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Andrew M. Davis

Sermon Notes

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Belshazzar's Last Feast

Daniel 5

I. From Pride to Presumption

A. A Mysterious Ceremony Finds Fulfillment: God's Water Clock

Jeremiah's final words... tied to a scroll

B. Pride: Nebuchadnezzar's curable disease

C. Presumption: Belshazzar's deadly flaw

D. The Patience of God runs out

II. Historical Context: Babylon After Nebuchadnezzar

A. The "Head of Gold" Returns to the Earth

1. The "King of kings" falls ill and dies (562 B.C.)

2. The "way of all the earth"

3. Prepare to meet your God!! (Amos 4:12)

B. Nebuchadnezzar's Successors: Incompetence, Intrigue, and Idolatry

1. Son Evil-Merodach the successor

a. called "Amel-Marduk" in Akkadian ("Man of Marduk")

b. mentioned in 2 Kings 25... released Judean king Jehoiachin & allowed him to eat at his table

c. two years later...

2. General Neriglissar assassinated Evil-Merodach & took the throne

a. served with Nebuchadnezzar when he destroyed Jerusalem

- b. eventually died, his son placed on the throne for nine months
- 3. Conspiracy: Nabonidus placed on the throne
 - a. Neriglissar's son assassinated
 - b. Nabonidus reigned for 17 years
 - c. married Nitocris, daughter of Nebuchadnezzar
 - d. had a son Belshazzar... Nebuchadnezzar was Belshazzar's son
 - e. the two reigned together as co-regents

C. Jeremiah's timetable

Jeremiah 27:6-7 Now I will hand all your countries over to my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon; I will make even the wild animals subject to him. ⁷ All nations will serve him and his son and his grandson until the time for his land comes; then many nations and great kings will subjugate him.

D. Persians at the Gate

1. Cyrus the Great moves out, defeats Babylonian army
2. Nabonidus fled to Borsippa where he was captured
3. Cyrus the Great then turned to the great fortress of Babylon itself
4. The city had never been conquered

III. Belshazzar's Defiant Feast (vs. 1-4)

A. Massive banquets

vs. 1 "King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine with them."

Ancient historian Ktesias: Persian monarchs frequently known to dine daily with 15,000 people

M.E.L. Mallowan: Ashurnasirpal II gave a feast to 69, 574 guests when dedicating capital city of Calneh in 879 B.C.

In 485 B.C., Persian King Darius held a lavish feast: 1000 animals slaughtered, including oxen, zebras, gazelles, stags, Arabian ostriches, geese, gamecocks and camel (smoked camel hump a

favorite Persian dish); also served rice pilaf w. meats, nuts, spices, and fruit; shish kebabs of mutton, fish, poultry, and vegetables seasons with special yoghurt sauce; the guests even enjoyed sugar brought by caravan from distant lands and too expensive to serve to anyone but royalt

B. “Their god is their stomach”: Hedonism fattens for slaughter

Philippians 3:19 Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things.

1. Hedonism: Deep yearning for earthly pleasure
2. Actually becomes enhanced in times of imminent danger

Illus. High-ranking Nazi officials had a vigorous party the night Berlin fell to the Soviet Army

3. Squeezing last amount of pleasure... instead of repenting

Isaiah 22:12-14 The Lord, the LORD Almighty, called you on that day to weep and to wail, to tear out your hair and put on sackcloth. ¹³ But see, there is joy and revelry, slaughtering of cattle and killing of sheep, eating of meat and drinking of wine! "Let us eat and drink," you say, "for tomorrow we die!" ¹⁴ The LORD Almighty has revealed this in my hearing: "Till your dying day this sin will not be atoned for," says the Lord, the LORD Almighty.

4. Massive drinking bouts

Central to it all: getting completely drunk with free-flowing wine... forgetting your troubles by drowning them in alcohol

“Let us eat drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.”

BUT the Babylonians probably didn’t think they would die tomorrow... they were:

C. Defying the Medo-Persians

1. Awesome Babylon: the “unconquerable city”
2. Three ways to win a siege
 - a. go over the wall
 - b. go through the wall
 - c. starve the defenders into submission

All three thought to be impossible!!

