

Against the Tide: Lessons from Daniel 1-6

The Writing on the Wall (Daniel 5)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on November 12, 2017

Introduction

- ❖ We're back in a series going through the first six chapters of the book of Daniel. We looked at chapters 1 to 3 before we jumped into a mini-series to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. And now we're back, and we'll finish up this month before moving into an Advent series in the book of Hebrews.
 - Now I want to remind you why we chose to study Daniel. **The book contains a number of stories about Jewish exiles removed from their homeland and planted in a city, in a culture, that was very pagan and very hostile to their faith.** They grew up in an environment where believing in one true God was conducive. Everyone around them believed the same thing.
 - But suddenly these young exiles found themselves in a Babylonian culture that was pluralistic at its core and intolerant of anyone making absolute or exclusive truth claims – saying there's only one true God and refusing to bow down to any cultural idols.

- ❖ So as we see Daniel and his friends navigating the ocean of culture, making difficult choices to swim upstream against the tide, we're being instructed on how to do the same in our day, in our context, in our culture. There is a tidal wave of cultural pressure pushing against Christians today. Pressuring us to conform, to go with the flow, to join the right side of history. Here in Daniel we're shown how a Christian can live in the ocean of culture and yet swim against the tide.
 - Now in the earlier chapters we were learning lessons from Daniel from when he was a young teen, as a young man. But here in chapter 5, Daniel is an old man likely in his eighties. By this time the great King Nebuchadnezzar of chapters 1-4 is long dead. Over two decades have passed and the man in charge of Babylon is called King Belshazzar. I know the text calls Nebuchadnezzar his 'father', but that's just because the term in ancient custom could refer to any of your forefathers. This means Daniel has outlasted Babylonian king after Babylonian king. Belshazzar is the last.

- ❖ Now any study of chapter 5 has to be done in light of the contents of chapter 4 because they play off each other. They share similar themes. In both chapters we meet very prideful kings who fail to realize who's the true Sovereign of the world. In both chapters Daniel is brought in to reveal a mystery and issue a stern warning and rebuke from God.
 - **But the big difference is how the two kings respond to warning and rebuke.** Nebuchadnezzar eventually repents. In his own words, we hear him bless, praise, and honor God in chapter 4:34-35. And in v36 he's restored to his sanity and his throne. **Daniel 4 illustrates a very important biblical principle in narrative form. It teaches how repentance leads to restoration no matter how wicked your past.** Nebuchadnezzar was no choir boy. He ransacked Jerusalem. Desecrated the temple of God. Built giant idols of gold and threw innocent people into fiery furnaces. And yet through repentance he experienced restoration.

- ❖ Belshazzar illustrates a related biblical principle. Repentance leads to restoration no matter how wicked your past, but **in Daniel 5 we're reminded that defiance leads to downfall no matter how secure your present.** Things could be fine in your life – or at least that's the impression you give everyone – but your downfall is at the door if you defy God and refuse to humble yourself and repent.
 - That's the main point of our text. **And my goal is to challenge each of you to take stock of your own life. To not let appearances fool you into thinking your life is secure – if you have yet to humble yourself before the LORD.** If sovereign kings of vast empires stand no chance when they defy God, then who are we kidding (but ourselves) to think we can get by ignoring God and his many warnings.
- ❖ This passage is where we get the popular saying “the writing is on the wall”. It’s usually meant to signal a warning. **To say that the writing is on the wall is to warn of the inevitable.** So let me stick with that motif and give you three warnings from our text. 1) Don't ignore the inevitability of death. 2) Don't defy the sovereignty of the Most High God. 3) Don't fail to learn from the error and example of others.

Don't Ignore the Inevitability of Death

- ❖ Let's consider the first warning that goes like this: Don't ignore the inevitability of death. We do it all the time. That is, we try our hardest to never think about death, particularly our own. And our culture is doing it's best to help, to keep us distracted, to keep our minds off the inevitable. Stay busy. Stay entertained. Stay focused on the weekend and not the future.
 - **But then God, in his sovereign ways, will occasionally give us stark reminders of our mortality.** How can we continue to ignore the prospect of death when seven days ago, twenty-seven people were gunned down in a rural Baptist church outside of San Antonio – doing exactly what we're doing now?
- ❖ We need reminders. We need warnings. It's what Belshazzar needed as well because he was doing all he could to ignore the inevitable. And his denial took the form of a raucous party that he threw for a thousand guests. Look with me at v1, *“King Belshazzar made a great feast for a thousand of his lords and drank wine in front of the thousand.”*
 - **Having some historical context really helps to understand what's happening.** We're told at the end of chapter 5 that on that very night the Medo-Persian army broke through and killed Belshazzar. It's surprising for the reader, but it shouldn't have been for Belshazzar and the citizens of Babylon.
 - They had been under siege by Darius the Mede, the top general for Cyrus the great king of Persia. Historical records tell us that the Babylonian army had been defeated a couple days earlier. So Belshazzar knew this was coming.
- ❖ **So his downfall is quite literally at the door and yet here he is throwing a party.** What in the world could be going on in that head of his? Was he not concerned with the massive army encamped around his city? Did he really think he was going to weather this out?

