

UNIT 1: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Lesson 11

May 17, 2026

The Danger of Pride:

Humility is an essential virtue of Christian character.

THE LESSON OVERVIEW

This study jumps forward over twenty years past the era of Nebuchadnezzar to the final hours of his grandson Belshazzar's reign. Though Belshazzar knew of Nebuchadnezzar's recognition of the true God, his arrogance led him to blaspheme the Lord in a very public fashion. His pride triggered a supernatural event – a hand appeared and inscribed a mysterious message on the banquet room's wall. Daniel was brought in to decipher the writing, which foretold the violent downfall of Belshazzar with the Persian army overtaking Babylon. This story illustrates the importance of humility before God, warning against pride's damaging consequences.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

After Nebuchadnezzar died in 562BC, Babylon entered a period of decline under ineffective rulers, while the Persian Empire rose to prominence. The reign of Babylon's final king, Belshazzar, ended with the Persian conquest under King Cyrus in 539 BC. A significant and unsettling event marked the closing days of Belshazzar's rule, demonstrating the supreme authority of God over the course of history. This episode serves as a powerful reminder of divine sovereignty amidst political upheaval, emphasizing that ultimate control lies beyond human governance and reinforcing the enduring influence of divine will during time of transition.

THE LESSON OUTLINE

- 1. PRIDE LEADS TO SACRILEGE: Daniel 5:1-9.**
 - A. The King Defiles Holy Things, (1-4)
 - B. A Terrifying Hand Appears, (5-9)
- 2. PRIDE EXPOSED: Daniel 5:10-21.**
 - A. Daniel Can Interpret, (10-16)
 - B. Pride Brings Judgment, (17-21)
- 3. PRIDE OPPOSED BY GOD: Daniel 5:22-31; 1 Peter 5:5-6.**
 - A. Babylon Is Falling, (Daniel 5:22-31)
 - B. God Shows Favor to the Humble, (1 Peter 5:5-6)

DISCUSSING THE LESSON

1. PRIDE LEADS TO SACRILEGE: Daniel 5:1-9.

A. The King Defiles Holy Things, Daniel 5:1-4.

Belshazzar, the last king of Babylon, presided over the events described in Daniel 5 during the waning hours of his reign. The chapter opens with the vivid scene of the king hosting a grand feast for a thousand of his nobles. The Aramaic terminology used suggests that the drinking was continuous, likely leading to a night of debauchery. This raises the question of why Belshazzar would organize such a banquet, given that the Persian army was encamped outside Babylon's walls and his father, Nabonidus, had fled after suffering a crushing defeat mere days earlier. Some scholars believe Belshazzar was trying to assert himself as the sole ruler of the empire through an arrogant display of authority during an impending crisis. His actions reflect brazen confidence, perhaps an attempt to project strength and control in the face of looming disaster.

During this feast, Belshazzar committed a shocking act of sacrilege by calling for items from the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem – objects consecrated for divine worship – to be used as vessels for toasting pagan gods. These items, seized during Babylon's conquest of Jerusalem half a century earlier, were treated as trophies of past victories. This act was typical of ancient practices where conquered nations' religious artifacts were misused to insult their deities. Scholars interpret this as Belshazzar's attempt to bolster morale and reassure his people of divine protections by invoking Babylon's gods, described as "the gods of gold, and of silver, or brass, or iron, of wood, and of stone" (v. 4). Ironically, this act reveals the folly of misplaces confidence in false gods. The prophet Isaiah's warnings centuries earlier about faithfulness and idolatry resonate here (Isaiah 2:8, 17-18), with the arrogance of a king who believed his empire's fleeting power could subdue the eternal God and His people.

