



The writing on the wall * Daniel 4 & 5

May 23, 2021 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

The last few weeks, we've been moving through Daniel a chapter at a time but today we're going to take on two because I think that they really belong together. Chapters 4 and 5 both ask the same question – how do we respond to the reality of an eternal and sovereign God in our lives?

According to Daniel 5:23, there is a God who holds my life and all my ways in His hands; same for you. He's there, whether you believe it or not. The question is, how are you going to respond to that reality? By living under His compassionate lordship or by going your own way? Chapters 4 and 5 show us two different people faced with that very question and they show us two different ways of answering it. So we're going to look at two case studies in God's Word today, and as we do, I want you to ask yourself – how am I responding to the eternal sovereignty of God? By trusting in Him or relying on myself?

Let's go to Daniel chapter 4 together. I'm going to paraphrase a fair bit since we're going to cover a lot of ground, so I think you'll find it useful to have your Bibles open in front of you to see the whole story. So Daniel chapter 4, starting in verse 4.

Now, once again, we find ourselves in the king's bedroom, because king Nebuchadnezzar has just had another dream. It's been more than thirty years since the last one, but just like that dream of the statue, this dream has freaked Nebuchadnezzar out. Unlike last time though, he's willing to tell the wise men what his dream was – I think he's more secure in his power base now - but even knowing the dream, the wise men can't explain what it means. So Nebuchadnezzar sends for the greatest wise man of all – our old pal Daniel.

So Daniel comes before Nebuchadnezzar and Nebuchadnezzar says to him:

10 These are the visions I saw while lying in my bed: I looked, and there before me stood a tree in the middle of the land. Its height was enormous.

11 The tree grew large and strong and its top touched the sky; it was visible to the ends of the earth.

12 Its leaves were beautiful, its fruit abundant, and on it was food for all. Under it the beasts of the field found shelter, and the birds of the air lived in its branches; from it every creature was fed.

13 "In the visions I saw while lying in my bed, I looked, and there before me was a messenger, a holy one, coming down from heaven.

14 He called in a loud voice: 'Cut down the tree and trim off its branches; strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit. Let the animals flee from under it and the birds from its branches.

15 But let the stump and its roots, bound with iron and bronze, remain in the ground, in the grass of the field. " 'Let him be drenched with the dew of heaven, and let him live with the animals among the plants of the earth.

16 Let his mind be changed from that of a man and let him be given the mind of an animal, till seven times pass by for him.

17 " 'The decision is announced by messengers, the holy ones declare the verdict, *so that the living may know that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes* (underline that) and sets over them the lowliest of men.'

18 "This is the dream that I, King Nebuchadnezzar, had. Now, Belteshazzar, tell me what it means, for none of the wise men in my kingdom can interpret it for me. But you can, because the spirit of the holy gods is in you."

So that's the dream and now it was up to Daniel to give the interpretation. And to be fair, it wasn't really Daniel who would be giving the interpretation. Nebuchadnezzar got it almost right – the spirit of the holy God who would be doing the interpretation.

And when He did, we get a neat little insight into Daniel's character. Daniel is an unflinchingly loyal guy. Here he is, technically a prisoner of the state, and yet he has real concern for the king. This is Daniel living out what it said in Jeremiah 29 – build homes, plant vineyards, seek the good of the land of your exile. Daniel is a faithful guy. He says verse 19 – o king, if only this was about your enemies and not about you.

Because, as it turns out, the tree in the dream was none other than Nebuchadnezzar himself.

20 The tree you saw, which grew large and strong, with its top touching the sky, visible to the whole earth,

21 with beautiful leaves and abundant fruit, providing food for all, giving shelter to the beasts of the field, and having nesting places in its branches for the birds of the air--

22 you, O king, are that tree! You have become great and strong; your greatness has grown until it reaches the sky, and your dominion extends to distant parts of the earth. (Neb is a great and mighty king as you can get!).

