

Heeding the Warning

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Date: 17 May 2026

Preacher: Jono Vickers

[0 : 00] Alright, good morning everyone. It's my pleasure to bring God's word to us again this morning. We're going to be reading from Daniel chapter 5, so grab your Bibles.! If you have a visitor's Bible, it'll be on page 742.

And like with most of the chapters in Daniel so far, it's a very exciting story. Alright, Daniel chapter 5.

That the king and his lords, his wives and his concubines might drink from them. Then they brought in the golden vessels that had been taken out of the temple, the house of God in Jerusalem.

And the king and his lords, his wives and his concubines drank from them. They drank wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood and stone. Immediately, the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace, opposite the lampstand.

And the king saw the hand as it wrote. Then the king's color changed, and his thoughts alarmed him. His limbs gave way and his knees knocked together.

[1 : 40] The king called loudly to bring in the enchanters, the Chaldeans and the astrologers. The king declared to the wise men of Babylon, Whoever reads this writing and shows me its interpretation shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around his neck, and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom.

Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or make known to the king the interpretation. Then King Belshazzar was greatly alarmed, and his color changed, and his lords were perplexed.

The queen, because of the words of the king and his lords, came into the banqueting hall, And the queen declared, O king, live forever.

Let not your thoughts alarm you or your color change. There is a man in your kingdom, and whom is the spirit of the holy gods. In the days of your father, light and understanding and wisdom, like the wisdom of the gods, were found in him.

And King Nebuchadnezzar, your father, your father the king, made him chief of the magicians, enchanters, Chaldeans and astrologers, because an excellent spirit, knowledge and understanding to interpret dreams, explain riddles and solve problems, were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Belteshazzar.

[3 : 00] Now let Daniel be called, and he will show the interpretation. Then Daniel was brought in before the king.

The king answered and said to Daniel, You are that Daniel, one of the exiles of Judah, whom the king my father brought from Judah. I've heard of you that the spirit of the gods is in you, and that light and understanding and excellent wisdom are found in you.

Now the wise men, the enchanters, have been brought in before me to read this writing and make known to me its interpretation. But they could not show the interpretation of the matter.

But I've heard that you can give interpretations and solve problems. Now if you can read the writing and make known to me its interpretation, you shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around your neck and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom.

Then Daniel answered and said before the king, Let your gifts be for yourself, and give your rewards to another.

[4 : 09] Nevertheless, I will read the writing to the king and make known to him the interpretation. O king, the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar, your father, kingship and greatness and glory and majesty.

And because of the greatness that he gave him, all peoples, nations and languages trembled and feared before him. Whom he would, he killed. And whom he would, he kept alive.

Whom he would, he raised up. And whom he would, he humbled. But when his heart was lifted up and his spirit was hardened so that he dealt proudly, he was brought down from his kingly throne, and his glory was taken from him.

He was driven from among the children of mankind, and his mind was made like that of a beast, and his dwelling was with the wild donkeys. He was fed grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, until he knew that the Most High God rules the kingdom of mankind, and sets over it whom he will.

And you, his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this, but you have lifted up yourself against the Lord of heaven. And the vessels of his house have been brought in before you, and you and your lords, your wives, and your concubines have drunk wine from them.

[5 : 36] And you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which do not see or hear or know. But the God in whose hand is your breath, and whose are all your ways, you have not honored.

Then from his presence the hand was sent, and this writing was inscribed. And this is the writing that was inscribed. Mene, Mene, Tekel, and Parsin.

This is the interpretation of the matter. Mene, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end. Tekel, you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting.

Perez, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians. Then Belshazzar gave the command, and Daniel was clothed with purple.

A chain of gold was put around his neck, and a proclamation was made about him that he should be the third ruler in the kingdom. That very night, Belshazzar, the Chaldean king, was killed.

[6 : 47] And Darius, the Mede, received the kingdom, being about 62 years old. All right, let's pray together. Heavenly Father, please help us to trust and obey your word to us this morning.

Please work powerfully in us to transform us to be like Jesus. And please help me to speak with clarity, wisdom, and humility. Amen. Amen. Now, it might seem a bit rude, but the question that I want to ask you this morning is this.

Did you learn from last week's sermon? Were you paying attention? And if so, did you learn the lesson? And just to be clear, I'm not asking because I think you're stubborn or forgetful or anything like that.

