

Daniel 5:1-16 – Cups of Wrath

In chapter 5, Nebuchadnezzar was dead. There was a new Babylonian king named Belshazzar. Chapter 5 starts the second half of the chiasm of chapters 2-7. Chapters 4 and 5 make up the middle of the chiasm and have similar content. There are two different kings in these two chapters but they both were given a lesson in humility. One main difference was that Nebuchadnezzar was restored to power after his humiliation. Belshazzar was humbled by God but with little time to repent. Once again, God communicated to a heathen king through signs and through his servant Daniel. I wonder if Belshazzar learned humility from the trilogy of books, “Humility and How I attained it”, “Pride and How I Overcame it” and “Ten Famous Men and How I met the Other Nine”. That’s an old joke.

Read Daniel 5:1-9.

Who was Belshazzar? Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 BC. Evil-merodach, his son, reigned after Nebuchadnezzar for about two years (562/561-560 BC). See 2 Kings 25:27 and Jeremiah 52:31. There is historical information which says that he was assassinated. We are fairly sure that Belshazzar was not the son of Nebuchadnezzar. Father can sometimes mean grandfather in a genealogy. It could also mean “father” in the sense of predecessor. There is information that Belshazzar was the son of Nabonidus. We don’t have a lot of information on Belshazzar but since 1853 more information has been discovered about him. He only appears in the Bible in the book of Daniel. (5:1-2)

Chapter 5 took place in 539 BC. The temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 586 BC, about 47 years earlier. What was the occasion of chapter 5? Why do you think Belshazzar wanted to use the temple vessels for his party? (5:1-2)

In chapter 4, Nebuchadnezzar had proclaimed what he learned about the one true God. The chapter ended with one of the main lessons he learned about God, which was that “those who walk in pride he is able to humble.” What do verses 3-4 tell us about Belshazzar’s attitude toward the one true God? (5:3-4)

In verse 5, there was an immediate reaction to what Belshazzar did. It may remind us of God’s swift response when Nebuchadnezzar said “Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power”. What message did Belshazzar receive from God? How was the message delivered? How did Belshazzar react to the message? (5:5-6)

Like Nebuchadnezzar before him, who did Belshazzar call on to interpret the message he received from God? Unlike Nebuchadnezzar in chapter 2 who threatened the wise men with death, what did Belshazzar promise to the one who could interpret the message? (5:7)

Just like in chapters 2 and 4, the wise men were not able to interpret God's message to the king. It may make us wonder what they were good for. How did Belshazzar and his lords react when the wise men could not interpret the message? (5:8-9)

In verse 10, the "queen" entered the picture. Because Belshazzar's wives were mentioned as being at the feast, some think that the "queen" was the "queen mother". In support of that notion, she did seem to know more history than Belshazzar. It must be embarrassing to be a king and need your mommy to come to the rescue. What message did the queen have for Belshazzar? What was the queen's recommendation? (5:10-12)

In verse 13, ESV has a declaration, "you are that Daniel". NKJV, NASB and NIV have a question, "are you (that) Daniel". Does a question or a declaration fit the context better? Belshazzar must have been desperate. He had just belittled Daniel's God by drinking wine from the temple vessels and now he had to call on a Jew to interpret the message. All the Babylonian wise men had failed. That must have really stuck in his craw. (5:13)

What did Belshazzar say that he had heard about Daniel? (5:14)

In verse 15, what was Belshazzar's candid admission? After chapters 2 and 4, you would think that Daniel would be the first one who would get called when there was an alarming message from God. Why do you think he was always called on last? (5:15)

In verse 16, it is interesting to note that Daniel not only had a reputation for interpretations but also for solving problems. NASB and NIV add the adjective "difficult" to "problems". NKJV has "explain enigmas". Chapter 5 was written in Aramaic and there was no mention that the message was in a different language. There appeared to be two issues. One was to be able to read the message. The second one was to be able to interpret the message. While Aramaic was not the primary language of Babylon, it was in use by some. It was especially used by the Jewish exiles. We are not specifically told what language God used to write the message on the wall. Was Belshazzar confident that Daniel could read and interpret the message? What would be Daniel's reward if he could read and interpret the message? (5:16)