

THE LIMITATION OF EARTHLY POWERS 'THE WRITING ON THE WALL'

We're back again in the book of Daniel after a week's break from our series. Let's remind ourselves of what's happened so far. The people of Judah had rebelled against the Lord for so long that He'd finally brought judgement upon them in the form of the main world power of the time – the Babylonian empire. Their king, Nebuchadnezzar, attacked in 597BC and took Jerusalem. He stripped the temple of its treasure and then the country of all its best talent, taking into captivity/service the well-bred, intelligent, good-looking young men. Included in this forcible recruitment programme were four young men (probably teenagers) who wanted to stay true to the Lord, even in Babylon – their names were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah.

The first test, in Chapter 1, was the special royal diet Nebuchadnezzar prescribed for them which would have led to their defilement, so they held out against it and God blessed them for their faithfulness so much that all the other recruits were made to eat their diet. And they were the most impressive students when they came to graduate/be examined by the king – David being especially gifted in the interpretation of dreams and visions.

The next crisis happened in Chapter 2 where Nebuchadnezzar has a disturbing dream and wants the wise men to both tell him what it was and then interpret it. When no one can do this impossibility, Nebuchadnezzar is angry and decides to execute all the wise men, including the four friends. But they pray and Daniel is given a vision of the dream and its interpretation.

It's a huge statue with a head of gold, chest and arms of silver, belly and thighs of bronze, legs of iron and feet partly of iron and partly of clay. A rock, not cut by human hand, comes and smashes the statue to little pieces and then grows to fill the whole earth. The interpretation is of successive kingdoms eventually being replaced by the kingdom of God. Nebuchadnezzar is so impressed with what Daniel delivers that he calls Daniel's God "the God of gods and the Lord of Kings and a revealer of mysteries."

Buoyed by the interpretation that he is the head of gold perhaps, Nebuchadnezzar decides to erect a huge image of gold and get everyone to worship it with the penalty for disobedience to be burnt alive. But Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah won't worship and are denounced. Despite all Nebuchadnezzar's threats, they are defiant, preferring to submit their fate to "our God whom we serve". And to everyone's astonishment, they are delivered without a sin. The only things burnt are their bonds. The result is that Nebuchadnezzar promotes them and sees that "no other God can deliver in this way". No one is to say anything against the God of Israel on pain of death.

But God is not finished with Nebuchadnezzar because he is still proud and not personally submitted to the true God. Nebuchadnezzar has another dream, interpreted by Daniel, that means he will go mad for a time and be removed from the throne. Only when Nebuchadnezzar praises the "Most High" and honours and glorifies Him is his sanity and rule restored. Nebuchadnezzar's conclusion to Chapter 4 is as follows:

Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of Heaven because everything He does is right and all His ways are just. And those who walk in pride He is able to humble.

And that's the last we hear from Nebuchadnezzar who, we know from history, died in 562BC. He is succeeded by a usurper, Nabonidus, whose son Belshazzar, (which means "Bel protect the king") is viceroy when his father is away from Babylon on empire business. This is the situation in Chapter 5, which we'll now read.

"King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for one thousand of his nobles and drank wine with them. 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. So they brought the gold goblets that had been taken from the temple of God in Jerusalem, and the king and the nobles, his wives and his concubines drank from them. As they drank the wine, they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone.

Suddenly, the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall, near the lamp-stand in the royal palace. The king watched the hand as it wrote. His face turned pale and he was so frightened, his knees knocked together and his legs gave way.

The king called out for all the enchanters, astrologers and diviners to be brought, and 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."

Then all the king's wise men came in but they could not read the writing or tell the king what it meant. So, King Belshazzar became more terrified and his face grew more pale. His nobles were baffled.

The queen, hearing the voice of the king and his nobles, came into the banquet hall. "O King, live forever!" she said, "Don't be alarmed! Don't look so pale! 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. King Nebuchadnezzar, your father – your father, the king, I say – appointed him chief of the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners. This man Daniel, whom the king called Belshazzar, 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.

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? I have heard that the spirit of the gods is in you and that you have insight, intelligence and outstanding wisdom. 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. 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.

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."