I'm not trying to launch an attack. But it's actually Daniel who is asking this question. He's putting this question before us this morning. Did we learn the lesson from last week?

In verse 21, which we just read, Daniel's punchline is exactly the refrain that ran all the way through our previous chapter, chapter 4. So if you look in verse 21, it says, And that was the lesson.

[8 : 12] God rules over the kingdoms of the earth, and he personally appoints every kind of authority. And we learned as well that eventually he will set over it the lowliest of men, if you remember.

None can stay his hand, and it's no place of man to judge or resist God. That's the kind of arrogance that makes us unfit, we learned, to rule alongside Jesus in the eternal kingdom God is setting up.

Think of the stone in chapter 2. Jesus has been appointed to rule over the kingdom of men forever, and only the lowly will rule with him.

Jesus says, Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. There's kind of an apocryphal story where a pastor preached a great sermon one Sunday, and then returned the next week and preached the exact same sermon to his congregation.

And when the elders asked him why, he basically said, Oh, well, based on your kind of conduct, I didn't assume you'd heard it before. And that's the kind of thing we're looking at here.

[9 : 20] I'm not trying to offend anybody. I think you're great. But the story before us is really about a man who ignored the lessons of his father. And as a result, we have the privilege of hearing it again.

So, as we get into chapter 5, I just want to quickly highlight Nebuchadnezzar's last words from chapter 4, from verse 37. He says, Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just, and those who walk in pride he is able to humble.

Okay, so the date is October the 12th, 539 B.C. And this is the last night of the Babylonian Empire. King Belshazzar, as we just read, would die this very night at the hands of the Medes and Persians, who, as history tells us, practically waltzed in and took the city without facing much resistance. And Daniel tells us that this same night, hours before his kingdom would end, King Belshazzar made a great feast for a thousand of his lords and drank wine in front of the thousand. So, what was prosperous ease in chapter 4 has now turned into kind of prideful opulence. This is more than just comfort here.

[10:46] This is lavish excess, decadence. And I kind of picture King Belshazzar perched on a kind of tall throne at the end of a long hall, sipping wine in front of all the people that he wants to be admired by.

It's haughtiness to the extreme. But actually, this feast is a kind of typical example of classic pagan wickedness that the Gentiles are usually guilty of.

At various points in the scriptures, these three sins come bundled together. Greed, idolatry, and sexual immorality. It's kind of like a Gentilian trifecta of sin.

And they all have to do with kind of an obsession with the physical. Belshazzar puts on this extravagant feast, which is an extraordinary display of greed and gluttony.

Everyone praises the Babylonian false gods of metal and wood and stone. And they've even made their gods into kind of physical things they can bow down to. And of course, Belshazzar is there with his multiple wives and concubines to satisfy his every desire.

[11:54] Greed, idolatry, and sexual immorality. But the worst, most terrifying and arrogant thing about this feast is that Belshazzar brings in God's holy vessels from the temple in Jerusalem for all his lords and wives and concubines to drink wine from as they perform their debauched idol worship.

I mean, it's just shocking, right? You've got to like cover your eyes or squirm or something. It's terrible. To Belshazzar, it's not enough that Nebuchadnezzar had ransacked the temple of the living God and pillaged all the holy vessels from inside.

With no regard for God whatsoever, Belshazzar turns them into vessels for his own pleasure as though Yahweh was neither to be feared or even acknowledged for their prosperity.

That which God consecrated for the worship of his holy name, Belshazzar uses as objects of greedy, hedonistic idolatry. But God is not mocked for whatever a man sows that he will also reap. And verse 5, immediately the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace. And isn't it true that the unrighteous flagrantly practice all sorts of wickedness supposing that God's judgment is far away.

[13:23] He will not avenge himself or at least his judgment will be delayed. But this kind of thinking is foolish. I think of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5 who lied to the Holy Spirit and died immediately.

God is a consuming fire that deserves to be feared and honored. and he can and at times will act swiftly to punish lawlessness and idolatry.

Psalms 2 captures this pretty helpfully. I think I've put it on the screen. Yeah, there you go. Now therefore, O kings, be wise, be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling.

Kiss the Son lest he be angry and you perish in the way for his wrath is quickly kindled. Lest are all who take refuge in him. And indeed, God's judgment is something to tremble about.

