

THRIVING in BABYLON

A STUDY OF DANIEL

SERMON TITLE: The Handwriting on the Wall
SCRIPTURE: Daniel 5

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Sometimes life feels like it's all about survival. Sometimes it feels like all we can do is keep our head above water. This is true for everyone, but especially for followers of Jesus. As Christians, we are exiles, and that means that survival is doubly difficult. But God has not called us to survive; he has called us to thrive. And the place that God called us to thrive is in Babylon - the place of our exile. With this in view, the book of Daniel is a perfect picture for us of what it looks like to be faithful in a foreign land that isn't our home. Daniel doesn't merely survive in Babylon. Rather, with God's help, he thrives there. What would it look like for us to do the same here in Greenville?

This morning we come to another well-known story from the book of Daniel—the story of Belshazzar's feast or "The Handwriting on the Wall." ...an expression still in use today—as in—"His firing came as no surprise. The handwriting was on the wall months before." As I've been saying, there's more to these stories in the book of Daniel than just simple moral lessons. The book of Daniel is about how God's people are called to live faithfully in a culture that is hostile to their faith—to live with hope in God's faithfulness in a culture that denies, and in many ways, openly defies God and the things of God. Also, as I said last week, Daniel is about two kings, two kingdoms, and two sovereignties. It's about the Kingdom of God vs the Kingdoms of this world. On the surface, it looks like the nations of this world and their rulers are in charge—that they can do whatever they want—they can kill people, invade other countries, enslave people—control the destinies of people—make life easy or hard for people. And then there are the people of God who are citizens of God's kingdom—small, in the minority, exiled, insignificant, harassed, suffering—trampled on by nations. But again and again, the message in the Bible is that if they hold fast, if they hang in there, God will somehow turn things around; even if they suffer and die, somehow God will vindicate them and God's kingdom will one day be established on this earth as it is in heaven. That's the message we find in the book of Daniel—found in both *history* (chps 1-6) and *prophecy* (chps 7-12). And it's the message we very much need to hear today as our faith becomes more and more irrelevant and even considered dangerous by a growing majority of people—a topic we've been talking about since last January.

The passage we'll look at today tells the shocking story of a king whose arrogant disregard for God cost him and his nation everything. And it's a grim reminder that if our culture insists on continuing down this same road, then history will repeat itself in America as it has countless other times since the day Babylon fell. We shouldn't make the mistake of thinking God's patience and kindness in the face of such decadence is an indication that he doesn't care about what's going on and that he will not ultimately judge sin. Daniel 5 reminds us that God's patience has a limit and there will be a day of reckoning—a time will come when God chooses to stop showing grace—and instead—shows justice and gives people what they deserve. ...Daniel 5 covers the final night of Babylon's greatness just before God's judgment comes crashing down. It describes the closing scenes of the Babylonian empire—the transition from the *head of gold* to the *chest and arms of silver* of the great image in Nebuchadnezzar's dream that we saw in chapter 2 and from the *lion* to the *bear* of Daniel's vision in chp 7 as we'll see a couple of weeks from now.

All of which underscores again that—*The Most High God rules the kingdoms of men* and that he is very much in charge of politics and governments. *God IS in control of who is in control* even though sometimes, things might seem to us to be out of control.

One important thing to remember is that the events of chp 5 take place after the visions/dreams of chps 7 & 8. These two chapters (along with chp 2) reveal how Babylon will fall to the Medes and Persians, which is the very message Daniel will deliver to "king" Belshazzar (he's actually the crown prince. His father, Nabonidus, was the real king. *Hear the message for more details.*).

The armies of the Medes and Persians have already defeated Nabonidus and now their armies have laid siege to the capital city of Babylon. Believing that Babylon was invincible and in pure contempt of the surrounding armies, Belshazzar throws a wild party to reinforce the idea that he and the gods of Babylon are superior to the kings and gods of other nations. To

drive that point home, he calls for the sacred goblets that had been taken out of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem so that he and his wives and concubines and royal officials could drink from them. This was not just contempt; this was arrogant blasphemy. Basically, he was spitting in the face of Yahweh, the God of Israel.