B. A Terrifying Hand Appears, Daniel 5:5-9.

Verse 5 says, "In the same hour the fingers of a man's hand appeared and wrote opposite the lampstand on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace" (NKJV). It is hard to imagine a more terrifying scene. The word translated "appeared" ("came forth," KJV) could also be translated "came out," indicating that the hand "came out" from God and appeared in the natural world and began to write on the wall. Not surprisingly, Belshazzar had a dramatic physical reaction to what he was witnessing. His face turned pale, his limbs or hips became weak ("the joints of his loins were loosed"), and his knees were knocking (v. 6). He was in a panic, perhaps realizing that he had offended a powerful deity.

Immediately, Belshazzar called upon the men tasked with accessing the gods: enchanter, astrologers, and diviners (v. 7). To anyone who could explain what was written, he offered rewards of royal clothing and jewelry, as well as a promise to be elevated to third in the kingdom. (The person would be under Belshazzar and Nabonidus, his father, who was still living.) To Belshazzar's disappointment, none of them could read the writing (vv. 8-9). This may seem odd in that the writing was in Aramaic (v. 25), a language very familiar to them. Most likely, the words presented a riddle that no one could understand. Regardless, Belshazzar

became even more terrified. Everyone was baffled by what had just happened as they indulged in revelry and pagan worship with utensils consecrated to the God of the Hebrews.

The utensils used by Belshazzar were considered holy because they were crafted for and used in the temple, making them sacred and dedicated to God's glory. Today, however, we no longer rely on a physical temple to define holiness. As stated in 1 Corinthians 3:16, we are "the temple of God." This profound truth calls us to reflect on the significance of being set apart for God and challenges us to live in a way that honors this sacred identity. We should consider how we can embody this sacred calling in our daily lives and actions.

2. PRIDE EXPOSED: Daniel 5:10-21.

A. Daniel Can Interpret, Daniel 5:10-16.

Verse 10 signifies a pivotal moment in this amazing narrative. The queen, overhearing the commotion, approached Belshazzar. This was not one of his wives; she is believed by scholars to have been Nabonidus' wife and Nebuchadnezzar's daughter, which means she would have remembered Daniel's ministry to her father. Despite the passage of decades since Nebuchadnezzar's reign, she recognized Daniel as the most likely person to provide a solution to Belshazzar's dilemma. She testified to Daniel's divine wisdom, describing him as a man "in whom is the spirit of the holy gods" (v. 11). Recalling Nebuchadnezzar's trust in Daniel, she emphasized his exceptional abilities in "understanding, interpreting of dreams, and shewing of hard sentences, and dissolving of doubts" (v. 12). These qualities had once elevated him to prominence in the Babylonian court.

Daniel was summoned urgently to address Belshazzar's crisis (vv. 13-16). The king explained his dilemma, complaining that none of his diviners could interpret the mysterious writing on the wall. He extended the same promise of reward to Daniel as he had to the unsuccessful diviners. Daniel's unwavering faith in God throughout his years in Babylon, despite pervasive pagan influences, had sustained his reputation and influences. His testimony now bore fruit again, positioning him to deliver a crucial divine message to an arrogant king at a historically significant juncture.

B. Pride Brings Judgment, Daniel 5:17-21.

Daniel rejected Belshazzar's offer of rewards, thereby affirming that God and God alone could give the interpretation (v. 17). God's gifts cannot be bought or sold. Before giving the interpretation, however, Daniel rebuked Belshazzar with a reminder that God is the trustworthy source of human authority (vv. 18-21).

Rulers rise and fall according to the purpose and plan of God, not their own power, as Psalms 75:6-7 declares. Daniel then gave Belshazzar a lesson on history and pride that the king should have recalled: "The most high God gave Nebuchadnezzar thy father a kingdom, and majesty, and glory, and honor" (Daniel 5:18). Nebuchadnezzar was the greatest king that Babylon ever knew, holding absolute, unrivaled human power he had the power to decide if someone lived or died (v. 19). Then, Nebuchadnezzar became arrogant, so God humiliated him with a mental breakdown during which the king lived like an animal for seven years (vv. 20-21). After this

judgment, Nebuchadnezzar recognized that the God of Israel was the true God (see Daniel 4:34-37). Belshazzar had fallen into the same trap of pride, ignoring the fact that he was also accountable to God.