- That would be a pure and very obvious form of pride. To carry such an air of invincibility that you're partying while your city is under siege. **But, on the other hand, perhaps Belshazzar is actually afraid, deathly afraid, and he would rather distract himself and deny the inevitable.** And if you think about it, that's also a form of pride, though much more subtle.

- ❖ **When we try to ignore the inevitability of death, pride is driving that.** It's lurking in the background. You see, when we are willing to face our mortality, to accept the fact that our few decades of life here on earth is a mere blip on the timeline of history – to face that with honesty requires humility. It requires the acceptance of our creatureliness, our humanity.
 - **But to deny such things, to ignore the truth, to pretend to be immortal and act like you'll live forever is a form of pride.** You're putting yourself in the place of God. That's the epitome of pride.

- ❖ **The humble will own their creatureliness.** They know they're going to die one day. They know it could be any day. **Because they know they're not God, and they don't determine the number of their days.** That's why humble people are able to speak freely of their own death without getting squeamish, without getting morbid and depressing.
 - **But the proud get very uncomfortable with the topic of death.** They don't want to think about it. They don't want to talk about it. They don't want to be reminded that they're not any different. That they're going to die like everyone else.

- ❖ This is why if you seek humility, then you have to confront your fear of death. **This is why the humblest of Christians are the ones who have the deepest, most abiding hope in the eternal life that Christ secures.** If you want to grow in humility, then you've got to grow in love and appreciation for the Savior who defeated death by death.

- ❖ **Friends, when was the last time you gave serious consideration to your own death?** Or have you been doing all you can to push that frightful thought out of your mind? Distracting yourself with mindless entertainment. Surrounding yourself with friends and acquaintances, perhaps hundreds, even thousands. Numbing yourself with meaningless sex and strong drink.
 - That was certainly Belshazzar's strategy. He tried to ignore the inevitability of death, but God brought it to his doorstep. And he was completely unprepared. What about you? Are you prepared for your own death?

Don't Defy the Sovereignty of the Most High God

- ❖ That's the first warning in our text – not to ignore the inevitable. Now the second goes like this: Don't defy the sovereignty of the Most High God.
 - If we read on we see Belshazzar asking for the holy goblets that Nebuchadnezzar ransacked from Solomon's temple. Look at v3, "*3Then 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. 4They drank wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone.*"

- ❖ **Now why did he ask for the holy goblets?** Did he just run out of cups at his party? No, I think there was a more prideful motivation. I think Belshazzar was trying to make a statement comparing himself to the great Nebuchadnezzar who originally took those cups.
 - But even Nebuchadnezzar had enough respect for Yahweh to not use his holy vessels in an unholy party where you drink to the many pagan gods of Babylon. You have to remember that Belshazzar was no modern day secularist who thought, "Holy cups are just cups, people. There are no gods that you have to fear offending."
 - No, he didn't deny Yahweh's existence. **Belshazzar knew he was real, but he saw the LORD as just one of many gods and clearly inferior to the Babylonian gods since he couldn't rescue his people from exile.**

- ❖ Just like Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar's pride got the best of him. He convinced himself that he's above the LORD. He defied the sovereignty of the Most High God. And just like with Nebuchadnezzar, God sent a cryptic message to declare that his sovereign power over the mightiest of human sovereigns is undeniable.
 - **A mysterious hand appears in the middle of all the partying and writes a message on the wall.** The words are in Aramaic, the vernacular of the day, so it's not that the wise men couldn't read the message. The problem is they couldn't interpret it. The message had to be spiritually discerned.

- ❖ **But even though Belshazzar lacked the spiritual discernment to understand the meaning, the warning itself was sufficient to convict and condemn.** That's why even non-Christians can be convicted by the preaching of the Word even though they don't have the Spirit in them giving them spiritual discernment.
 - **And that's why you shouldn't shy away from inviting your non-Christian friends from sitting under biblical preaching or shy away from speaking God's Word to them – thinking they won't understand.** Sure, there are going to be spiritual truths that they won't get until they get the Spirit. But they can – and need to – be convicted by the Word and be under great distress at the lostness of their condition.

