

## DANIEL 5:1-31, Part 8 11-20-16

### BABYLONIAN GRAFFITI OR THE NOT-SO FICKLE FINGER OF FATE

Our title for today's message is: *Babylonian Graffiti* or *The Not-So Fickle Finger of Fate*. Now, if that doesn't pull you in I don't know what would. The book of Daniel covers the life and times of God's man in Babylon during the time when the Jewish nation had been exiled. Daniel had distinguished himself strikingly and had even seen the mighty king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, become a worshipper of the true and living God. But times changed and years passed and the story of Daniel picks up in chapter 5 many years after the time of Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel is by now up in years and the throne of the land is occupied by one named *Belshazzar*. Archeological studies indicate that Belshazzar was possibly the grandson of Nebuchadnezzar thru a father named *Nabonidus* who was still alive at the time of our story but had been captured by the Medes and Persians who were at war with Babylon. As a result of his father's absence, Belshazzar was functioning as the king. Like certain sons may do when their father is away, Belshazzar invites some friends to the house and throws a party. That is where we pick up the story. 5:1-4 *Belshazzar the king held a great feast for a thousand of his nobles, and he was drinking wine in the presence of the thousand. 2 When Belshazzar tasted the wine, he gave orders to bring the gold and silver vessels which Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken out of the temple which was in Jerusalem, so that the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines might drink from them. 3 Then they brought the gold vessels that had been taken out of the temple, the house of God which was in Jerusalem; and the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines drank from them. 4 They drank the wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone.* Now listen if it is your intent to play the fool, if it is your intent to destroy yourself, you could hardly do better than Belshazzar. He takes that which had been sanctified to the holy worship of God and uses it in his drunken, sensual, and idolatrous party. For doing less than this God struck Nadab and Abihu dead. For doing less than this God ended the life of Uzzah. Without reading further you gotta know that what is coming is not good for Belshazzar. He has defied, and mocked the living God and God says, "I will not be mocked."

So, it's no surprise when we read on. 5-6 *Suddenly the fingers of a man's hand emerged and began writing opposite the lampstand on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace, and the king saw the back of the hand that did the writing. 6 Then the king's face grew pale and his thoughts alarmed him, and his hip joints went slack and his knees began knocking together.* And some of

you are saying, “Isn’t that just like God to be a party pooper.” No, it’s not. God is a God of joy. God calls his people to feasts and festivals and grand times. God is into joy but He is a God who is deadly serious as well. We sing, “Holy, Holy, Holy” not “fun, fun, fun.” God doesn’t care that He is interrupting their fun with a little graffiti from heaven. He sends the finger of fate to deliver a message, in code, to the king. Now, if you are in the process of mocking God and a hand emerges from nowhere and writes on your wall - do you expect good news or bad news? You knew what he expected. He didn’t think he had won the lottery. Belshazzar was scared to death. He could see the handwriting on the wall. He couldn’t read it yet, but he was about to take care of that problem. **7** *The king called aloud to bring in the conjurers, the Chaldeans and the diviners. The king spoke and said to the wise men of Babylon, “Any man who can read this inscription and explain its interpretation to me shall be clothed with purple and have a necklace of gold around his neck, and have authority as third ruler in the kingdom.”* This was the best he could offer since Belshazzar himself was only the second ruler in the kingdom. **8-9** *Then all the king’s wise men came in, but they could not read the inscription or make known its interpretation to the king. 9 Then King Belshazzar was greatly alarmed, his face grew even paler, and his nobles were perplexed.* To say the least, his party had come to a screeching halt. Belshazzar was in the midst of that dread, that foreboding sense of impending doom that falls upon wicked people when they sense that *payday someday* has finally arrived. **10a** *The queen entered the banquet hall because of the words of the king and his nobles; now the queen would not be Belshazzar’s wife. His wives were already at the party. This would have been either the wife of Nabonidus, the captured king, or maybe even the widow of Nebuchadnezzar if she were still around. 10b-12* *the queen spoke and said, “O king, live forever! Do not let your thoughts alarm you or your face be pale. 11 There is a man in your kingdom in whom is a spirit of the holy gods; and in the days of your father, illumination, insight and wisdom like the wisdom of the gods were found in him. And King Nebuchadnezzar, your father, your father the king, appointed him chief of the magicians, conjurers, Chaldeans and diviners. 12 This was because an extraordinary spirit, knowledge and insight, interpretation of dreams, explanation of enigmas and solving of difficult problems were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Beltshazzar. Let Daniel now be summoned and he will declare the interpretation.”* Thank God for someone in the land who has a sense of history. When we know some history we are familiar with proven solutions of days gone by. This woman remembered Daniel. **13-17** *Then Daniel was brought in before the king. The king spoke and said to Daniel, “Are you that Daniel*

