

# Surprise Party



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Daniel 5*.

**Memory Text:** “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths” (*Proverbs 3:5, 6, NKJV*).

As this chapter opens, we see a great banquet hall with a thousand guests. The “thousand” is no exaggeration. Kings in the ancient world were known for their lavish banquets.

Throughout the chapter, Nebuchadnezzar is called the father of Belshazzar (*Dan. 5:2, 11, 13, 18, 22*), referring to the fact that his mother, Nitocris, was probably Nebuchadnezzar’s daughter. The word *father* in the Semitic languages can refer to any ancestor or predecessor, not only to the immediate parent. Mephibosheth is called the son of Saul (*2 Sam. 19:24*), whereas he was really the son of Jonathan (*2 Sam. 9:6*). Christ was called the Son of David (*Matt. 9:27*), not because David was His immediate human father but because He was from the lineage of David (*Luke 2:4*).

**The Week at a Glance:** What was the king’s sin? Why did he react as he did to the handwriting on the wall? Why was the king “without excuse” for his actions? In what sense are we all, as Romans 1:20 says, “without excuse”?

*\*Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 30.*

## **The Handwriting on the Wall** (*Dan. 5:1-9*).

When in 539 B.C., Cyrus, the Persian king, marched against Babylon, King Nabonidus, of Babylon, met him with his forces at Opis, on the Tigris, in an attempt to prevent Cyrus from crossing the river. The Babylonians suffered a disastrous defeat, and the Persians pushed immediately through to Sippar, on the Euphrates. Cyrus captured Sippar without a fight in October of 539 B.C. According to the Babylonian chronicle, Nabonidus fled south. Belshazzar, his son, stayed in Babylon, about thirty-five miles south of Sippar, trusting in its strong fortifications.

**Surrounded by the enemy, why would Belshazzar give such a banquet and send for the vessels from God's temple (*Dan. 5:1-4*)?**

Was it an act of defiance aimed at the Persians and a show of confidence in the strong walls of Babylon? Or was it simply a festival that happened to fall on this particular date? Whatever the reason, Belshazzar's pride and reckless state of mind are shown by his command to bring the vessels from the house of Yahweh.

**Read** *verse 4. Though they were praising the gods of the vessels, how was this an act of defiance against the God of the temple from which those vessels were taken? (See Exod. 20:4, 5; Isa. 45:5; Col. 1:15; 1 Tim. 1:17.)*

No matter how drunk the king and his guests were, they quickly sobered up when they saw the "fingers of a man's hand" writing something on the wall. All of a sudden, the revelry stopped, and a deathly silence filled the room.

**What** *was the king's first reaction when he recovered from the initial shock? *Dan. 5:7.**

Belshazzar calls for an interpretation, but once again, as in the case of his grandfather, the wise men of Babylon are unable to help the king. The inscription was in Aramaic, which, like Hebrew, is written only in consonants, and it was so short that though they could read the individual words, they did not understand their meaning.

**Look at the reaction of the king to the writing that he didn't understand (*vs. 6*). Without even knowing what the words meant, he was afraid. What does that reaction imply?**

## **The Queen's Counsel** (*Dan. 5:10-12*).

The confusion of Belshazzar and his nobles must have lasted for some time. The news of what had happened was carried throughout the palace and reached the ears of the “queen,” who had not been present in the banquet hall. Her identity is uncertain. It was not one of Belshazzar’s wives, because they and his concubines were already at the feast (*vs. 3*). Scholars are divided as to whether it was Belshazzar’s mother or his grandmother, the wife of Nebuchadnezzar.

The importance of queen mothers is widely attested to in ancient Near Eastern sources. Often the mother of the reigning king held a more important position at the court of her son than his own wife. An inscription from Haran speaks of the influence Belshazzar’s mother had on the career of her son, and the Greek historian Herodotus reports that Nebuchadnezzar’s wife was renowned for her wisdom. He credits her with the development of the defenses of Babylon.

**The king called in all the wise men but Daniel. What does this omission imply about how far removed the king was from the past and the spiritual lessons that he should have learned?**

When the queen mother entered the banquet hall, she was able to calm the frazzled king. She remembered that on at least two prior occasions Daniel had been able to interpret Nebuchadnezzar’s dreams, and she must have concluded that if anyone could solve this riddle, it would be Daniel. He evidently was in retirement at that time, though he still lived in Babylon. At the right time, God had the right man ready.

**What** reasons did the queen give for her confidence that Daniel could decipher the handwriting on the wall? *Dan. 5:11, 12*.

Before urging her son to call Daniel, the queen mother sang the praises of the aged prophet. Her words remind us of Nebuchadnezzar’s confession in Daniel chapter 4. The fact that she mentions the name of Daniel twice indicates that she was well acquainted with him. If she was Nebuchadnezzar’s widow, it is possible that she shared her husband’s conviction regarding Daniel’s God.