Just take a look at Belshazzar in verse 6. It's kind of humorous actually. Then the king's color changed and his thoughts alarmed him. His limbs gave way and his knees knocked together.

[14:33] The king called loudly to bring in the enchanters, the Chaldeans and the astrologers and the king declared to the wise men of Babylon, whoever reads this writing and shows me its interpretation shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around his neck and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom.

Belshazzar is terrified and who wouldn't be? And he's helpless and humiliated. Part of his humiliation as well I think is the fact that he can't even read the writing and actually in the Mark growth groups this year we've been learning about how Jesus often uses parables to obscure meaning and exclude people from understanding as a form of God's judgment.

I think that's happening here as well. And then even when Belshazzar summons the enchanters and the Chaldeans they prove to be just as useless as usual so much for the wise men of Babylon.

So, in verse 10 the queen tells everyone not to worry for in verse 11 there is a man in your kingdom in whom is the spirit of the holy gods. And the thing that I want to point out in this section is that the queen appeals to Belshazzar by mentioning his father.

You can kind of see it. She says, in the days of your father light and understanding and wisdom were found in him and King Nebuchadnezzar your father your father the king made him chief of the magicians enchanters Chaldeans and astrologers.

[16:05] And I'm not certain but I think the fact that Daniel hadn't immediately been summoned is a pretty telling sign that Belshazzar had ignored the lessons that his father had learned before him.

And this is really Belshazzar's big problem. He spurns the warnings of history and just presses on anyway in arrogance. Nevertheless he does take the queen's advice and summons Daniel and promises him the same hefty sum for his services.

But let's take a look at Daniel's sermon now in verse 17 onwards and I've kind of got four points that I'm trying to make and draw out from the text for us. Number one Daniel sees how useless the king's reward actually is.

It's not a hefty sum at all and he shows that by his response to the king's offer. Because really Belshazzar the king is promising to dish out authority in a kingdom which is on the brink of collapse. What's the point? What's the use of being a king in a dying kingdom? Yet unfortunately many people fail to see how useless it is to reign in this kingdom and the kingdom of men now.

[17:29] This kingdom which is passing away and will soon be replaced by a kingdom of the risen Lord Jesus. What does it profit a man to make it to the top in a kingdom that is doomed to fall?

The second is that dealing proudly is an offense against the God of grace. Daniel reminds Belshazzar that God gave Nebuchadnezzar kingship and greatness and glory and majesty. And actually the extent of his kingship and greatness was basically limitless. God had not spared any power for Nebuchadnezzar. All peoples, nations, and languages trembled and feared before him.

So how can someone dare to deal proudly when all their greatness and authority are gifts from God? Grace, generous giving, means there's no room for boasting.

It makes no sense. You cannot boast in your own greatness about something that you have been given freely. And so when Nebuchadnezzar lifted up his heart and said, you know, back in chapter 4, is this not great Babylon which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence for the glory of my majesty?

[18:46] He was blatantly refusing to honor and thank God in arrogance and was swiftly brought low and stripped of his glory. God because that is the lesson of dealing proudly before a gracious God.

The Most High rules the kingdom of mankind and sets over it whom he will. He sets up kings and removes kings. He has authority to establish or abolish kingdoms of his own free choosing.

It is both arrogant and foolish actually to boast before a God of grace. And Belshazzar ought to have learned this crucial lesson before he did the same.

But he didn't. You, his son, Belshazzar, Daniel says, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this, but you have lifted up yourself against the Lord of heaven.

And sort of crucially, this is not just ignorance. It's not like Belshazzar didn't know any better. Being a Gentile after all, he doesn't have the scriptures. No.

[19:57] This is arrogance. Belshazzar knew all along that the Most High God rules the kingdom of men and sets over it whom he will. Yet he defiantly persists in his arrogance, committing some of the most fearful idolatry in all the scriptures.

And notice the way Daniel describes the evil of idolatry. This is just really helpful. Rather than praising God for his grace and sovereignty, Belshazzar praises the gods of silver and gold, bronze, iron, wood and stone, which are really no gods at all.

They neither see nor hear nor know. And yet Belshazzar praises these material fixtures rather than the gracious sovereign God who created everything.

And in this way, idolatry is robbing God, robbing God of the praise and honor and thanks that he is due, and having the arrogance to exalt over him perverse recreations of his own creation.

Paul picks much of this up in Romans 1, and because some of us have been studying Romans in growth groups as well, I was going to put it on the screen. He describes the unrighteousness of men like this.