3. Ancient Babylon: Herodotus's description & that of modern archaeology

- 14 miles square
- huge outer walls: 87 feet thick, 350 feet high (35 story building); thick enough at top for a chariot with four horses to rise along easily
- 100 great bronze gates in the walls
- inner/outer wall system, moat in between fed by flowing Euphrates
- great Euphrates flowed down center of the city under the wall
- within the walls: beautiful avenues, parks, palaces
- a great bridge, spanning the Euphrates connected eastern/western portions of city
- famed "hanging gardens of Babylon" large enough to support trees

Therefore, Babylon had never been conquered... the walls were too high to go over, too thick to go through... the Euphrates guaranteed a constant water supply, and the walls were large enough to include small farmlands... the city was amply supplied to withstand a siege of several years

Most armies could not siege anywhere near that long

4. Banquet especially shocking... most cities under siege would be conserving food

5. Total disregard for danger:

feasting/drunkenness throughout the city... not even a watchman on the walls; all the soldiers drunk

Summary: The Babylonians considered their city completely safe... they could stand on the walls and mock the Medes and Persians, then go inside for a drunken feast

The Babylonians defied the siege army

They also defied the eternal God

D. Defying the Eternal God

vs. 2-4 *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.

1. The God of Israel's reputation... established through experiences with Nebuchadnezzar
2. Belshazzar's open defiance
 - a. goaded on by wine
 - b. BUT wine only removes restraint to expose what's already in the heart
3. Blasphemy and idolatry wrapped together in this defiant act
 - a. sacred vessels removed from storage
 - b. used to toast Babylonian gods (they were counting on military protection of Marduk)
 - c. NOTE: descending value of what is worshipped: gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood & stone
4. BUT God would not be mocked... the weapons of Belshazzar's destruction surrounded walls

Jonathan Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*:

There is no want of *power* in God to cast wicked men into hell at any moment. Men's hands cannot be strong when God rises up. The strongest have no power to resist him, nor can any deliver out of his hands.-He is not only able to cast wicked men into hell, but he can most easily do it. Sometimes an earthly prince meets with a great deal of difficulty to subdue a rebel, who has found means to fortify himself, and has made himself strong by the numbers of his followers. But it is not so with God. There is no fortress that is any defence from the power of God. Though hand join in hand, and vast multitudes of God's enemies combine and associate themselves, they are easily broken in pieces. ... What are we, that we should think to stand before him, at whose rebuke the earth trembles, and before whom the rocks are thrown down?

IV. God's Terrifying Warning: "The Writing on the Wall" (vs. 5-9)

A. The Apparition Appears

Archeological note: in the ruins of Babylon, there was found a large room 56 feet wide, 173 feet long, decorated in blue glazed brick with white and yellow lions... this was probably the site of this banquet

Midway, in the long wall opposite the entrance there was a niche in front of which the king's throne may have been positioned... amazingly, the archaeologists discovered the wall in the niche was covered with white plaster!

1. The feast progressing, loud laughs and crude jokes
2. Suddenly some fingers appear
3. Writing on a plaster-covered wall
4. Room lit by flickering lanterns & torches... probably area over king's head most brightly illuminated

B. Suddenly, the Music Stops

1. Unlike the decks of the Titanic... the music suddenly stopped
2. The laughter and jokes stilled
3. Perhaps a woman or two screamed
4. Perhaps the only sound the knocking of the king's knees
5. "No Fear"??? God is able to make us fear!!

C. The Mysterious Letters

1. Letters over the King's head
2. "Experts called in to read them"... some mysterious message
3. Belshazzar must know what they mean!!
4. Summons the soothsayers, magicians, Chaldeans

D. Terror and Confusion Reign

Human wisdom utterly incapable of discerning God's mind!!

Even the lavish offer of rewards cannot produce a solution

V. Daniel's Clear Interpretation: The End Has Come (vs. 10-28)

A. The Queen Mother's Advice (vs. 10-12)

- Nabonidus's wife... almost certainly a daughter of Nebuchadnezzar; calls Nebuchadnezzar his "father" twice
- "O King, live forever!!" [Takes on a certain irony in that this was the last night of his life]
- She speaks to him not as a wife but as a mother would
- Reminds him of Daniel... probably in semi-retirement
- Praises Daniel:

"keen mind and knowledge and understanding; also the ability to interpret dreams, explain riddles, solve difficult problems."