*who is one of the exiles from Judah, whom my father the king brought from Judah? 14 Now I have heard about you that a spirit of the gods is in you, and that illumination, insight and extraordinary wisdom have been found in you. 15 Just now the wise men and the conjurers were brought in before me that they might read this inscription and make its interpretation known to me, but they could not declare the interpretation of the message. 16 But I personally have heard about you, that you are able to give interpretations and solve difficult problems. Now if you are able to read the inscription and make its interpretation known to me, you will be clothed with purple and wear a necklace of gold around your neck, and you will have authority as the third ruler in the kingdom.”*

*17 Then Daniel answered and said before the king, “Keep your gifts for yourself or give your rewards to someone else; however, I will read the inscription to the king and make the interpretation known to him. God’s people are supposed to be motivated differently than the world. Daniel didn’t care about position, prestige and money. He was a man in Babylon, but not of Babylon. He was a different creature because he saw a different kingdom. We always live for the kingdom we see. Most folks see the kingdom of man and live for that. The Daniels of the world see and live for the kingdom of God, and in the kingdom of God there is only one ruler, gold is used for pavement and everyone is clothed with the righteousness of God. Indifferent to his reward Daniel is about to preach to the king. He is going to speak truth, but it is a hard truth that most would be too timid to tell. **18** O king, the Most High God granted sovereignty, grandeur, glory and majesty to Nebuchadnezzar your father. Remember that the word father in the Bible refers equally to grandfather and great-grandfather. **19-22** Because of the grandeur which He bestowed on him, all the peoples, nations and men of every language feared and trembled before him; whomever he wished he killed and whomever he wished he spared alive; and whomever he wished he elevated and whomever he wished he humbled. 20 But when his heart was lifted up and his spirit became so proud that he behaved arrogantly, he was deposed from his royal throne and his glory was taken away from him. 21 He was also driven away from mankind, and his heart was made like that of beasts, and his dwelling place was with the wild donkeys. He was given grass to eat like cattle, and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven until he recognized that the Most High God is ruler over the realm of mankind and that He sets over it whomever He wishes. 22 Yet you, his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, even though you knew all this. Here goes Daniel again, rebuking the king. It’s amazing he stayed out of that lion’s den as long as he did. **22-25** You, his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, even though you knew all this. 23 but you have*

*exalted yourself against the Lord of heaven; and they have brought the vessels of His house before you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines have been drinking wine from them; and you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which do not see, hear or understand. But the God in whose hand are your life-breath and all your ways, you have not glorified. 24 Then the hand was sent from Him and this inscription was written out. 25 “Now this is the inscription that was written out: ‘MENĒ, MENĒ, TEKĒL, UPHARSIN.’ Literal translation would be something like, numbered, numbered, too light, divided. **26-29** This is the interpretation of the message: ‘MENĒ’—God has numbered your kingdom and put an end to it. 27 ‘TEKĒL’—you have been weighed on the scales and found deficient. 28 ‘PERĒS’—your kingdom has been divided and given over to the Medes and Persians.” 29 Then Belshazzar gave orders, and they clothed Daniel with purple and put a necklace of gold around his neck, and issued a proclamation concerning him that he now had authority as the third ruler in the kingdom. And Daniel tolerated the ceremony. Sometimes people insist on giving us what we don’t need and don’t want. Sometimes politeness requires us to patiently endure being honored in ways that mean nothing to us. Daniel knew that being third in the kingdom was no big deal because he knew what was coming. **30-31** That same night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was slain. 31 So Darius the Mede received the kingdom at about the age of sixty-two.*