"O, King, the Most High God gave your father Nebuchadnezzar sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendour. Because of the high position He gave him, all the peoples and nations and men 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. But when his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory. He was driven away from people and given the mind of an animal; he lived with the wild donkeys and ate the grass like cattle; and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven until he acknowledged that the Most High God is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and sets over them anyone He wishes.”

“But you his son, O Belshazzar, have not humbled yourself although you knew all this. 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 honour the God who holds in His hand your life and all your ways. Therefore, He sent the hand that wrote the inscription. This is the inscription that was written: ‘MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN.’

This is what the words mean:-

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

TEKEL: You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting.

PARSIN (PERES): Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.’

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. That very night, Belshazzar, King of the Babylonians, was slain and Darius the Mede, took over the kingdom at the age of 62.

Although the Bible doesn’t tell us, the year is 539BC. The Babylonian empire is beginning to fail and the Persian army of King Cyrus is approaching the city of Babylon. Babylon is still a strong city, although other places have fallen to the Persians – remember, you could ride a chariot around the top of its walls. It had huge, bronze gates and so on.

We don’t know why Belshazzar has his feast – is it an act of bravado or a last desperate celebration? And he demands the holy drinking vessels, taken by Nebuchadnezzar from the temple of Jerusalem, so they can all drink from them and worship all the false gods (and look to them for deliverance from the Persians). And as they drink from the forbidden objects, a hand appears and writes on the wall near the main lamp-stand. Belshazzar sees and is struck with dread, but he wants to know what is written and its meaning. None of the Babylonian wise men have a clue, but the queen (Nebuchadnezzar’s widow?) comes in and reminds Belshazzar of Daniel and his extraordinary wisdom and skill.

So Daniel is summoned, rejects Belshazzar’s offer of reward, but reads the inscription and interprets it.

MENE – a numbering

TEKEL – a weighing

PERES – a dividing.

The words seem to be three measures, but Daniel shows Belshazzar in no uncertain words that the writing foretells his doom and the destruction of the Babylonian

empire. He contrasts Belshazzar's arrogance and rejection of the true God with Nebuchadnezzar's gradual acceptance and submission to Him.

That night, the Persians enter Babylon and execute Belshazzar – there is a story that they got in by lowering the level of the Euphrates River and coming through the water gate.

And so the invasion of the people of God and His kingdom of the Babylonian empire is complete. The head of gold is replaced by the chest and arms of silver in Nebuchadnezzar's first dream. I told you when I first spoke on Daniel 1, that Nebuchadnezzar thought he was invading and conquering Judah, whereas in reality, he was just the instrument of God's judgement and God was invading Babylon and putting the cream of His people there for His own purpose. Babylon would be judged in turn in due course, but the Lord had business with Nebuchadnezzar, who was His unknowing servant, but by the end of Chapter 4, has acknowledged the Lord and worshipped Him. When Nebuchadnezzar dies, the empire is taken over by others who do not acknowledge the one true God, despite knowing Nebuchadnezzar's story and so bring about God's judgement, the final act being the sacrilege of defiling the temple treasures in an act of defiance against Him. And so, Babylon perishes.

You see, all earthly kingdoms are under the Lord's control and all will ultimately fail. The most important object in Nebuchadnezzar's first dream is not the fabulous statue, but rather the stone that destroys it – this is the Kingdom of God, which replaces all earthly kingdoms and will grow to fill the whole world. Exciting, isn't it? This is the Kingdom we're part of - nothing can stand against it (even the gates of Hell, Mt. 16:18).

But there is another lesson here and it's a more personal one. The writing on the wall didn't just refer to Babylon – it was very personal to Belshazzar. For all of us, there will be a reckoning and for those who do not acknowledge Jesus as Lord, there will be a "writing on the wall". Jesus told a parable in Luke 12:16-21, about a man who stored up things for himself, but was not rich towards God. As he gloated over the riches of his harvest, with no acknowledgement of the God who provided it for him, God called him a fool and his life was taken that night. If today, you haven't acknowledged the Lord Jesus and His claim on your life, accepted His gift of grace (undeserved favour) of complete forgiveness and eternal life, then all too soon, you too will face the writing on the wall. Your little kingdom of your life will be torn from you and only judgment will remain.

How long will you resist the Most High? The God of Heaven has made a way, but you need to acknowledge Him and take Him as Lord and Saviour.

Let's pray.