

STAND when the writing is on the wall  
Daniel 5  
page 1379

Q: What do you think of when you hear the saying “The writing is on the wall?”

Today’s reading is the origin of this saying.

The last few weeks we’ve been looking at stories from the book of Daniel to show us how to stand when we are pushed to our limit and have a choice to make. Will we have the courage to stand?

Quick recap – The Israelites were conquered by King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians with a number of them taking as prisoners of war including young Daniel and his 3 friends.

Today’s reading takes place decades later. Nebuchadnezzar’s son Nabonitus has won the throne but is out defending the borders of the country from the Medes and Persians and has left his son Belshazzar to rule Babylon.

Let’s pick up the story 5:1-4 (page 1379)

*King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine with them. <sup>2</sup> 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 from them. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> As they drank the wine, they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone.*

Historians document that the Persians were literally outside of the city walls on the verge of conquering Babylon, yet, King Belshazzar throws a big party. During the party, he has the temple goblets brought in and used as common table ware – not because

they ran out of red solo cups – but because he was making a point in essence saying “our gods are greater.”

You may remember the terrorist attack in Paris last year. I’ve heard that while people were being killed the terrorists were shouting Allah Akbar – meaning Allah is great. They weren’t just saying Allah is great, but that their Allah is greater than the God of the west, the God of Christianity.

King Bel and the guests using the temple goblets as common cups were doing the same thing – proclaiming that their gods are greater than Yahweh. They are mocking God.

But our God is never mocked for long. There is always an account. Here’s what happened, v. 5-6:

*<sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his legs became weak and his knees were knocking.*

All of a sudden, in the midst of the mockery declaring God is dead and useless, the king sees a hand writing on the wall. Can’t you just picture it? The king having a jolly time, raising his glass, toasting his gods and then all of a sudden seeing this hand out of nowhere writing a message on the wall. I imagine it was a “check your pants” kind of moment.

The writing terrified the king! Especially because he had no clue what it meant. So, he called on his advisors. V. 7-12

*<sup>7</sup> The king summoned the enchanters, astrologers and diviners. Then he 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.”*

*<sup>8</sup> Then all the king’s wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or tell the king what it meant. <sup>9</sup> So King Belshazzar became even more terrified and his face grew more*

*pale. His nobles were baffled.*

*<sup>10</sup> The queen, hearing the voices of the king and his nobles, came into the banquet hall. “May the king live forever!” she said. “Don’t be alarmed! Don’t look so pale! <sup>11</sup> There is a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods in him. In the time of your father he was found to have insight and intelligence and wisdom like that of the gods. Your father, King Nebuchadnezzar, appointed him chief of the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners. <sup>12</sup> He did this because Daniel, whom the king called Belteshazzar, was found to have a keen mind and knowledge and understanding, and also the ability to interpret dreams, explain riddles and solve difficult problems. Call for Daniel, and he will tell you what the writing means.”*

Daniel is now an old man, probably in his 80’s, enjoying his retirement. But the queen mother remembers Daniel and suggests that if anyone can figure this it, Daniel can.

*v. 13-17 <sup>13</sup> So Daniel was brought before the king, and the king said to him, “Are you Daniel, one of the exiles my father the king brought from Judah? <sup>14</sup> I have heard that the spirit of the gods is in you and that you have insight, intelligence and outstanding wisdom. <sup>15</sup> The wise men and enchanters were brought before me to read this writing and tell me what it means, but they could not explain it. <sup>16</sup> Now I have heard that you are able to give interpretations and to solve difficult problems. If you can read this writing and tell me what it means, you will be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed around your neck, and you will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom.”*

The king is so desperate he is willing to make Daniel next in command.

*<sup>17</sup> Then Daniel answered the king, “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.*

This is what he tells the king, v: 18-22

<sup>18</sup> “Your Majesty, the Most High God gave your father Nebuchadnezzar sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendor. <sup>19</sup> Because of the high position he gave him, all the nations and peoples 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.”<sup>20</sup> But when his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory. <sup>21</sup> He was driven away from people and given the mind of an animal; he lived with the wild donkeys and ate grass like the ox; and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, until he acknowledged that the Most High God is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and sets over them anyone he wishes.

<sup>22</sup> “But you, Belshazzar, his son, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this.

Let me frame this with a story I heard. Joe Kennedy Jr., the older brother of John F. Kennedy, in 1944 was part of a secret mission using a remote controlled bomber. It was a PB4Y Liberator bomber loaded with about 20,000 lbs of explosives. These aircraft couldn't take off safely on their own, so the idea was that a crew of 2 would take off and fly to 2,000 feet before activating the remote control system, arming the detonators and parachuting from the aircraft. Before the flight, an electronic technician urged Lieutenant Kennedy to abort the flight because the remote control device was faulty. Kennedy ignored the warning, “the writing on the wall”, and flew the mission anyway. He knew. He was told, but it made no difference to him. His stubborn pride not only destroyed him but others as well.

