**Believers in Babylon Series**

**“The Writing is on the Wall”**

**Daniel 5.1-31**

**Preaching Prelude**

Our current series is entitled “Believers in Babylon – living as exiles is a strange land.” As believers in Christ we must remember that this world is not our home. (Heb.13.14) We are foreigners and strangers living in exile. (IPt.1.1a, 2.11) In this series we are looking at the book of Daniel, as a divine manual that gives us insights on how to live as exiles in our own Babylon.

Today we come to Daniel chapter five where the great Babylon will fall in defeat to the Persians. As I have shared last week, Babylon is woven throughout the pages of Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, and is used symbolically as the kingdom of this world that is in rebellion to God. (Gen.11.2-4; Dan.1.1-2; IPt.1.1a, 2.11, 5.13; Rev.17-18)

The book of Revelation, Babylon is seen as the Great Harlot that promotes immortality and sensuality in this world. And even if it looks like the world is winning the Bible tells us that there will be a day when the Lord will defeat Babylon, overcome the kingdom of this world, because He is the Lord of lords and the King of kings. (Rev.17.14)

As the Apostle John saw Babylon destroyed he heard an angel cry out with a mighty voice, saying, “*Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!*” (Rev.18.2) And after that John heard a roar of the great multitude in heaven shouting, *“Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are His judgments.”* (19.1-2a) Then John heard the sound of a great multitude shouting, *“Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give Him glory!”* (Rev.19.6-7a)

This morning I want to use the words found in the book of Revelation to call us to worship as we seek the Lord to overcome our own Babylon.

**Call to Worship**

“*Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!* *Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are His judgments. Hallelujah! For our Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give Him glory!”*

(Rev.18.2, 19.1-2a, 6-7a)

Let us worship God.

**Reading of Scripture**

*King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine with them.****2****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.****3****So they brought in the gold goblets that had been taken from the temple of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines drank from them.****4****As they drank the wine, they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone.*

***5****Suddenly the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall, near the lampstand in the royal palace. The king watched the hand as it wrote.****6****His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his legs became weak and his knees were knocking.*

***7****The king summoned the enchanters, astrologers and diviners. Then he 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.”* ***8****Then all the king’s wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or tell the king what it meant.****9****So King Belshazzar became even more terrified and his face grew more pale. His nobles were baffled.*

***10****The queen, hearing the voices of the king and his nobles, came into the banquet hall. “May the king live forever!” she said. “Don’t be alarmed! Don’t look so pale!****11****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. Your father, King Nebuchadnezzar, appointed him chief of the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners.****12****He did this because Daniel, whom the king called Belteshazzar, 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.”*

***13****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?****14****I have heard that the spirit of the gods is in you and that you have insight, intelligence and outstanding wisdom.****15****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.****16****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.”*

***17****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.* ***18****“Your Majesty, the Most High God gave your father Nebuchadnezzar sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendor.****19****Because of the high position he gave him, all the nations and peoples 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.****20****But when his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory.****21****He was driven away from people and given the mind of an animal; he lived with the wild donkeys and ate grass like the ox; and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, until he acknowledged that the Most High God is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and sets over them anyone he wishes.*

***22****“But you, Belshazzar, his son, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this.****23****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 honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways.****24****Therefore he sent the hand that wrote the inscription.*

***25****“This is the inscription that was written: mene, mene, tekel, parsin* ***26****“Here is what these words mean: Mene: God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end.* ***27****Tekel: You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting.****28****Peres: Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.”*

***29****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.*

***30****That very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain,****31****and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom, at the age of sixty-two.*

**Introduction**

Nearly twenty-five years have passed since the events of chapter four and over seventy years since the events of chapter one. Daniel is a senior statesman in Babylon and has outlasted most of his contemporaries, even Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar has been dead for about 20 years and since his death there has been a series of monarchs that succeeded him on the throne. All of these rulers of Babylon either die prematurely or were assassinated. The succession of power led to Nebuchadnezzar’s son, Nabonidus, becoming king, and Nabonidus’s son, Belshazzar, serving as second in power. Chapter five references Nebuchadnezzar as Belshazzar’s father four times but this should be understood as the “father of the nation” or the leading patriarch of the family. (5.2, 11, 13, 18)

By the time of Daniel chapter five the Persians, under the reign of Cyrus, were attacking the surrounding provinces of Babylonia.



Remember that Daniel in his interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s statue in chapter two told Nebuchadnezzar that another kingdom, inferior to Babylonia, would rise and rule the earth. (2.39) And now the kingdom of silver has arrived on the world stage, the Persian Empire.