Daniel emphasized that recognizing God's sovereignty fosters humility by shifting our focus away from ourselves and onto Him. This perspective allows us to understand our place in relation to God and respond to Him appropriately. Regardless of whether we hold positions of authority or live quietly in the background, the temptation to prioritize self over God often leads to pride. Therefore, cultivating humility requires a conscious, daily commitment to keep our attention on the Lord and His will for our lives. By doing so, we align our actions and attitudes with His plans and purposes, ensuring a life centered on faith and mission.

3. PRIDE OPPOSED BY GOD: Daniel 5:22-31; 1 Peter 5:5-6.

A. Babylon Is Falling, Daniel 5:22-31.

In contrast to Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar refused to humble himself before God (v. 22). History indicates that Belshazzar likely rose to his position only two years after Nebuchadnezzar's death, so he was likely aware of what happened with his grandfather. His refusal to honor God, and instead to blaspheme Him, did not come from ignorance about God. Instead, Belshazzar purposely set himself up in opposition to God (v. 23) and had done so in a blasphemous way. He took items that were holy and consecrated, set apart for God's worship and used them to worship idols. Daniel's description of those idols focused on their construction from natural items, including gold, stone, and wood. These things could not see, hear, or know anything. Daniel was mocking the absurdity of Belshazzar's actions while pointing out that Belshazzar's actions while pointing out that Belshazzar offered no honor whatsoever to "the God in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy way" (v. 23).

As a result of Belshazzar's behavior, God interrupted his feast with an inscription on the wall: "Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin" (v. 25), from which Daniel interpreted God's message. The words were written in Aramaic: Mene (a unit of measurement or numbering, repeated for emphasis) meant "numbered," indicating that Belshazzar's days were numbered. Tekel (a reference to weight, similar to shekel in ancient usage) meant that Belshazzar had been "weighed in the balances, and Found wanting," or lacking (v. 27). In Aramaic, the U in Upharsin means "and," so Daniel omitted it in the translation, picking up with the word Peres, which signified division by breaking. The interpretation of this was that Babylon was "divided [broken or smashes to pieces] and given to the Medes and Persians" (v. 28).

These three words alone in this sequence would have indicated a descending list of weights. But Daniel, through divine inspiration, interpreted them as a sober message of judgment, defeat, and death coming to Belshazzar's door. This was the result of his unrepentant pride. Indeed, Belshazzar was killed that night, when Darius the Mede conquered the kingdom of Babylon (vv. 30-31). All of this happened according to God's plan. It had previously been prophesied through Nebuchadnezzar's dream and Daniel's interpretation (2:36-45). Also, centuries later, the Greeks conquered the Persians, followed by the rise of the Roman Empire.

God's plan was unfolding, just as Daniel had prophesied through the interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream.

B. God Shows Favor to the Humble, 1 Peter 5:5-6.

In Biblical times, kings were answerable to no one. It is not surprising, then, that pride was always a potential problem. However, God can humble the proud when necessary – a reality that applies not only to kings but to all of us. To avoid being humbled by God, we should live daily in submission to Him (v. 5). Submission is often an unwelcome concept in a sinful, self-centered world. The attitude that “nobody is going to tell me what to do” is typical and some would view it as bravery. However, Scripture often calls for submission between Christians (Ephesians 5:21), parents and children (6:1-3), and even secular leaders (Titus 3:1).

Humility is rooted in the servant attitude of Christ (Philippians 2:5-7), and as such, the call of submission found in 1 Peter 5:5 contains one of Scripture's greatest challenges. Human nature resists efforts to humble ourselves, but can we overcome this resistance? Peter included a key phrase, which was also emphasized by Daniel 5: “Humble yourselves ... under the mighty hand of God” (1 Peter 5:6). This kind of humility recognizes the greatness of God in comparison to mere mortals. He is the eternal Creator, greater than any human or earthly power, so to resist or reject Him is foolish.