23 "You, O king, saw a messenger, a holy one, coming down from heaven and saying, 'Cut down the tree and destroy it, but leave the stump, bound with iron and bronze, in the grass of the field, while its roots remain in the ground. Let him be drenched with the dew of heaven; let him live like the wild animals, until seven times pass by for him.'

24 "This is the interpretation, O king, and this is the decree the Most High has issued against my lord the king:

25 You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle and be drenched with the dew of heaven. Seven times will pass by for you *until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes.*

26 The command to leave the stump of the tree with its roots means that your kingdom will be restored to you when you acknowledge that Heaven rules.

27 Therefore, O king, be pleased to accept my advice: Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue."

Daniel lays it all out for the king. Nebuchadnezzar is indeed a great and mighty king. He is powerful beyond all measure and his kingdom reaches to the ends of the earth. But here's the question – how did he get to be that way? By his own merit or by the grace of God? Put it another way – how is he going to respond to the reality that there is a sovereign God who rules over all things? Acknowledge God and rely on Him or go his own way and rely on himself?

Well, we don't have to wait long to find out. Verse 29,

29 Twelve months later, as the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon,

30 he said, "Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?" Nebuchadnezzar chooses to pridefully go his own way on rely on himself.

Well, verse 31 - 31 The words were still on his lips when a voice came from heaven, "This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: Your royal authority has been taken from you.

32 You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that *the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes.*"

33 Immediately what had been said about Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled. He was driven away from people and ate grass like cattle. His body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair grew like the feathers of an eagle and his nails like the claws of a bird.

Nebuchadnezzar looked at all the power and privilege and authority that God had given to him and said – ‘look at great I am; this is all the work of my hand’ – and with that, God humbled him to become like an animal. Nebuchadnezzar chose to rely on himself rather than admit that he had been the recipient of God’s blessings and so he ended up a beast of the field.

But even so, God was gracious to him and He gave Nebuchadnezzar the chance to change. He didn’t root out the stump in the dream; He just had it bound and held in place to give Nebuchadnezzar time to repent. And that he did. Verse 34 –

34 At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever. *His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation.* [He acknowledges that the Most High is sovereign over all, for all eternity].

35 All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. (Not nothing like ‘having no value’ but nothing like ‘powerless compared to Him’). He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: "What have you done?"

36 At the same time that my sanity was restored, my honor and splendor were returned to me for the glory of my kingdom. My advisers and nobles sought me out, and I was restored to my throne and became even greater than before.

37 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.

King Nebuchadnezzar finally got it. He finally learned that ‘the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes.’ All he had, his power and privilege and wealth came from God. And Nebuchadnezzar was finally willing to admit it. So instead of arrogantly patting himself on the back, Nebuchadnezzar humbly acknowledged his dependence on God and God exalted him once again. God gave him back His kingdom. Because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. God humbles the proud who go their own way but exalts the humble who rely on Him.

So that’s case study number one – how Nebuchadnezzar responded to the reality of the Sovereign God of the universe. Let’s move on to case study number two and see how one of his successors fared.

Fast forward a few decades and we arrive at chapter 5 – King Belshazzar, the playboy prince. Belshazzar was not technically king – he was interim king while his dad the ACTUAL king was away from the capitol – but Belshazzar was going to enjoy every perk that was coming his way, even if it was just short term for now and so, chapter 5, verse 1 –

NIV Daniel 5:1 King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine with them.

2 While Belshazzar was drinking his wine, [he got it into his head that he would show off just a little and so] he gave orders to bring in the gold and silver goblets that Nebuchadnezzar his [fore] father had

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

3 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 from them.

4 As they drank the wine, they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone.

Now this is what I would call a high-stakes game of chicken. Belshazzar strikes me as the kind of guy who has a few too many drinks and then takes his tie off and puts it around his head like he's Rambo – but he also strikes me as the kind of guy who laughs at the gods. He takes these holy vessels from the Jerusalem temple and has his raucous partygoers drink from them. And all the while, he's worshiping idols of stone and silver, lifeless gods who can do nothing.