[21 : 18] For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore God gave them up in the lust of their heart to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the creator, who is blessed forever.

Fourthly, we're going to go back to the writing on the wall. Many, many, tackle and pass in. And this is God's verdict about Belshazzar's arrogance.

God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end. You've been weighed in the balances, Belshazzar, and found wanting. Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.

God has run out of warnings for Belshazzar. It's judgment day. There is no more to be said about the matter of Belshazzar and his arrogance and his depraved kingdom.

[22 : 43] Time has run out. The God who removes one king and sets up another has spoken. Now, the fact that Belshazzar still makes Daniel a third ruler in the kingdom is so silly.

I mean, it makes me wonder whether he understood God's pronouncement of judgment properly or whether he was just kind of resigned about the whole thing and just, you know, whatever. But just as God said in verse 30, that very night, Belshazzar the Chaldean king was killed and Darius the Mede received the kingdom being about 62 years old.

To conclude, I just want to make three points and my third is a bit of a double point, but forgive me. I think there's a pretty good argument to be made that Darius the Mede, in that last verse, is another name for Cyrus the Persian, which is super significant because Cyrus is the king God promised would free his people from exile in Babylon.

So you might remember in Isaiah 45, which we read out not long ago, I've put it on the screen, thus says the Lord who is anointed to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed.

And then skipping ahead a bit to verse 13, I have stirred him up in righteousness and I will make all his ways level. He shall build my city and set my exiles free, not for price or reward, says the Lord of hosts.

[24 : 24] So in God's sovereign appointment of all the authorities of the world, he's actually working out his purpose of salvation for his people. God sets up his Messiah, Cyrus the Persian, to execute justice and salvation and free God's people from slavery.

The end of the empire is good news to everyone who trusts in the most high God. The changing of kingdoms means freedom from slavery and exile. And then, isn't this most wonderfully and fully realized in the gospel of our Lord Jesus?

Jesus promises to return in judgment and salvation, to free all of those who trust in him from exile in this world. God has given him, ultimately, the kingdom and appointed him over all men.

And this is good news. This is the gospel. Because from that time on with the arrogant, the greedy, the idolatrous, the sexually immoral, will never ever rule again.

What good news. Finally, the pronouncement of this new kingdom requires a response of humility. The resurrection of Jesus is the proof that God has made him king over the kingdom of God and the gospel message is that this current kingdom is passing away.

[25 : 53] So I want to address both Christians and non-Christians separately with this point. If you're not a Christian and you don't trust Jesus as your Lord and Savior, please hear God's warning.

This kingdom is passing away. Just like the final hours after Daniel spoke this news to Belshazzar, we are living in the final moments before Jesus returns to begin his rule here on earth.

And to join Jesus in this kingdom, you need to humble yourself. Turn from acting proudly and trust Jesus instead. In God's kindness, it's not too late, like it was for Belshazzar, but please do not wait. If you are a Christian and you do trust Jesus as God's eternal king, then what? How does this speak to you? Actually, I just want to read from the apostle Peter because he, surprise, surprise, is better at application than I am.

But how should we live in these last days, given that we are in that small window before King Jesus returns? Why don't you turn to 1 Peter chapter 4?

[27 : 14] It's after Hebrews and James and it's before 2 Peter. I'm going to just read from verse 1 all the way to the end of verse 11.

And be thinking about how we as Christians might be living in these last days. Since therefore Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking.

For whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions, but for the will of God.

For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry, with respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery and they malign you.

But they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. For this is why the gospel was preached even to those who were dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does.

[28 : 40] The end of all things is at hand. Therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.

Show hospitality to one another without grumbling, as each has received a gift. Use it to serve one another as good stewards of God's very grace. Whoever speaks as one who speaks oracles of God, whoever serves as one who serves by the strength that God supplies, in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.

To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Let's pray. Gracious Father, you are glorious and have set your Son on heaven's throne, and you have given us the freshest gift of the gospel that we might rejoice in the coming of your kingdom.

Father, there are many who presume on your patience and arrogantly oppose you, even here in St. Lucia in our city. We thank you that you do not ignore their wickedness and promise to set things right, but we humbly ask that you would spare many by drawing them to your Son in repentance and faith.

And Father, work in us that we should live upright, holy lives in this current time while we wait for the new age. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.