In 1 Peter 5:5-6, there are two promises to those who willingly humble themselves. First, “God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble” (v. 5). The Greek word translated as resists means God actively opposes the proud, but His grace adorns the live of the humble. Second, when God's people humble themselves, He will “exalt [them] in due time” (v. 6). “Due time” means the right time. Humble Christians trust God's timing for exaltation and promotion. People deceive themselves when they believe they can exalt themselves. Instead, we are called to humble ourselves, encouraged by the promise that God will bless us and hold us up in ways we cannot even imagine.

When humility feels difficult to maintain the desire for validation or recognition can become quite compelling. Watching others boast might nudge us to exaggerate ourselves in an effort to fit in, and personal accomplishments may lure us into arrogance, leading us to expect special treatment. However, God calls us to embrace humility to guard against pride and self-importance. A humble spirit reflects the heart of our Savior and becomes a testimony in a world consumed by self-promotion.

CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP

Humility calls us to two spiritual virtues: submission and gratitude. We must submit to God and gratefully acknowledge the blessings of following His will.

MINISTRY IN ACTION

Pray for one another, asking God to grant each other discernment to reject pride and embrace a life of humble submission to God and others.

WORKSHEET

The End of the Babylonian Empire

The kingdom of the Babylonians became an empire twice. First, the old empire around the year 2000 BC, and the new empire from 606 to 536 BC. The words in Daniel 5:30-31 announced not only the death of King Belshazzar, but also the end of the New Babylonian Empire.

Soon after the events told in Daniel 5, Daniel began praying for the captivity of the Jews in Babylon to come to an end. He did this because he had read the prophecy by Jeremiah the prophet that the captivity of the Jews in Babylon would last 70 years, and the 70 years were at their end (Daniel 9:1-3). Jeremiah had prophesied that the end of the new Babylonian Empire would signal the end of the Jews' captivity (Jeremiah 25:11-12; 29:10).

King Nebuchadnezzar had ruled the new empire for 45 years with great success, but he had prepared no one to take his place after his death (in 561 BC). So his death marked the beginning of 25 years of decline of the empire under the leadership of a series of five incompetent kings: Evilmerodach (561-560); Neriglissar (559-556); Labash-Marduk (556); Nabonidus (555-536); and Belshazzar, the son of Nabonidus, who reigned as co-regent with his father during the last few years of his father's life

Various ancient historical sources reveal that King Nabonidus spent the last few years of his life away from the city of Babylon, and left his son Belshazzar there, in charge of the government and the army. Belshazzar (as Daniel 5 suggests) was a man of low character, mostly interested in sensual pleasures and negligent of his responsibilities as the co-regent king of an empire.

In later writings, Cyrus the Persian told of how easy it was for his army to enter the city of Babylon via the riverbed that ran under the wall, and to take the city, with Belshazzar reigning there. Belshazzar surrendered quickly to the Persian army, likely hoping to save his own life, but was killed immediately. Thus, the kingdom of the Babylonians, that had endured 15 centuries, was ended by God's judgment against them for their persistent evildoing.

Taken Down by Pride

Daniel 5

1. What did Belshazzar want all of his guests to drink from, and why (vv. 3-4, 23)?
2. Why did the Lord send his message to Belshazzar in such a dramatic fashion (vv. 5-6)?
3. Why could Daniel have been tempted to be prideful (vv. 13-16)?
4. Instead of being prideful, how did Daniel respond to Belshazzar (v. 17)?
5. What had Belshazzar failed to learn about pride from the humbling of Nebuchadnezzar (vv. 18-22)?

Two quotes to consider:

“A proud man is always looking down on things and people, and, of course, as long as you’re looking down, you can’t see something that’s above you.” – C.S. Lewis

“They that go up in their own estimation must come down again by His [God’s] discipline.” – Charles Spurgeon