Remember that even though the Bible is in concert with world history, the main objective of Scripture is to record history as it relates to the redemptive purposes of God. So God’s Word records world history though the lens of redemptive history. But secular history fills in the detail that is useful to understand the full story.

In this case, secular history records that the current king of Babylon, King Nabonidus, went out to defend the Babylonian Empire from the Persian’s assault and left his son, Belshazzar, in charge of the capital city. The Persians defeated Nabonidus’ army; Nabonidus was captured and held as a prisoner of war for the rest of his life.

With the all provinces and the territory surrounding the capital city conquered, only the city Babylon with its massive walls and fortifications remained. Cyrus advanced the Persian army and surrounded the great city of Babylon. Babylon was not just a beautiful city for those inside its walls. It was a formable fortress for those outside its walls. Babylon was about fourteen square miles, with great outer walls eighty-seven feet thick and three hundred and fifty feet high. Even President Trump would say that is excessive. The walls were designed with an inner wall and an outer wall with a water moat in-between making the city very secure. There were hundreds of towers reaching one hundred feet into the sky that would make anyone who did get over the walls easy targets. The great Euphrates River flowed through the middle of the city providing a continual source of fresh water for its gardens, streams, livestock, and citizens. Where the river entered and exited the city Nebuchadnezzar designed a water gate that allowed the water to flow but prohibited intruders from swimming into Babylon.

Trust me all of this information will be helpful later.

Inside the security of the city *King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine with them.* (5.1)



You might think it was strange that the king would be hosting a party for one thousand people while the Persian army was just outside of the city walls but this shows their confidence in the city’s security. For generations the Babylonians had been told that Babylon could not be conquered and these nobles believe what they had been taught. Too often those who have put their trust in Babylon, the kingdom of this world, seek God’s wisdom too late. They put their trust in their own sufficiency, adopt the standards of this age, and reject the pursuit of God’s wisdom found in His Word. Instead of seeking the truth of God from the pages of Scriptures they listen to the voices of Babylon. And that is what is happening here in chapter five.

The storehouses of Babylon would have plenty supplies to provide foods and supplies for years. So throwing a party, especially for dignitaries, was good for moral. Belshazzar would use the feast to reinforce his place as ruler, to reassure his top officials that the city was secure, and to remind the people of the great gods of Babylon. But just like the prisoners Alcatraz could hear the New Years Eve party from the banks of San Francisco Bay, the Persian army could hear the Babylonians partying inside their fortified city and their anger grew hot.

With dinner served the wine began flowing freely and everyone was feeling petty good as one toast after another was hoisted to their city, their country, and their gods. Their intoxication caused them to feel invincible. Then *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.*(5.2)

**The Mockery of God**

Remember, chapter one told us that after Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem he brought vessels from the temple to Babylon. (1.2) These sacred goblets had been under lock and key for over seventy years but now this “second rate king” orders them to be used as common utensils to serve more wine his guest. *As they drank the wine, they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone.* (5.4)

Let me make a few of points so that we can understand severity of this mockery.

Belshazzar’s mockery stems from his defiance to surrender his life to the Lord of Heaven. This is exactly what Daniel tells him in the first part of verse twenty-three, “*you have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven.”* (5.23a) Those who trust in Babylon have a false sense of pride and self-security that deceives them to set themselves up against the Lord of Heaven. They will not surrender to the Lord of Heaven. This is why God sends His messengers saying, “*Repent, save yourself from this perverse generation*.” (Acts2.38-40) The call of God is to save your self from the destruction of Babylon by the mercies of God in Christ. If you do not surrender to the Lord of Heaven you are destined for destruction.

Belshazzar mocks the Most High God that his grandfather, Nebuchadnezzar, had honored in the later years of his life. (4.1-37) Daniel states that Belshazzar knew all the details of his grandfather’s conversion. Well, of course he did. The whole empire knew about Nebuchadnezzar’s conversion. He had sent a written testimony to the entire empire telling about his conversion experience. (Dan.4.1-37) But instead of following his grandfather’s example Belshazzar mocks the Lord of Heaven. (5.18-21; esp.22) Instead of humbling himself before the God who held his life in His hand, Belshazzar stood in defiance and would not bend his knee. It is interesting to note that when Belshazzar witnesses the hand of God writing on the wall that the text reads *that his legs became weak and his knees were knocking.* (5.6) Isn’t it ironic that the king who would not bow his knee to God lost control of the lower part of his body and all strength from his legs? The point is that eventually every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, so why not do it today before its too late.” (Phil.2.10-11)

