud and arrogant king who thought he was in control couldn't even control himself or his bodily functions.

God forced him to face the reality by sending him a personal message. The king couldn't read the message, but he knew it was bad. But at least he was smart enough to try and find out the

meaning.

And that's where Daniel comes in at the queen's request. It appears Daniel played no part in Belshazzar's administration. Perhaps he was pensioned off a while back. But it's more likely to be the queen mother who recommends Daniel, because she would have been old enough to remember Daniel from Nebuchadnezzar's reign, of how he played a key role in interpreting Nebuchadnezzar's dreams for him.

And so Daniel is called in to help. And so we read, Belshazzar says, verse 16, So the king is desperate to discover the meaning.

So how does this apply to us? Well, we can also live life with the same kind of escapism as Belshazzar. Carrying on as if life were one big party.

[10:43] Where instead of worshipping the living God, we can worship the secular gods of our age. And they're glittering gods, the gods of money, sex, power, and so on.

And we can depend on them and look to them for security and for happiness. And yet all they can give us is a false sense of security. So if you worship money, you'll always live in fear of thinking that you never have enough.

If you worship sex, you'll never be satisfied and you'll live in fear of being lonely. And if you worship power, you'll always want more power and you'll live in fear of losing the power that you have.

And so we can be attracted to these false gods. But we're living in an escapist world if we think worshipping them will keep us safe.

They'll be about as much use as Belshazzar's gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone. And that is no use. Just think of a current example. We may worship the god of health and live in fear of growing old or getting sick, even dying.

[11:51] And that's why we praise the saving power of the COVID vaccine to protect us. But as brilliant as the science, the vaccines, and the NHS are, a shot in the arm is only a temporary fix.

It can't stop the inevitability that one day we will die. Just like the alcohol at Belshazzar's party. It gave a temporary escape, but he soon had to sober up and face God's message for him.

You see, the escapism of this world might be good for a while, but we can't shut out the harsh realities of life forever. And that's why some can be so busy parting their way through life that they don't give God a second thought.

Whereas others can deliberately defy and mock God. And with all of this, the underlying assumption is that it doesn't really matter how we treat God. And so we need to be careful.

We're not caught up in a careless, mindless, godless excess that we dismiss God altogether.

Because no matter how consumed we are by the false gods out there, they will never be able to fulfil us.

[13:06] And we'll never be able to escape the one true and living God. And so it's only as the other gods are toppled over and proven to be useless that our knees start knocking and we get that much needed dose of reality.

And so Belshazzar warns us of this risky and dangerous way of living. It is sheer escapism to try to live by keeping God off our radar.

That's the first thing we see, the risk of escapism. And the second thing is the reality of judgment. In verse 17 to 31, Daniel now gets the opportunity to speak to the king.

Let's read verse 17. So Daniel is going to tell the king what this writing on the wall means and the king will get a dose of reality in his world of fantasy.

Daniel will give him a real, true perspective on life and on God by forcing Belshazzar to take account that God is there. And so Daniel begins in verse 18 to 21 and he reminds Belshazzar of how God dealt with King Nebuchadnezzar.

[14:31] And this is really a summary of chapter 4. Nebuchadnezzar was arrogant and proud like Belshazzar, but God humbled him. God took away his power, his dignity, his sanity, even his humanity until Nebuchadnezzar acknowledged, as we see in verse 21, that the most high God is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and sets over them anyone he wishes.

Daniel is telling Belshazzar, this is the real world of the living God, not some escapist world of false gods. So you can't live as if God wasn't there.

Belshazzar had failed to grasp that God is sovereign over all kingdoms and all people, and so he ruled over him too. Listen to what Daniel says, verse 22.

But you, Belshazzar, his son, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this. 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 honour the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways. [15:53] Therefore, he sent the hand that wrote the inscription. Belshazzar was aware of God's dealings with Nebuchadnezzar, and he not only failed to humble himself, but he set himself up against the Lord of heaven.

So he was arrogant, he was ignorant, he was insolent, he was idolatrous, and he was blasphemous. And God gave him the opportunity to repent of his ways, but he refused. And now it was too late. And so his final act of defiance was using the goblets from God's temple to praise the false gods who could not see or hear or understand. And so Daniel told him, but you did not honour the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways. Belshazzar cursed the God who gave him life. And so Daniel accuses the king of being a stupid, stupid man. Just look how many times in verse 23 and 24 Daniel uses the words you and your.

[17:01] They're used 14 times as Daniel hammers home Belshazzar's stupidity. What on earth did he think he was playing at? It's hardly surprising that God wrote on the wall to force him to pay attention.

And so this is what was written on the wall. This is the inscription that was written. Many, many, tekem, parson. That's God's epitaph for Belshazzar. Here's what it means. Verse 26. Here is what these words mean. Many, God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end. Tekem, you have been weighed on the scales and found wanting. Perez, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians. These words represent three different weights or coins of value. Many is from the verb to number. God had numbered the days of Belshazzar's kingdom and brought it to an end. Tekem is from the verb to weigh or to assess. God had weighed Belshazzar on his scales and he was found wanting. [18:05] Perez, or the singular parson, is from the verb to divide or to part. God would divide his kingdom and give it to the Medes and Persians.