Immediately, the fingers of a human hand appeared and scratched an eerie message on the wall. It scared the king to death and he "turned a whiter shade of pale." He called for all his wise men to come, so they could interpret the meaning, but when they arrived, they had no idea what it meant. The queen mother (probably Nebuchadnezzar's widow) showed up and told her grandson about Daniel. She assured him that Daniel would be able to read and interpret the mysterious writing. So in comes Daniel. He's about 80 yrs old now and has been working behind the scenes for over 20 years. Belshazzar addresses him with contempt—"you are one of the exiles from Judah that my father (actually, forefather/grandfather) brought here." He promises Daniel all the rewards he had promised the others, but Daniel is not interested in his gifts. Nevertheless, Daniel does interpret God's message for the king. He's quite harsh in how he speaks to Belshazzar which is a bit out of character from what we know of Daniel. Daniel says, "Your days have been numbered and time is up. You have been weighed in God's scales and you've come up short. Your kingdom will be divided from you and given to the Medes and Persians. And that very night, it happened just as God, through Daniel, had said.

So, what does this story teach people in exile? How does Daniel 5 encourage faithfulness to God? How does it instill hope for people who are waiting on God to do something about all the evil we see in the world? The story of the handwriting on the wall in Dan5 is the fulfillment of prophecy that both Jeremiah and Isaiah spoke of years before. The fall of Babylon occurred approximately 50 years after the prophet Jeremiah's ministry ended. ...At the very end of the book of Jeremiah, chp 59:60, "Jeremiah had written on a scroll about all the disasters that would come upon Babylon; all that had been recorded concerning Babylon." Jeremiah's prophecies concerning Babylon extend way beyond the time of Daniel, but they are surprisingly specific about what happened here in Dan5. Just a few verses before this statement in v60—we read in vv54-57...⁵⁴ "The sound of a cry comes from Babylon, the sound of great destruction from the land of the Babylonians."⁵⁵ The Lord will destroy Babylon; he will silence her noisy din. Waves of enemies will rage like great waters; the roar of their voices will resound.⁵⁶ A destroyer will come against Babylon; her warriors will be captured, and their bows will be broken. For the Lord is a God of retribution; he will repay in full.⁵⁷ I will make her officials and wise men *drunk*, her governors, officers and warriors as well; they will sleep forever and not awake," declares the King, whose name is the Lord Almighty.

Pretty specific don't you think? 50 years before the Handwriting on the Wall! But that's not all. Babylon fell approximately 150 years after the prophet Isaiah's ministry. As with Jeremiah, Isaiah's prophecies about Babylon extend way beyond the time of Daniel, but they are just as specific. In Isaiah 13:1—we're told that—"Isaiah son of Amoz received this message concerning the destruction of Babylon"—then down in v17—"Look, I will stir up the Medes against Babylon." And over in 21:2—"Go ahead, you Elamites and Medes, attack and lay siege. I will make an end to all the groaning Babylon caused"—v5—"Look! They are preparing a great feast. They are spreading rugs for people to sit on. Everyone is eating and drinking. But quick! Grab your shields and prepare for battle. You are being attacked!" *See it?* The fall of Babylon was predicted by no less than three of God's prophets—*Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel*—over a span of at least 150 years.

What does that tell you about the sovereignty of God? How does that encourage you to be faithful in exile today? How does it give you hope that God will be both merciful and just in dealing with the evil we see in the world today?

Discussion Starters — Take time to read all the way through Daniel 5—Ask different people to read 5 or 6 verses at a time.

1. For those of you who were raised in the church, what do you remember about this story? ...If someone had asked you what this story was all about *before* you heard the message today what would you have said?
2. Why did Belshazzar throw a wild party on that particular night? What was going on outside the walls of Babylon?
3. Why did Belshazzar call for the sacred vessels used in Temple worship back in Jerusalem to be brought to the party? Did he just run out of cups for wine or was there more going on?
4. As Charlie said, there's more to this story than a moral lesson on pride. What is the big take-away from this story?
5. How do the prophecies of Jeremiah and Isaiah help us understand how to apply this stories to our life in modern-day Babylon today? (Read Jeremiah 59:60, then go back and read 59:54-57) and then read the prophecies of Isaiah 13—read 13:1 then skip over and read 21:2 then read v5).
6. Think about what you see and hear on the evening news, talk radio, on TV shows—How does this story help you stay calm when it seems like things are spinning out of control?
7. How does what you learned from this story help you share with others when they are anxious, worried, and frantic about what's going on in our world today?