Listen again to what Daniel said in verse 22. “But you, Belshazzar, his son, have not humbled yourself, though **you knew** all this.” You knew all this but you chose to ignore it. King Belshazzar's problem wasn't ignorance it was arrogant pride leading to insubordination. He was fully aware of what God wants, what God desires, but insists I'll do what I want anyway. That's flagrant sin.

And we all do it. God's word teaches us what God wants from us – in relationships, sex, work, how we live our lives, etc. But when we don't like it, we cover our ears.

Have you ever watched a little kid who doesn't want to hear something cover up their ears? That's what we do. We know what the Bible teaches or at the very least we know God has given us the Bible to instruct us – but we don't want it to get in the way of our fun, our pleasure, our self-gratification – so we cover our ears, we don't read the book and we avoid participating in bible studies because we don't want what we learn to get in our way. We think we know better and so we ignore it, we cover our ears, we allow our stubborn pride to get in the way. We too are guilty of flagrant sin. We have a whole lot more in common with this situation than we like to admit.

Daniel says to king Bel – you knew better, but you chose to defy God and refused to honor God.

v. 23-30 <sup>23</sup> *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.* <sup>24</sup> *Therefore he sent the hand that wrote the inscription.*

<sup>25</sup> *“This is the inscription that was written:*

*mene, mene, tekel, parsin*

<sup>26</sup> *“Here is what these words mean:*

*Mene: God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end.*

<sup>27</sup> *Tekel: You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting.*

<sup>28</sup> *Peres: Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.”*

<sup>29</sup> *Then at Belshazzar's command, Daniel was clothed in purple, a gold chain was placed around his neck, and he was proclaimed the third highest ruler in the kingdom.*

<sup>30</sup> *That very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was*

*slain, <sup>31</sup> and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom, at the age of sixty-two.*

The writing on the wall, O king, is pronouncing judgment against you. Your days are numbered, you have been found wanting and now your kingdom is lost to you. You're done for.

History tells us that very night the city was captured by the Persians and the king (and his guests) had no clue until the enemy was literally standing in front of him ready to take his life.

What we have in this story today is a theological teaching. It's the dynamic duo (no, not batman and robin), but the dynamic duo that appears over and over again in the Bible, about how God interacts with us. It's the dynamic duo of Law and Gospel.

The **Law** is the part of God's word that sets the boundaries of how we are to live - like the curb on the side of the road – it is designed to keep us on the right track. The Law also functions as a mirror that serves as a perfect reflection of what God created the human to be and how far we fall short of that perfection. The Law reveals the mistakes we've made, the sins we've committed and like a measuring stick shows us how far we've fallen or. When you don't measure up to God's standards there are consequences, there is judgment for our sin.

But thanks be to God that is not where it ends. We have a God who loves us so deeply that God sent his son Jesus to suffer the consequences, to take our place. That is what the cross is all about.

While the law shows us how far we fall short, the **Gospel** comes in behind, washes us clean, refreshes us and reminds us that through blood of Christ we are forgiven.

So what can we do? To begin with, don't rush past it. Look at the Law as a curb to keep us on the right track and then as a mirror to reveal to us just how far we fall short. The fact is we have all sinned, we are all broken, we are all flawed human beings and we all deserve judgment for our sin. Hear this and tremble!

Then, be thankful for the Gospel - that the very hand of God has shown up in Jesus. In Luke 11:10, Jesus refers to himself as the finger of God. And in John 8, Jesus uses his finger to write in the sand and tells the woman who was caught in adultery “*Go now and leave your life of sin,*” “*neither do I condemn you.*”

In Jesus, we have the king of kings, who comes and willingly takes the judgment for our sins and gives us a new record, a clean slate.

Not “mene” you’re finished, but you’re alive.

Not “tekel” you’re weightless, but you are valuable and precious in God’s sight.

Not “perez” lost, but you’ve been given the kingdom forever.

Let the judgment for our sin sober us and let the gospel make us sing because we have Jesus.

One more thing - there is a third use of the law. The Law acts as a curb, a mirror and a guide showing us what to do next, how to live as one who is set free, who has been showered with grace, forgiveness, kindness, mercy and love.

When we recognize how messed up we are and there is a God who knows it all but loves us anyway and cleanses us with his blood, we move forward into the future not because we are good but because we are grateful. So we chose to live our lives in grateful response to all God has done for us in Jesus, reflecting him in all we think, say and do.

Thanks be to God for both his Law and also his amazing grace.

Amen