- ❖ We go on to read that the queen enters the court to speak sense into the room and to comfort everyone's fear. Commentators think this is likely the queen mother, the wife of Nebuchadnezzar. She's alive and well two decades later. She remembers Daniel and the way he revealed mysteries by the power of his God, so she implores Belshazzar to send for him.
 - The fact that no one remembers him is surprising since at one point he was basically in charge of running the entire kingdom. **But that's just a humbling reminder that no matter how prominent you are, no matter how much you accomplish, you'll likely be forgotten in a generation or two.** That ought to humble us.

- ❖ Now when Daniel arrives, he's offered a chance to regain his status and power, but he refuses the reward. Instead he rebukes the king. That's what a prophet does after all. **Throughout the OT we see prophets in the royal court serving as the king's conscience.**

- ❖ When kings ignore their consciences or sear them, they forget their place and are prone to lift up themselves against the LORD. **The prophet's job is to be their conscience reminding the king who's the ultimate King.**
 - For Daniel, his rebuke culminates in v23. Look there, *"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. 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."*

- ❖ Belshazzar's sin is multileveled. On one hand, he's guilty of desecrating the holy and worshipping idols. That's breaking commandments two and three. He takes holy vessels and instead of lifting a cup of gratitude to God, he drinks to the false gods of Babylon.
 - And we do the same. Just think about it. Where are the holy vessels of the LORD today? Are they not here in the church? I'm talking about Christians. **We're his holy vessels filled with his Holy Spirit.** Which means we'd be just as guilty as Belshazzar if we go on filling our holy bodies with the profane and using them for unholy purposes – to serve the idols of unholy pleasure. We'd be no different than Belshazzar.

- ❖ Now desecrating the holy and worshipping idols is reason enough to condemn him. But there's a more fundamental problem at hand. It says at the end of v23 that Belshazzar failed to honor God. **He failed to see that even his breath is in God's hands. He couldn't even take his next breath if God didn't allow it.** If that's so, then the same would apply to his throne, his power, his riches – they're all from the LORD. Everything that he has, everything he enjoys, is grace. Everything is a gift from God. But he doesn't honor God. He insults him.
 - This is what pride does. **Pride stares back at the Great I AM and says, "No, I am. I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul."** That's pride. And all of us are guilty of it.

- ❖ When you try to picture a proud person, don't just think of the boisterous, loud man who is always boasting of his accomplishments. Don't just think of the vain woman always fishing for compliments. Yes, those are obvious examples of pride.
 - **But the proud would also include the quiet, hard-working, self-reliant man or woman who feels like they've earned their keep.** Who feel like they've worked hard for all they have, and don't feel the need to give credit to anyone – God included. So all of us deal with pride in one sense or another. All of us are as guilty as Belshazzar.

- ❖ And it's God's mercy to confront our pride. **If we continue to feed our pride, we continue to lose our humanity.** You see, we are most human when we're living according to our design, and we're designed to worship our Creator. So when we live to be worshiped ourselves, to be praised, to receive the glory – we become less and less human.

- ❖ We see that principle ring true in Nebuchadnezzar's experience in chapter 4. Daniel reminds us in v20, "²⁰*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. ²¹He 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.*"
 - So the more prideful we get, the less human we get. **The more we defy God's godness, the more we lose our human-ness.** The more we descend into a beastly mindset where we're always trying to win, trying to dominate, unable to empathize with the wounded and the weak.
- ❖ Friends, the writing is still on the wall. **God is confronting your pride today because he cares too much for you to let you lose your very humanity.** So you can either humble yourself or let him humble you. Accept his discipline. Accept his loving rebuke. As it says in Proverbs, faithful are the wounds of a friend (Prov. 27:6).

Don't Fail to Learn From the Error and Example of Others

- ❖ So the two warnings we've seen so far are: Don't ignore the inevitability of death and don't defy the sovereignty of the Most High God. The third and final warning is found specifically in v22. It goes like this: Don't fail to learn from the error and example of others.
- ❖ Belshazzar had the advantage of a predecessor who was prone to the same sins and prone to make the same mistake. **But instead of learning from the past, leaning from the error and example of others – Belshazzar chose to learn the hard way.**
 - Look at v22. After mentioning all that God did to humble Nebuchadnezzar and then to restore him, Daniel says, "*And you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this*".
 - He knew all this. He knew full well the divine judgment that Nebuchadnezzar faced, and yet he failed to learn from it. **He had all the knowledge, but it didn't change his behavior one bit.** In spite of all he knew, Belshazzar lifted himself up against God just like his forefathers. He didn't learn from history, so he was bound to repeat it.
- ❖ For Belshazzar, the writing on the wall was more than a warning. **For him, it was a pronouncement of judgment.** His time had come. For him, the prospect of repenting had passed. MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN was his judgment.
 - If you look in v25, Daniel tells us what that means. "²⁵*And this is the writing that was inscribed: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, and PARSIN. ²⁶This is the interpretation of the matter: MENE, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; ²⁷TEKEL, you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting; ²⁸PERES, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.*"
 - The three words taken together, mean: Your days are numbered (*Mene*). You've been weighed (*Tekel*) and found wanting. So your kingdom will be divided (*Parsin* [*Peres* is the singular form]) between the Medes and Persians.