Okay, that is your story. What is the moral thereof? What can we learn from all of this? Let’s zero in on three things, three lessons from chapter 5. The first is that God treats different persons in different ways. Where does the idea come from that God treats everyone the same? We don’t treat everyone the same. The police don’t treat everyone the same. Simple observation does not incline one to think that God treats everyone the same. Where does that idea come from? It would have to come from the Bible, but you know what? The Bible doesn’t teach that either. Daniel 5 follows on the heels of Daniel 4 which was the story of how God humbled Nebuchadnezzar, of how God displayed a severe mercy in his life. Does he deal with Belshazzar in the same or in an equal way? Not at all. God spoke to Nebuchadnezzar rather gently - in a dream. With Belshazzar he scared him to death with a house of horrors type of maneuver. God spoke to Nebuchadnezzar a word of warning with an invitation to repentance. There is no invitation for Belshazzar. Daniel looked for and called for no response this time. Last time he told Nebuchadnezzar to repent. Here he does not bother with that. God dealt with Nebuchadnezzar in the way of discipline, leading to mercy. He dealt with Belshazzar in the way of punishment leading to death. Granted Belshazzar deserved it.

He was a partier, a drinker, a proud blasphemer. He toyed with the holy vessels of God's temple. But was Nebuchadnezzar really any better? Nebuchadnezzar was the one who took these items in the first place and obliterated the entire temple. It seems difficult to argue that Belshazzar was really worse than Nebuchadnezzar. I don't think he was. But God showed mercy to one and justice to the other. Why? What is the Biblical answer to that question of *why*? Why does God make men so differently, why does he treat them so differently? The Biblical answer is that God simply chooses to do so for his own inscrutable reasons. What should we do with this truth?

We have to go back this morning to Romans 9 where this question is handled by the great apostle Paul. Here he doesn't ask why God treated Nebuchadnezzar one way and Belshazzar the other. He asks why God treated Jacob one way and Esau the other. Why one son of Isaac, and the younger, received the inheritance and the calling of God while the other did not. Romans 9:**11-13** *Though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls, 12 it was said to her, "The older will serve the younger." 13 Just as it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.* And right away some of us are screaming - "that's not fair!" Paul hears you. **14** *What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be!* Does that mean God really does treat all the same? No. It just means He is never less than just with anyone. But it goes on to say **15** *For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."* If God chooses to have compassion on Nebuchadnezzar it does not mean he also has to have compassion on Belshazzar. **18** *So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.* This is the only answer God gives to why He handles different persons in different ways. With Nebuchadnezzar there was judgment, but mercy was in the foreground. With Belshazzar the opposite is true. Even the way Daniel speaks to the king is different isn't it? Remember how Daniel spoke kindly to Nebuchadnezzar? He prefaced his interpretation with honoring words and ended it with a call to repent. Before Belshazzar the prophet takes a different approach. There is no friendship here, only judgment. Daniel is the voice of God declaring condemnation on this wicked man for his pride and his idolatry. Again we see the sovereignty of God, the theme of this book, shining through in our story. God is the one raising up a king, bringing down a king, and establishing his purpose in the land. And God has the right to do it. Don't be so proud as to dispute with your maker in whose hand is your very life breath. God has

the right to and God does treat different persons in different ways. Our response to that can be hostile or worshipful. Which will you choose?

Now to our second lesson from Daniel 5. Children often fail to learn what their parents have taught them. Belshazzar was probably a grandson of Nebuchadnezzar, but look at what Daniel says to him. Reminding him of how God humbled Nebuchadnezzar, he says in 22 *Yet you, his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, even though you knew all this.* In other words, he says, “you Belshazzar are doubly guilty because you had the example and heritage of your grandfather to learn from.” Listen, if we learned the lessons of the experiences of previous generations, what would be left to learn? If we learned the lessons of history, even just those portions of history recorded in God’s book we would be the wisest of the wise and the blessed of the blessed. But so deep is the innate corruption and craziness of man that we have to relearn everything for ourselves by error and trial. This is so exasperating for parents. We figure, “Hey, if I made that stupid mistake and I tell you about it” then you should have sense enough to avoid it. But more often than not children don’t have that much sense. Grandpa Nebuchadnezzar was humiliated by God, then humbled by God. He became a worshipper of this Hebrew deity. He revered the God of Daniel. Remember the decree he issued back in Chapter 3? Daniel 3:29 *Therefore I make a decree that any people, nation or tongue that speaks anything offensive against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego shall be torn limb from limb and their houses reduced to a rubbish heap, inasmuch as there is no other god who is able to deliver in this way.*” And here we are, still within Daniel’s lifetime, and the new king of Babylon decides to have fun with the holy things of the Hebrew God. Does it surprise you how the situation could get so bad so quickly? Don’t be surprised. Read the story of the kings of Israel. Read of how righteous kings brought to pass great reforms in the land, only to be followed by wicked sons who led the people into idolatry. This can be maddening to you if you let it. Imagine how President Obama must feel. All they went through to pass Obamacare only to watch an election five years later set it up for destruction. In Ecclesiastes Solomon wrote 2:18-19 *Thus I hated all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun, for I must leave it to the man who will come after me. 19 And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the fruit of my labor for which I have labored by acting wisely under the sun. This too is vanity.*