B. Daniel's Appearance (vs. 13)

- As usual, Daniel refuses to be associated with the other counselors
- Makes a dramatic entrance... his bearing regal and holy, contrasted with the wine-flushed faces of the banquet hall

C. Belshazzar's Offer: Made and Spurned (vs. 13-17)

- Quick recount of the evening's disturbing incident
- Retelling of the failure of the counselors
- Offer of power and wealth: third highest ruler in the kingdom

Note: Nabonidus was first, Belshazzar the second... Daniel would be third

- Offer totally spurned by Daniel

vs. 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."

D. Daniel Teaches History (vs. 18-21)

1. God gave Nebuchadnezzar his kingdom & glory

2. Nebuchadnezzar's extraordinary sovereign powers... perhaps the greatest the world has ever seen
3. Nebuchadnezzar's pride and downfall
4. Nebuchadnezzar's repentance and restoration

Basic idea: you should have learned from your father's experience... his judgment should have humbled you

We also should learn from the experiences of people around us... to be warned and to flee the wrath to come!!

E. Daniel Preaches Judgment

vs. 22 *"But you,... O Belshazzar..."*

1. Prophetic power: Daniel levels severe charges against Belshazzar
2. Incredible boldness here! Daniel shows none of tender concern he did for Nebuchadnezzar
3. Daniel's theology: God holds your very life in his hands

vs. 24 *"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."*

Acts 17:28 'For in him we live and move and have our being.'

as James put it

James 4:15 "If it is the Lord's will, we will live..."

This is the basic idea of "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God"... God upholds our lives at every moment; every breath we inhale is a gift from Him; if we openly defy Him, we should not be surprised if that very night, our lives come to an end

Ask any damned person in hell, "Did you think you would end up here?" They would all answer, "No" Ask them why not, they will answer they always thought they had more time to set matters right

For Belshazzar, his time has run out

F. Daniel Interprets the Writing:

1. “Mene” (repeated) = “numbered”

“God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end.”

2. “Tekel” = “weighed”

“You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting.”

3. “Peres = “divided out”

“Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.”

Amazing symmetry! When Belshazzar’s grandfather, Nebuchadnezzar was besieging the holy city of Jerusalem, within the walls another prophet, Jeremiah, was sent to proclaim the conquest of the city to the Jews within: he said plainly “This city will be handed over to the Babylonians”

Now, 70 years later, Daniel plays the exact same role in Babylon!

VI. Daniel Exalted, Belshazzar Destroyed (vs. 29-31)

A. Daniel Exalted

vs. 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.

1. O the vanity of the world’s gifts and honors!!
2. A one-day rule over a city about to be destroyed!
3. How useless are the world’s baubles when the judgment of God is about to fall!
4. AMAZING: Babylon’s last official act... honoring a Jewish refugee named Daniel!

B. Belshazzar Destroyed

vs. 30-31 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.

1. Judgment comes suddenly
2. Reminiscent of Jesus’ parable of the rich fool

Luke 12:20 "But God said to him, `You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?'

3. The Kingdom stripped away and given to the Medes and Persians

C. How It Happened

1. Famous story from the ancient world: Herodotus & Xenophon
2. The date was Oct. 11-12, 539 B.C.
3. Cyrus the Great of Persia advanced against the walls
4. A brilliant Persian general, a forgotten canal
 - a. Ugbaru, governor of Gutium Cyrus's commander in chief
 - b. noticed an old abandoned canal previously dug by Queen Nitocris
 - c. diverted the water of the Euphrates river to the old abandoned canal
 - d. sent his men under the walls where the river had flowed
 - e. if the Babylonians had been watching they could easily have killed the soldiers sent under the walls... but they were all lying in their beds drunk
 - f. the Persian army flooded through the city and killed all these drunken soldiers while they lay in their beds
 - g. King Belshazzar was among the slain that night
 - h. DANIEL WAS NOT... God spared his life