- ❖ Belshazzar knew this was coming. He knew what happen to his forefathers. He knew what God would do to him if he continued down the same path. And yet he changed nothing. **What that tells us is that mere knowledge of God – mere knowledge of how he deals with sinful man in the past (in the pages of Scripture) – is simply not enough.**
 - You can know Nebuchadnezzar’s story. You can know Belshazzar’s story. You can know all this. But if it doesn’t translate into changed behavior, changed values, and changed priorities, then all that biblical knowledge is pointless.
 - **Just knowing the error and example of others is not enough.** The goal is to learn from it. And learning from it means living differently in light of it. It means choosing a different trajectory for your life.

- ❖ Years ago I led a D-Group of five high school boys in whose lives I poured out my own. And I remember after they graduated, I took them on a trip down to Corpus and we had a blast. But one evening I sat them down in the hotel room, and I pleaded with them, as they were about to go off to college, to not make the same mistakes I made when I was in their shoes.
 - I told them you’re going to be tempted to ignore my warnings and to make the same foolish choices I made because you want firsthand knowledge. You want to experience these things for yourself. **But I begged them *not* to despise the blessing of secondhand knowledge, especially when it comes to sin and its consequences.**

- ❖ It is a blessing to have fellow Christians in your life who have gone before you on the path of discipleship, who are warning you before you come to a crossing – telling you, “Don’t go down this path. There’s nothing good waiting for you at the end. Only misery. Only regret. Don’t go there.” **If you have someone speaking that kind of loving warning into your life, please don’t despise that blessing.** Don’t trample it. Don’t ignore it.

- ❖ **To my young brothers and sisters in Christ, I beg you to listen intently to the older Christians that God has placed in your life.** If you have Christian parents or an older believer or discipler in your life, please heed their warnings when they tell you not to make the same mistakes they did.
 - There’s going to be plenty of temptations in your life, plenty of tough choices you’re going to have to make. Just knowing what the Bible says and knowing the testimony of your parents or your discipler or pastor and their past mistakes – is not going to be enough. You need to actually learn from it. **You need to appreciate that sometimes secondhand knowledge and secondhand experience is the best kind.**

- ❖ **Because you can’t presume that your story will turn out like Nebuchadnezzar’s.** Who’s to say that you’re going to go down this prideful path of rebellion where you’re losing your very humanity, and then one day you’re suddenly going to repent and be restored? Sure, that happened to Nebuchadnezzar. But who’s to say that’s going to happen to you if you go down a similar path? How do you know your story will turn out the same?

- ❖ **What if you end up like Belshazzar?** What if you end up so far down the path, where there are no more warnings left – just a pronouncement of judgment and an immediate downfall? But that's why this story is here. To warn us *not* to presume upon God's grace and to not fail to learn from the error and example of others.
 - I want to be clear: **No one's story has to end like Belshazzar's.** There is grace available to the worst of sinners, to all sinners. You just have to recognize yourself as one. And to fall at the feet of the Gracious God of the Gospel.

- ❖ There's this one place in the Gospel of John where the Pharisees drag an adulteress woman in front of Jesus to test him. And they ask him whether or not she should be stoned to death in accordance with the Law of Moses. **And Scripture says that "*Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground.*"** (Jn. 8:6).
 - No one knows what he wrote. But whatever it was, to the Pharisees it was a word of judgment. It could've been something like MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN. Because they walked away condemned and ashamed of their own sinfulness.
 - **But to that woman, whatever Jesus wrote with his finger, was clearly perceived as a word of mercy.** He says he's not here to condemn her but to save her. To change her so that she sins no more.

- ❖ **Friends, the point is this: You have to turn to Jesus. Some of you need to turn back to him. Some of you have never turned to him before.** If you keep waiting and pushing it back for another day. Then MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN might very well be waiting for you on the wall one day when you least expect it.
 - **But today, as long as it's called "today", I can confidently say with the authority of God's Word that Jesus has another message for you.** He's writing, "Come to me you heavy laden. Receive my mercy. Receive my forgiveness. Come and sin no more." You don't have to end up like Belshazzar. Defiance will certainly result in a downfall but repentance in Christ always leads to restoration.