Now, there is a lesson here for parents as well as kids. For parents we need to see that teaching our children well is a difficult but vital task. I expect that one reason righteous kings were followed

by foolish ones is that the kings were too busy ruling to train their own children properly. A long-term vision means we invest heavily into our kids. But, and here is a critical counterweight to that in our thinking, our kids will often fail to learn the lessons we teach even when we teach them well. I am not in control of, nor am I responsible for my children's adult decisions. Here is a painful fact of life. A creepy-crawly, slimy caterpillar by some remarkable power goes through a change of life and emerges as what? A lovely, fluttering butterfly with colorful wings that is more delightful in every way than that caterpillar. And our butterfly friend meets another butterfly and the two of them get married and have babies. The big day arrives, the eggs hatch and what comes out? To the dismay, if not horror, of the butterflies - what comes out of those eggs are little creepy-crawly caterpillars. They aren't pretty like their parents. They can't fly. They are stuck in the mud like mom and dad used to be. And all of the flying lessons in the world won't do them any good until what? Until they too are transformed in that same marvelous way. Parents, understand that your faith, your wisdom, your humility didn't get passed on in your DNA. All you gave your kids is their innate selfishness and pride that makes it hard for them to learn the lessons you try to teach. But you teach them anyway. You pray like crazy. Just don't be surprised or grow angry at God if some of your babies insist on learning the hard way and some don't ever learn at all.

There is also a lesson for you kids here. Listen to me this morning. Daniel said to Belshazzar that he was doubly guilty because he knew the story of his grandfather. He knew the work God had done. He had been taught the truth. And so have you. I mean, hey, if you had parents who came home at night, drank their beer and watched MTV till they passed out on the couch then maybe you would have some excuse for living in the pigsty of sin. But you don't have those kind of parents. Your parents aren't perfect, but they have taught you the way. They have placed you where you can hear and learn the truth. You know the way of life and if you, knowing what you know, if you reject the truth, then woe be to you. You children who reject the privileges and the light of the covenant will experience greater wrath for their refusal to honor God. Some of you will be haunted on the Day of Judgment by the face of your faithful mother and the face of your faithful youth pastor and Sunday School teacher who taught you the way of truth which you ignored to your own peril. It's true that kids often fail to learn what their parents teach. But you don't need to be one of them.

Let's move along now to our third major point which is this—the failure to glorify God is a damning sin. In verse 23 Daniel says *but you have exalted yourself against the Lord of heaven; and*

*they have brought the vessels of His house before you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines have been drinking wine from them; and you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which do not see, hear or understand. But the God in whose hand are your life-breath and all your ways, you have not glorified.* What is this gross sin of Belshazzar? Yes, it was idolatry. Yes, it was blasphemy. But the prophet puts his finger at the end of verse 23 on something else. We speak of sins of commission and sins of omission. We are able to sin against God not only by the things we do that we should not have, but also by the things we don't do that we should have. And here we read Belshazzar condemned for something he did not do. Daniel says, "*But the God in whose hand are your life-breath and your ways you have not glorified.*" There was a failure in Belshazzar's life to worship God. Is that a little problem or a big problem? I ask again. Is the failure to worship God a little problem or a big problem? Our society says, "That is tiny." The Bible says, "That is huge!" I don't know how many times I've heard this. "My husband is saved but he doesn't go to church." 80% of Americans say they believe you can live a fine Christian life without any regular worship with God's people. And let's face it half who do go to church really don't go there to glorify God anyway do they? We treat worship; we treat our devotion to the glory of God as something optional if we can squeeze it into our schedules. And if somebody doesn't worship God, either in private or in church we think that's no big deal. Failure to worship is really a very minor matter don't you think? God doesn't think so. Neither does the Bible allow for this popular notion of the good unbeliever, the nice non-Christian. And we all know them. They are pleasant enough. They mow their grass and care for their kids. And they may even help out a good cause now and then. We are prone to think this person is actually good. That somehow God ought to not care about their total neglect of Him. But my friend what is the first and great commandment according to Jesus? To love the Lord thy God with all your heart soul, mind and strength. And if someone isn't doing that, my friend, regardless of what else he does, he is a disobedient rebel sinner. When I had become zealous, at the age of 18, to tell my friends about Jesus I addressed my closest non-Christian buddy in a letter. This was a young man who had many great privileges in life. I remember recounting for him all that God had done for him, and my appeal to him was on this very point that in spite of it all he had failed to honor God. He wasn't a wild, drunken, inconsiderate slob but he stood in dire need of forgiveness and grace for his sins of omission. What is the chief end of man? To glorify God and enjoy Him forever. Glorifying God is the very purpose for which you were made. To suggest that someone is a good person who does not