How has he chosen to respond to the reality of a sovereign God? He doesn't acknowledge Him; he laughs at Him. He spits in His face and goes his own way. But you know what God does with the proud, don't you?

Verse 5 - 5 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.

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

Belshazzar was terrified and so 7 The king called out for the enchanters, astrologers and diviners to be brought and said to these wise men of Babylon, "Whoever reads this writing and tells me what it means will be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed around his neck, and he will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom." [He's not technically king so he can only give third spot under the real king and him].

8 Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or tell the king what it meant.

9 So King Belshazzar became even more terrified and his face grew more pale. His nobles were baffled.

And then finally the queen (mother) comes in and talks some sense into this playboy prince. Thank goodness for moms.

She comes in and says 'there is a wise man in your kingdom with a keen mind and understanding who interpreted dreams and explained riddles and solved problems all through Neb's reign. Get him in here and he'll figure it out.'

And so, once again, a now aged Daniel was brought in before the king. And the king says to him 'I hear that you can interpret dreams and explain riddles and solve problems; if you tell me what this writing means, then I will give you royal purple robes and a gold chain and authority beyond your wildest imagination.

Daniel's already been ruler over all Babylonⁱⁱ but Belshazzar has no interest in anything that happened before him, but Daniel says – Verse 17 - "You may keep your gifts for yourself and give your rewards to someone else. Nevertheless, I will read the writing for the king and tell him what it means."

18 "O king, the Most High God gave your father Nebuchadnezzar sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendor.

19 Because of the high position he gave him, all the peoples and nations and men of every language dreaded and feared him. Those the king wanted to put to death, he put to death; those he wanted to spare, he spared; those he wanted to promote, he promoted; and those he wanted to humble, he humbled. [This is exactly what we saw in the last chapter – Neb, the great and mighty tree. Did Neb though acknowledge God, that all of these things were gracious gifts from His hand? Nope].

20 But when his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory. [He walked in pride and so God humbled him – 4:37].

21 He was driven away from people and given the mind of an animal; he lived with the wild donkeys and ate grass like cattle; and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, *until he acknowledged that the Most High God is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and sets over them anyone he wishes.*

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

Belshazzar knew about Nebuchadnezzar. He knew about that time when the previous king went nuts that we don't talk about. He knew how Nebuchadnezzar learned his lesson and came to acknowledge the sovereign reign of the creator God. (Chapter 4 is a royal proclamation making that very point!ⁱⁱⁱ).

And yet, how did Belshazzar respond to the reality of a sovereign God who ruled eternally over all things?

23 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.

24 Therefore he sent the hand that wrote the inscription.

25 "This is the inscription that was written: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN

26 "This is what these words mean: *Mene*: God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end.

27 Tekel: You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting.

28 Peres: Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians."

That's a sobering message, isn't it? Your days are numbered, your deeds are lacking and your kingdom is about to be divided.

29 Belshazzar clothed Daniel in purple, gold chain around his neck and he was named third highest ruler in the kingdom. And then verse 30 -

30 That very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain,^{iv}

31 and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom, at the age of sixty-two.^v

Belshazzar ignored the Most High God and arrogantly went his own way. He refused to acknowledge the sovereignty of God, really spitting in His face, so the Most High God humbled him, just as Nebuchadnezzar said He would. The Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes.

He exalts the humble who rely on Him and humbles the proud who go their own way. Nebuchadnezzar was willing to acknowledge his dependency on YHWH but Belshazzar was not. Nebuchadnezzar was exalted and Belshazzar overthrown.

And that leads us then back to our original question. How are YOU responding to reality of God in your life?

There is a sovereign God whose dominion endures from generation to generation. Everything he does is right and all his ways are just. He humbles the proud and exalts the humble; how are you responding to His eternal rule?