And so Daniel's interpretation emphasises that Belshazzar's days are numbered and God weighed up his life and he failed to measure up. Belshazzar defiantly shut God out and made himself God's enemy. He refused to humble himself even though he knew of God's dealings with Nebuchadnezzar. And so all that was left for Belshazzar's fate to be sealed was his death. And he died that very night. We read, that very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain. And Darius the Mede took over the kingdom at the age of 62. So the Babylonian empire was overthrown immediately. It passed into history and a new empire took over. [19:05] So see how quickly God punished a proud king and wiped out his kingdom. We're supposed to see the severity of God's judgment here. Belshazzar had evaluated the Most High God as worthless.

And so God responded by doing the same with him. But God's judgment is not arbitrary. It's entirely just. So while Nebuchadnezzar learned his lesson in time, Belshazzar didn't. And that's why Daniel emphasizes Belshazzar was responsible for his attitude and his behavior. And so what do we need to learn from this episode? Well, we need to learn or relearn that God rules.

So firstly, for God's people, reading Daniel, this is a comfort and encouragement in a world that's hostile towards God and his people. The God of Daniel is the same God who rules the same world. He's the Most High God who is sovereign and he does whatever he pleases. And so individual kings and kingdoms will never have the last word. God will judge those who defy him in his own good timing.

[20:18] So while his people were in exile in Babylon for some 70 years, God just flicked the switch one evening to bring it to an end. And so if God is mocked, whether in Holyrood or Westminster, Brussels, Washington, or in the media, or across the internet, or at the general assemblies and synods of our national churches, or at your place of work, or in the lecture theatres, or in the classrooms of our land, God will have the last word.

The writing is on the wall for all who defy God. God's judgment will certainly come at the end, but it may come in this life, as it did for Belshazzar.

It may come after many years of waiting, but it could easily come this very night. And that's why, as God's people, we must continue to live for God and speak for God like Daniel did, confident that God rules.

But the message is not just for God's people. We said before that Daniel chapters 2 to 7 are written in Aramaic, and Aramaic was the international language that everybody spoke.

And so the story of King Belshazzar is a sober reminder to everyone not to mess with God. The reality of God's judgment means that we must acknowledge that God rules while there's still time.

[21 : 46] God has numbered our days, he weighs our lives, and his judgment will fall. And so perhaps you recognise something of yourself in Belshazzar.

And it may not be the blatant arrogance of setting yourself up against the Lord of heaven, it may be the failure to honour the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways.

If that's the case, then please humble yourself before him, before it's too late. How we treat God matters to God. And so we will all face God's judgment.

So humble yourself before the Most High God is the message here. Nebuchadnezzar did it, Belshazzar didn't do it. What about you?

Because we can't risk living in our own escapist world when we're faced with the reality of God's judgment. So how can we face God's judgment without being condemned?

[22 : 50] Because none of us have treated God as he deserves to be treated. Well, the good news is that God has spoken clearly to us, not just by writing on a wall in Babylon, but God has spoken to us in his one and only Son, Jesus Christ.

Listen to these words from John 3, verse 16 in the Bible. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

So out of his love for us, God gives us the opportunity right now to respond to him by believing in Jesus. But if we continue to set ourselves up against God and refuse to honour him by receiving his Son, then God has already given his verdict.

The writing is on the wall for us because we continue to read in John 3, verse 17 and 18. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

[24 : 07] So, like Belshazzar, we stand condemned already if we don't believe in Jesus.

Christianity tells us that we've all been weighed on the scales and found wanting because our attitude and our behaviour reflects the refusal of our hearts to accept God's right to accept God's rightful rule over our lives.

And deep down, we know that this is true. But while it was too late for Belshazzar, it needn't be too late for us. Jesus alone can save us through his death on the cross.

By believing in Jesus, the writing on the wall that would condemn us can be removed because through Jesus' death, our sins are forgiven. On the cross, Jesus was judged and punished for our failure to honour the God who made us.

If you've ever looked across the London skyline, you can see the Old Bailey, the central criminal court of England and Wales, the home of justice. And on top of the domed roof stands the magnificent golden statue of Lady Justice.

She holds a sword in her right hand and the scales of justice in her left, equally balanced with arms held out. And it's a guarantee of her impartiality.

[25 : 29] And yet the message is clear. If you're weighed in the scales and found wanting, then the sword of judgment must fall. But then about 200 yards across the London skyline is St Paul's Cathedral.

and its golden cross towers above Lady Justice because the cross is the symbol reminding us that the sword of God's justice and judgment did fall.

It fell on Jesus so it need never fall on us. Because when Jesus died, God's justice was perfectly satisfied.

Jesus was condemned on the cross so that we need never be. And that's why believing in Jesus Christ is the only way we can be sure that the writing on the wall that condemns us has been removed.

And so we have nothing to fear. So how are you going to live? There's a risk in living an escapist life. Of course you can party your way through life without Jesus but you will regret it forever. [26 : 39] Or you can live your life with Jesus by believing in him and so be a guest of the ultimate party of the kingdom of God and enjoy it forever.

So what is it that you choose? Let's pray. thank you God for how your word is a wake-up call and a reality check for us.

Forgive us for our failure to honour you our creator who holds in your hands our life and all our ways. We praise you for the forgiveness we can receive now through Jesus the one who came to bear our judgment on the cross.

Help each one of us to be ready to face him when he comes again to bring judgment at the end of time for we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.