glorify God is like saying, “It’s a good car it just doesn’t run. It’s a good boat it just won’t float. It’s a good oven, it just won’t cook the food.” Glorifying God is what we are all about! You either do that or you miserably fail! You know what you call a car that won’t run and a boat that won’t float and an oven that won’t cook? You call them junk. Do you know what you call a “Christian” who doesn’t worship? You call him *phony*. How about you? Did you sit here today and trifle with the things of God? When others around you were pouring out their souls before God in praise and devotion would you not and did you not glorify the God who holds your life in his hand? Do you see in any way at all how seriously you have sinned? Do you see the pride behind your attitude? This is where Daniel strikes at the conscience of the king. He says there is a God on whom you are so dependent that he holds your next breath in his hand. And you say you won’t worship that God?! Belshazzar went beyond that and used God’s holy things in the praise of idols. You talk about biting the hand that feeds you! The arrogance of this failure to worship! There is an offense of cosmic neglect that lays at the feet of every single person who is not devoted in life and worship to the glory of God.

That word “glory” in the Hebrew - the term *Chabod* - literally means *weightiness*. And it provides a helpful picture for us. To glorify God is to treat Him as heavy, as weighty as significant. Failure to do that is what? To take God lightly. This is precisely what Belshazzar was guilty of. He didn’t really hate God. He didn’t actually care about God. That’s where most of our world is and that is the problem. God is no big deal in our way of thinking. We trifle with him. What weighs heavy in our minds? Ourselves certainly. And after that the important people as we see them. Listen to Psalm 62:9 *Men of low degree are only vanity and men of rank are a lie; in the balances they go up; they are together lighter than breath.* God is talking here about how humans rate. Daniel 4:35a *all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing.* Daniel 5:27 *TEKEL’--you have been weighed on the scales and found deficient.* Who is the real lightweight? Belshazzar and you and men. But glory, weight, belongs to the Lord. And so we are to treat Him with great seriousness. This touches on one of my concerns for the modern church. I was talking with someone this week, a former member who has had a hard time finding a church where she now is. She says the new ones in her area are all targeting unbelievers in their Sunday services, which she doesn’t mind except that the worship there becomes airy, fluffy, Christianity lite. This is actually what many churches are trying to do - to create a fun, light-hearted or folksy atmosphere at church. They just want us to have a good ole time, and the service is an attempt to say, “Ain’t God fun!” Beware!

God is a God of joy and delight but He is a heavy, heavy God with whom you dare not trifle. He is the God who holds your life breath and he expects for you to glorify Him. The failure to do so is a damning sin.

So, how shall we then live? Will you glorify God? Will you revere Him? Will you treat Him as a big deal, not as someone to tip your hats to on Sunday? Glorifying God does require church worship, but it doesn't end there. Jesus says John 15:8 *My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.* What Jesus calls *fruit* we know from other teaching is the evidence of a righteous life, love, joy, peace, self-control. This too is how we glorify God. The key to this is in John 15:5 *I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.* Jesus says the one who glorifies God in his fruit bearing is the one who is in Him, and indwelt by Him. It is the connection to Jesus that makes it happen. Are you there this morning? Are you connected to Christ? Maybe you wonder where lies the difference between you and these people who seem genuinely excited about worshipping God. The difference is all in that relationship to Christ Jesus who is our connection to God.

If you want to be a God-glorifying man or woman that is where you start. Ask Jesus to come and fill your life, to live in you and make your life a glory to God beginning today. And for believers who long to bring more glory to God, to enjoy Him even more, then let's pray "More Lord." *More Gracious Lord.*