Are you acknowledging His blessing and care, and trusting in His eternal goodness? Or are you ignoring Him and trusting in your own limited power, saying 'all this is the work of my hands?'

Bryan Chapell writes: "...There is nothing wrong with striving for excellence. God expects us to make good use of the gifts He gives us. But we should remember that they are gifts. Talent, brains and opportunity mean nothing apart from God's provision. If we begin to trust only in what we can achieve – to believe that we are the sole cause of our success – then all around us life will begin to whisper the foolishness of our faith in ourselves."^{vi}

I want to encourage you – be a Nebuchadnezzar, not a Belshazzar. Embrace the eternal sovereignty of God and rely on Him instead of trusting in your own limited power.

The writing on the wall is a sobering reminder for us. Our days are numbered, our works weighed and found wanting. They won't last forever but God's Kingdom will. Nebuchadnezzar says it twice - His kingdom is an eternal kingdom; his dominion endures from generation to generation. (Dan 4:3 NIV). His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation. (Dan 4:34 NIV).

And God's Son, Jesus, invites us into it. By faith, He makes us citizens of the eternal kingdom and calls us to live with the same humility and dependence on God that He displayed when He came to live on earth. Jesus, who was in very nature God, did not count equality with God something to be selfishly clung to, humbled Himself to become a man, and not just a man but a servant, and not just a servant, but a sacrifice, dying on the Cross to welcome us into the kingdom. We are called to follow in His footsteps, to learn from Nebuchadnezzar and to humbly rely on God in all that we do.

When you look at all that you have, do you say 'Look at all this, the works of my hands?' Or 'look how good the Lord's been to me'?

The apostle James, thinking about what he learned from His brother Jesus, wrote in James 4:10 - 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

That's really the message that we learn from these case studies. God humbles the proud but exalts the humble. Acknowledge Him and all His gifts, rely on Him in all you do and He will lift you up.

ⁱ "Thirty-seven archival texts dated from the first to the fourteenth year of Nabonidus now attest to Belshazzar's historicity. His father, Nabonidus, resided at Tema in Arabia (about five hundred miles south of Babylon) for most of his seventeen-year reign, apparently for religious reasons. During these long absences, it was

Belshazzar, the crown prince, who ruled the empire. Although the author of Daniel was aware of Nabonidus (as evidenced by the phrase “the third highest ruler in the kingdom” in 5:7, 16, 29; see later discussion), he did not mention him by name because he played no part in the events described, and for all practical purposes Belshazzar was the only king the people served.” (Stephen Miller, *Daniel* (New American Commentary), chp 5, V.

ⁱⁱ 48 Then the king placed Daniel in a high position and lavished many gifts on him. He made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men. (Daniel 2:48).

ⁱⁱⁱ NIV Daniel 4:1 King Nebuchadnezzar, To the peoples, nations and men of every language, who live in all the world: May you prosper greatly!

2 It is my pleasure to tell you about the miraculous signs and wonders that the Most High God has performed for me.

3 How great are his signs, how mighty his wonders! His kingdom is an eternal kingdom; his dominion endures from generation to generation.

^{iv} “The outer walls were approximately twenty-five feet in width and rose to a height of at least forty feet. These fortifications were too difficult to challenge, and so according to Herodotus and Xenophon, the Medo-Persian army diverted water from the Euphrates River (which ran under the walls of Babylon) into a marsh. With the level of the water lowered, the soldiers were able to wade the river under the walls and enter the city.

Xenophon added that the city was invaded while the Babylonians were feasting in a time of drunken revelry, and Herodotus also related that a festival was in progress (Miller, *Daniel* (NAC), Notes on 5:30-31).

^v “Sixty-two years takes us back to the beginning of the exile, so the reference might suggest that the seeds of the downfall of Nebuchadnezzar’s dynasty were down even then...” (John Goldingay, *Daniel* (Word Biblical Commentary), 112).

^{vi} Bryan Chapell, *The Gospel according to Daniel*, 75.