**What lesson do her words about Daniel suggest regarding the power of personal influence? Be honest with yourself: What kind of influence do your words project upon those with whom you come in contact? What do you need to change?**

## **Without Excuse** (*Dan. 5:13-24*).

From the way Belshazzar greeted Daniel, we may conclude that Belshazzar was not personally acquainted with Daniel, or he had not seen him for many years. It seems that when Nebuchadnezzar died more than twenty years earlier, Daniel retired from public service. However, the fact that Daniel, in his old age, entered the services of the Persian kings (*Dan. 6:1-3*) indicates that his retirement from Babylonian politics was not a result of ill health or old age. His public censure of Belshazzar (*Dan. 5:22, 23*) may have been one of the factors that led Darius to hire the services of Daniel.

**Why** could Belshazzar offer Daniel only the third place in the kingdom (*Dan. 5:16*)?

Officially, Belshazzar's father, Nabonidus, was still the king of Babylon. Belshazzar, as coregent, was second in command; therefore, he could offer only the third place to the person who could interpret the writing on the wall.

As we see later, Daniel had no difficulty interpreting the words; but before he did so, he wanted the king to know the reason for the impending tragedy. By recounting the history of Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel reminded King Belshazzar that it was the Most High God who had granted Nebuchadnezzar, and by implication also Belshazzar, the authority to rule Babylon (*Dan. 5:18, 23*). He pointed out that at the end of Nebuchadnezzar's insanity, the king acknowledged that "the Most High God rules in the kingdom of men, and appoints over it whomever He chooses" (*vs. 21, NKJV*).

**What** was Belshazzar's great sin in the sight of God? *Dan 5:22, 23*.

Although Belshazzar knew firsthand what had happened to his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar, he failed to learn from Nebuchadnezzar's experience. His grandfather had been proud, but he had repented and had become a child of God. Belshazzar, on the other hand, chose to defy God's law and authority and refused to humble himself. His sin, therefore, was great and the judgment speedy.

**In a sense, Daniel was telling the king that he was "without excuse" (*Rom. 1:20*). Why, in the end, are we all "without excuse"? Even more important, why does the fact we are "without excuse" make the Cross even more crucial to us?**

## **Weighed and Found Wanting** (*Dan. 5:25-29*).

**What** was the message of the handwriting on the wall? *Dan. 5:26-28?*

In Aramaic, the inscription consisted of a series of four words. Because Aramaic, like Hebrew, was written only with consonants, the way in which the words were to be read depended on which vowels were supplied. To the wise men, the letters M N M N T Q L P R S N did not make sense. Some of them may have seen the names of three common weights on the wall, “a mina, a mina, a shekel, and a half-shekel,” but translated into modern weights, what did “a pound, a pound, an ounce, and half an ounce” mean? Daniel read them out as “*mene, mene, tekel, upharsin*” and then gave the interpretation: “numbered, numbered, weighed, and divided.” The repetition of the first word is a solemn emphasis, just like Jesus’ words “*verily, verily*” in the New Testament (*John 3:11, 5:24*).

*MENE* means “numbered” because the days of Belshazzar’s reign had been numbered, and God had decided to call a halt. *TEKEL* means “weighed.” Belshazzar’s life and actions were placed on one side of the scales, so to speak, and God’s law on the other side. Belshazzar’s side, unfortunately, was found wanting. *PERES* means “broken” or “divided.” Belshazzar’s kingdom was about to be broken and given to the Medes and Persians. There is a play on words here, because the consonants for the word *divided* are the same as for the name Persian (*paras*).

The message, then, was clear and specific. God had numbered or added up the crimes of the king and completed their tally. The period of Babylon’s political supremacy was coming to an end. Besides the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar and the deliverance of the three Hebrews from the fiery furnace, the mysterious handwriting on the wall was another example of God’s direct intervention in human affairs.

**If our lives, like Belshazzar’s, were placed on a balance (our life on one side and God’s law on the other), would we fare much better? And even if we fared better, would we fare well enough? After all, whose life—even that of the most saintly Christian—can stand before God’s holy law (*Rom. 3:23*)? In that sense, we aren’t all that different, really, from Belshazzar. However, we believe that there is a crucial and defining difference between us as Christians and this king: our faith in the God in “whose hand thy breath is” (*Dan. 5:23*). Read the following texts: Psalm 130:4, John 5:24, Romans 8:1, Ephesians 1:7. How do they explain what we have in Christ that makes all the difference between us and this king, who was doomed now and forever?**

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## **Babylon's Fall** (*Dan. 5:30, 31*).

While at times God delayed judgment to give people the opportunity to repent (*Jonah 1*), in Belshazzar's case the time of probation was closed.

How the Persians were able to penetrate the seemingly impregnable defenses of the city is explained by the Greek historian Herodotus, who wrote some eighty years after the event happened. He writes that Cyrus diverted the river Euphrates by redirecting its flow, causing the river level to drop as it went beneath the city wall. When the water reached about midway up a man's thigh, the Persian soldiers entered the city via the riverbed. So sure the city could not be taken, the Babylonians grew careless. Thus the Persians came upon them by surprise and so took the city. (Herodotus, *The Histories* [Baltimore, Md.: Penguin Books, 1954], pp. 90, 91.)