D. "Babylon the Great has fallen"

1. The city that terrified the ancient world is now conquered
2. The announcement goes out far and wide

Isaiah 21:9 'Babylon has fallen, has fallen! All the images of its gods lie shattered on the ground!' "

3. The image seen by Nebuchadnezzar of the end of his empire has now come true
4. Someday, a greater Babylon will fall... the world system in rebellion against God
all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor

Revelation 18:1-2 *After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven. He had great authority, and the earth was illuminated by his splendor. ² With a mighty voice he shouted: "Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!"*

VII. Isaiah, Habakkuk, Jeremiah: A Clear Prophetic Light Fulfilled

A. Isaiah: "Get up, you officers, oil the shields!!"

Isaiah 21:5 *They set the tables, they spread the rugs, they eat, they drink! Get up, you officers, oil the shields!*

Isaiah predicted the fall of Babylon during a drunken feast almost 200 years before it happened

B. Habakkuk 2: "Now it is your turn. Drink and be exposed!!"

Habakkuk 2:16 *You will be filled with shame instead of glory. Now it is your turn! Drink and be exposed!*

C. Jeremiah: "I will dry up her sea and make her springs dry"

Jeremiah was even more specific

1. Concerning the time: the third generation: Nebuchadnezzar, his son, his grandson
2. Concerning the enemy: the Medes and the Persians

Jeremiah 51:11 *"Sharpen the arrows, take up the shields! The LORD has stirred up the kings of the Medes, because his purpose is to destroy Babylon. The LORD will take vengeance, vengeance for his temple.*

3. Concerning the method: drunken soldiers and a dried up river

Jeremiah 51:36-39 *Therefore, this is what the LORD says: "See, I will defend your cause and avenge you; I will dry up her sea and make her springs dry. ³⁷ Babylon will be a heap of ruins, a haunt of jackals, an object of horror and scorn, a place where no one lives. ³⁸ Her people all roar like young lions, they growl like lion cubs. ³⁹ But while they are aroused, I will set out a feast for them and make them drunk, so that they shout with laughter--then sleep forever and not awake," declares the LORD.*

Jeremiah 51:57 *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.*

Once again, the amazing accuracy of predictive prophecy!!

4. God announces it ahead of time: The Story of Seraiah

Jeremiah 51:59-64 This is the message Jeremiah gave to the staff officer Seraiah son of Neriah, the son of Mahseiah, when he went to Babylon with Zedekiah king of Judah in the fourth year of his reign. ⁶⁰ Jeremiah had written on a scroll about all the disasters that would come upon Babylon--all that had been recorded concerning Babylon. ⁶¹ He said to Seraiah, "When you get to Babylon, see that you read all these words aloud. ⁶² Then say, 'O LORD, you have said you will destroy this place, so that neither man nor animal will live in it; it will be desolate forever.' ⁶³ When you finish reading this scroll, tie a stone to it and throw it into the Euphrates. ⁶⁴ Then say, 'So will Babylon sink to rise no more because of the disaster I will bring upon her. And her people will fall.' " *The words of Jeremiah end here.*

VIII. Lessons and Applications

A. What do you boast about? That feeling of security

1. Belshazzar was cocky... the walls of Babylon were his confidence
2. What are you trusting in?

- Your good health? Your good deeds? Your powerful position in a company?

3. Do not put off repenting till tomorrow... tomorrow may never come

B. God's ticking clock of judgment: God cannot be mocked

Galatians 6:7 Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.

At the right time, judgment falls... that very night Belshazzar's soul was required of him...So with us... we never know when will be our last day on earth

Modern popular culture in America mocks God as though He will do nothing

GOD CANNOT BE MOCKED!!

C. The future fall of Babylon

Revelation 18:10-14 " 'Woe! Woe, O great city, O Babylon, city of power! In one hour your doom has come!'

1 John 2:15-17 Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶ For everything in the world--the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does--comes not from the Father but from the world. ¹⁷ The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.

Babylon represents all the allurements of the worldly pagan system... someday God will destroy finally Babylon the Great... only be sure you are like Daniel... undefiled by the world system

D. Only one place of safety: The Cross of Christ

- No protective walls in this world can save us from God's judgment
- BUT there is a safe refuge: the cross of Jesus Christ