Belshazzar’s mockery is visualized by having the temple goblets brought into the feast where everyone was drinking wine from them as an act of praise to their *gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or understand.*(5.23b) *Professing to be wise,* these nobles *became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.**They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.* (Rom.1.22, 24)

To understand the severity of this mockery you must understand that God had ordained the temple in Jerusalem, its furniture, utensils, sacrifices, and offerings for worship that pointed to Christ’s redeeming sacrifice. (2Sam.7.12) Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the temple and everything in it! (Mt.12.6; Jn.2.19-22) So when Belshazzar orders the wine to be served from these goblets he is mocking God’s redemption through Christ. Belshazzar is trampling underfoot the Son of God. He is treating God’s redemption as an unholy thing. He is insulting the Spirit of grace. And God’s Word warns that those would mock God’s grace will receive a severe punishment. (Heb.10.29)

Belshazzar mocked the Lord of Heaven by treating God’s holy redemption like something common – everyday – nothing special. He mocked the incorruptible God by praising corruptible things as being superior. He mocked God by showing contempt towards the One who held his life in His hands. Brothers and sisters *do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap.* (Gal.6.7)

*Suddenly the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall, near the lampstand in the royal palace. The king watched the hand as it wrote. His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his legs became weak and his knees were knocking.* (5.5-6)

**The Man’s Hand**

As this drunken mockery was going on, the fingers of a man’s hand appeared and wrote on the plaster wall. The great feast was being held in a great hall large even to host a thousand guests and torches, like our “tiki torches”, illuminated the hall. These torches would only produce partial light so lampstands would be positioned in areas of greater importance, like near the king.



But the writing on the wall was like a neon sign glaring into the dimly lit hall so that everyone could see it. The whole experience frightened Belshazzar so badly that he had symptoms similar to a heart attack. The king wastes no time and immediately summoned his wise men. *“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.”* (5.7) *But they could not read the writing or tell the king what it meant.* (5.8b)

The man’s hand wrote three words probably in Aramaic, which would only have consonants with no vowels. Now, any of you who are a fan of Wheel of Fortune know how important it is to buy vowels. I can hear Pat Sajak encouraging Belshazzar and his wise men to “buy a vowel.” Or like Barbara and I yelling at the TV “buy a vowel!” “Buy a vowel!”

Even though the words were illumined like a neon sign, the king and his wise men needed the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Illumination is the ability the Holy Spirit gives to believers to understand and embrace the Word of God. Even if they had the vowels they still could not have interpreted the words because they needed the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Illumination is simply God “turning on the lights” so that we can understand His Word. Remember how it was before you were a Christian when you would read the Bible and how it just didn’t make any sense. The reason why it was like that is because before Christ entered our lives we were blind to God’s Word. We were darkened in our understanding. (Eph.4.18) We could read the words but we couldn’t understand what the words meant. But then by the grace of God the Holy Spirit turns on the lights and we could read and understand the Word of God. (ICor.2.10-16) The eyes of our hearts have been enlightened. (Eph.1.18) Praise be to God!

The inability of the wise men to understand the inscription caused the king to become even more alarmed, his face grew even paler, and everyone in the great hall were greatly perplexed. (5.9) And then queen enters the room. This is Nebuchadnezzar’s widow and Belshazzar’s grandmother. She wasn’t in attendance of the great feast probably due to her age. Someone must have run to get here in fear that Belshazzar was dying. As she enters the great hall she offers calming words and basically tells her grandson to sober up. She reminds him about Daniel and how his God given gifts of illumination, insights, and wisdom. (5.10-12) She encourages Belshazzar to summons Daniel because of his *ability to interpret dreams, explain riddles, and solve difficult problems.*

Daniel was brought before the king and his guest. Daniel was an elder statesman probably in his eighties. Belshazzar is probably taken back at this old man was the guy his grandmother was talking about so he make sure that Daniel was the right guy. (5.13-14) Age discrimination! With Daniel’s identification confirmed, Belshazzar explains what had happen and offers Daniel the same reward as he did to his wise men if he can give the interpretation of the handwriting on the wall. (5.15-16)

As Daniel walked into the banquet hall the words on the wall were glaring down. He knew immediately what the words meant. Notice that Daniel didn’t begin with the customary greetings, “*O king, live forever*,” because he knew that Belshazzar’s hours were short. Daniel knew that the king would definitely not live forever or evem a short time. Daniel told Belshazzar to keep his gifts and he would interpret the words on the wall. (5.17) After condemning Belshazzar for the mockery of his grandfather’s throne and the mockery of his grandfather’s God, Daniel gives the king the message from God. (5.18-23)