From the Babylonian chronicles we learn that Babylon fell on the sixteenth day of Tishri, or on October 12, 539 B.C., in terms of our calendar. Belshazzar was slain, but his father, Nabonidus, who had fled south, surrendered and committed himself to the mercy of Cyrus. According to a Greek report, Cyrus spared his life and gave him a residence in Carmania, a Persian province located along the north shore of the Persian Gulf.

**What** are some parallels between the fall of literal Babylon in 539 B.C. and the fall of spiritual Babylon in the time of the end? *Jer. 51:13, Rev. 17:1, Jer. 51:8, Rev. 14:8, Jer. 51:45, Rev. 18:4, Jer. 51:60-64, Rev. 18:21-24.*

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**Around 597 B.C., when Babylon was at the pinnacle of its power, Jeremiah prophesied that Babylon would become “ ‘a heap, a dwelling place for jackals, an astonishment and a hissing, without an inhabitant’ ” (*Jer. 51:37, NKJV*). Yet after its fall to the Persians, it remained an important city. Alexander the Great planned to make it the capital of his empire, but he died prematurely. One of his generals, Seleucus Nicator, chose Opis, to the north, as his capital, which he named Seleucia after himself. He used millions of bricks from Babylon to help build his new capital. Babylon, therefore, sank slowly into obscurity. As century succeeded century, it gradually fell into decay. By A.D. 200 the place was deserted. Covered by the shifting sands of the desert, it became a lost city until archaeologists uncovered it in the nineteenth century.**

**Further Study:** Read Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 522–538.

“Belshazzar had been given many opportunities for knowing and doing the will of God. He had seen his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar banished from the society of men. He had seen the intellect in which the proud monarch gloried taken away by the One who gave it. He had seen the king driven from his kingdom, and made the companion of the beasts of the field. But Belshazzar’s love of amusement and self-glorification effaced the lessons he should never have forgotten; and he committed sins similar to those that brought signal judgments on Nebuchadnezzar. He wasted the opportunities graciously granted him, neglecting to use the opportunities within his reach for becoming acquainted with truth. ‘What must I do to be saved?’ was a question that the great but foolish king passed by indifferently.”—Ellen G. White, *Bible Echo*, April 25, 1898.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1** Belshazzar was acquainted with many of God’s actions; yet, he deliberately chose to ignore them. Why do we all tend to do the same thing; that is, ignore what God has done in our life or in the lives of others? What’s the main reason?
- 2** What practical steps can we take when we weigh our lives in the balances and find that they are wanting? Why is the Cross the first place we must go if we want to change?
- 3** What is the relevance of this chapter to the second angel’s message, in Revelation 14:8?
- 4** In Daniel 5:23, Daniel tells the king that he has ignored the God “in whose hand thy breath is.” What does that statement mean? How does it fit in with the overall context of the previous chapters?

**Summary:** In spite of the experiences of his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar, with which Belshazzar was acquainted, the king chose to defy the God of heaven and suffered the consequences. It is a sad commentary on the fact that the wisdom of parents and grandparents cannot always be passed on to the next generations. The individual’s eternal destiny rests on his or her own choice.

## My Father Knows, Part 2

Homer Trecartin

Michelle was still rejoicing over the news that her friend Sofia wanted to follow Christ when neighbors came to tell Michelle that Sofia was in a coma. Michelle rushed to the hospital and found Sofia lying unconscious. Bruises and wounds covered her body.

Michelle wanted to run from the room. What had she done to her friend by sharing Christ? How could her husband do this to her? Michelle took Sofia's hand and began to pray. As she prayed, she felt Sofia's hand tighten in hers.

Sofia came out of the coma briefly when her brother visited. She begged him to give his life to God, then she slipped back into the coma and died.

Michelle was numb with grief and guilt. She agonized over what she could have done differently to prevent this senseless murder. During the week of mourning, Michelle visited Sofia's home and sat with the women every day. She did it for Hans and Anna, to let them know she cared. But her presence had an impact on others as well. Even Sofia's husband seemed to soften.

One day Sofia's husband came to ask Michelle's forgiveness for what he had done to Sofia. Michelle nodded, but in her heart a battle waged. How could she really forgive a man who had murdered his wife, the mother of his children, her friend?

Two years later he again visited Michelle. He wanted to remarry and wanted her advice. Michelle listened in stunned silence to this man's description of the woman he now loved. Michelle encouraged him to marry the woman.

Hans and Anna seemed to adapt well to their new mother. Then, without warning, Anna came to Michelle and asked to be baptized. Images of a bruised and beaten Sofia flooded Michelle's mind.

"No!" she whispered fiercely. "Anna, don't you remember what happened to your mother?"

"Yes," Anna said, "but I want to be baptized."

"But Anna," Michelle protested, "you must ask your father."

"My father knows," Anna replied, "and he is happy for me. He wants me to follow my conscience."

Tears of joy streamed down Michelle's cheeks as she hugged Anna tightly. She prayed for the girl, for her father, and for those whose lives will be touched by Anna's decision to follow Jesus.

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