**The Message from God**

Daniel first explains to Belshazzar and everyone in the hall that the hand that wrote these words was sent from the God that his grandfather worshipped. (5.24) Then Daniel says, *“This is the inscription that was written: mene, mene, tekel, parsin.”* (5.25) Then Daniel gets speaks directly to Belshazzar, *“Here is what these 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. Peres: Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.”* (5.26-28)

God’s message to the king was clear and direct. God has brought his reign to an end. He has been found deficient. And his kingdom will be given to the Persians. God’s message to Belshazzar is actually God’s message to each one of us. God has numbered our days and one day our reign on earth will end. Each of us is deficient because our lives don’t measure up to God’s standards. And our individual kingdoms will be one day be given over to another. Since we know these things, what type of people should we be? Are we going to be a people who live in the deception of Babylon, destined for destruction? Or are we going to be a people living for the glory of Christ’s kingdom, longing for a better country—a heavenly one, looking for the city whose architect and builder is God? (Heb.11.10, 16)

Having heard God’s message Belshazzar commanded that Daniel be clothed in purple, *a gold chain was placed around his neck, and he was proclaimed the third highest ruler in the kingdom.* (5.29) The king’s response indicates he believed Daniel’s interpretation was true. But his response mirrors his life. Sadly, he comes up short and doesn’t take God’s message as an opportunity to repent. Listen, the Lord has been patient towards you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. Don’t squander the message from God. Repent and believe upon the Gospel for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. (Mk.1.15; Rom.1.16)

But Belshazzar stood firm in his defiance towards God and *that very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain, and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom, at the age of sixty-two.* (5.30-31)

As happily as chapter four ended with Nebuchadnezzar’s conversion and praises to the Most High God, chapter five ends in darkness, death, and destruction. That very night the king’s time had ran out and the writing on the wall was fulfilled. That very night Belshazzar was killed, and Cyrus, the King of Persia, appointed Darius the Mede to govern the kingdom of Babylon.

**The Method of Attack**

Secular history fills in the detail of how the Persians finally enter Babylon. According to ancient historians Cyrus was frustrated by the inability to attack Babylon because of its walls. Cyrus knew that the Babylonians had laid up provisions for many years and he had already waited outside the fortress city for a long time. So he came up with a plan. He stationed the bulk of his army near the water gate where the Euphrates River enter Babylon, and stationed another division of soldiers where the river exited the city.

Cyrus ordered his soldiers to enter the city as soon as the river became shallow enough to pass under the water gate. Then he marched the rest of his army up the river until he came to a spot where there was an existing swamp.

"Cyrus then dug a trench and diverted the flow of the Euphrates River into the new channel which led to an existing swamp. The level of the river then dropped to such a level that it became like a stream. His army was then able to take the city by marching through the shallow waters  . . . The Babylonians at the time were celebrating intensely at a feast to one of their gods and they were taken totally by surprise." (Herodotus)

The attack by the Persians was brutal. Maybe their vicious attack was venting their frustration after waiting for such a long time outside those fortified walls listening to those Babylonians partying. We don’t know why but the Prophet Isaiah gives a prophecy describing the attack upon Babylon that night.

*Behold, I am going to stir up the Medes against them, who will not value silver or take pleasure in gold. And their bows will mow down the young men, they will not even have compassion on the fruit of the womb, nor will their eye pity children. And Babylon, the beauty of kingdoms, the glory of the Chaldeans’ pride, will be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah.* (Is.13.17-19)

**Closing Thoughts**

We do not have the gift of revelation like Daniel. And we have never experienced a divine act like the writing on the wall. But God has revealed His Word and has written it down in the pages of Scripture. Figuratively speaking, God has written on the wall of His Word and we should be quick to humble ourselves, listen to His Word, and obey His commands. Even though we might not know the exact day or hour the Lord will come or call us home, we know by His Word that day will come. Those who dwell in Babylon will say, “Peace and Safety” but destruction will come on those who sit in darkness, blind to the Word of God. But those in Christ whose the eyes of their hearts have been enlightened, should be alert and sober, having confidence in the hope of His calling, and the riches of the glory of His inheritance. (IThes.5.1-6, Eph.1.18) What I am saying is the writing in on the wall. Babylon is going to fall. Surrender your life to Christ today before its too late. One day we will hear an angel cry out with a loud voice, “*Fallen, Fallen is Babylon the great!*” (Rev.18.2a) So today let all those who are in Christ shout with a loud voice, *“The Lord our God the Almighty reigns.* *Let us rejoice and be glad and give Him glory!”* (Rev.19.6b-7)

**Call to Prayer**

*I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints,**and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe.*(Eph.1.18-19)