Daniel 5

The Writing on the Wall: Weighed and Found Wanting

OBSERVATION · INTERPRETATION · APPLICATION

"These were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so."
Acts 17:11

CHAPTER THEME

Belshazzar knew what God had done to his grandfather and mocked Him anyway — on the last night of his life. God numbered his days, weighed his life, and gave his kingdom away before morning. Knowing the truth isn't enough; I must humble my heart.

Ed Smith · Started 20 October 2026

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00 The Text

DANIEL 5 (KJV), MARKED

Gold God — His character & actions | Green Command / instruction | Sky Key repeated word
Rose Sin / warning | Violet Promise / blessing | Amber Time / place / contrast

[1] Belshazzar the king made a great feast to a thousand of his lords, and drank wine before the thousand.

[2] Belshazzar, whiles he tasted the wine, commanded to bring the golden and silver vessels which his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple which was in Jerusalem; that the king, and his princes, his wives, and his concubines, might drink therein.

[3] Then they brought the golden vessels that were taken out of the temple of the house of God which was at Jerusalem; and the king, and his princes, his wives, and his concubines, drank in them.

[4] They drank wine, and praised the gods of gold, and of silver, of brass, of iron, of wood, and of stone.

[5] In the same hour came forth fingers of a man's hand, and wrote over against the candlestick upon the plaister of the wall of the king's palace: and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote.

[6] Then the king's countenance was changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his loins were loosed, and his knees smote one against another.

[7] The king cried aloud to bring in the astrologers, the Chaldeans, and the soothsayers. And the king spake, and said to the wise men of Babylon, Whosoever shall read this writing, and shew me the interpretation thereof, shall be clothed with scarlet, and have a chain of gold about his neck, and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom.

[8] Then came in all the king's wise men: but they could not read the writing, nor make known to the king the interpretation thereof.

[9] Then was king Belshazzar greatly troubled, and his countenance was changed in him, and his lords were astonied.

[10] Now the queen, by reason of the words of the king and his lords, came into the banquet house: and the queen spake and said, O king, live for ever: let not thy thoughts trouble thee, nor let thy countenance be changed:

[11] There is a man in thy kingdom, in whom is the spirit of the holy gods; and in the days of thy father light and understanding and wisdom, like the wisdom of the gods, was found in him; whom the king Nebuchadnezzar thy father, the king, I say, thy father, made master of the magicians, astrologers, Chaldeans, and soothsayers;

[12] Forasmuch as an excellent spirit, and knowledge, and understanding, interpreting of dreams, and shewing of hard sentences, and dissolving of doubts, were found in the same Daniel, whom the king named Belteshazzar: now let Daniel be called, and he will shew the interpretation.

[13] Then was Daniel brought in before the king. And the king spake and said unto Daniel, Art thou that Daniel, which art of the children of the captivity of Judah, whom the king my father brought out of Jewry?

[14] I have even heard of thee, that the spirit of the gods is in thee, and that light and understanding and excellent wisdom is found in thee.

15 And now the wise men, the astrologers, have been brought in before me, that they should read this writing, and make known unto me the interpretation thereof: but they could not shew the interpretation of the thing:

16 And I have heard of thee, that thou canst make interpretations, and dissolve doubts: now if thou canst read the writing, and make known to me the interpretation thereof, thou shalt be clothed with scarlet, and have a chain of gold about thy neck, and shalt be ⇄ the third ruler in the kingdom.

17 Then Daniel answered and said before the king, Let thy gifts be to thyself, and give thy rewards to another; yet I will read the writing unto the king, and make known to him the interpretation.

18 O thou king, ▲ the most high God gave Nebuchadnezzar thy father a kingdom, and majesty, and glory, and honour:

19 And for the majesty that he gave him, all people, nations, and languages, trembled and feared before him: whom he would he slew ; and whom he would he kept alive ; and whom he would he set up ; and whom he would he put down .

20 But when ⚠ his heart was lifted up, and his mind hardened in pride, he was deposed from his kingly throne, and they took his glory from him:

21 And he was driven from the sons of men; and his heart was made like the beasts, and his dwelling was with the wild asses: they fed him with grass like oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven; till he knew that ▲ the most high God ruled in the kingdom of men, and that he appointeth over it whomsoever he will.

22 And thou his son, O Belshazzar, ⚠ hast not humbled thine heart, though thou knewest all this;

23 But hast ⚠ lifted up thyself against the Lord of heaven; and they have brought the ⇄ vessels of his house before thee, and thou, and thy lords, thy wives, and thy concubines, have drunk wine in them; and thou hast praised the gods of silver, and gold, of brass, iron, wood, and stone, which see not, nor hear, nor know: and ▲ the God in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, hast thou not glorified:

24 Then was the part of the hand sent from him; and this writing was written.

25 And this is the writing that was written, ◷ MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN.

26 This is the interpretation of the thing: MENE; ▲ God hath numbered thy kingdom, and finished it.

27 TEKEL; Thou art ⚠ weighed in the balances, and art found wanting.

28 PERES; Thy kingdom is divided, and given to ◷ the Medes and Persians.

29 Then commanded Belshazzar, and they clothed Daniel with scarlet, and put a chain of gold about his neck, and made a proclamation concerning him, that he should be ⇄ the third ruler in the kingdom.

30 ◷ In that night was Belshazzar the king of the Chaldeans slain.

31 And ◷ Darius the Median took the kingdom, being about threescore and two years old.

Marked in the text

- **v1** ⚠ a great feast
- **v2** ⇄ vessels *(every occurrence)*
- **v4** ⚠ praised the gods of gold
- **v5** ◷ fingers of a man's hand
- **v5** ◷ the plaister of the wall
- **v6** ⚠ his knees smote one against another
- **v7** ⇄ the third ruler *(every occurrence)*
- **v12** ★ an excellent spirit
- **v17** Let thy gifts be to thyself
- **v18** ▲ the most high God gave
- **v20** ⚠ his heart was lifted up
- **v21** ▲ the most high God ruled in the kingdom of men

- **v22** ⚠ hast not humbled thine heart, though thou knewest all this
- **v23** ⚠ lifted up thyself against the Lord of heaven
- **v23** ▲ the God in whose hand thy breath is
- **v25** ◷ MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN
- **v26** ▲ God hath numbered thy kingdom
- **v27** ⚠ weighed in the balances, and art found wanting
- **v28** ◷ the Medes and Persians
- **v30** ◷ In that night
- **v31** ◷ Darius the Median

Marks are drawn on the KJV text. KJV "scarlet" is the NASB95's "purple"; "weighed in the balances, and art found wanting" is "weighed on the scales and found deficient"; Hebrew Bibles number v31 as 6:1.

01 Observation

WHAT DOES THE TEXT SAY?

KEY VERSE · DANIEL 5:5–6 (KJV)

5 In the same hour came forth ◷ fingers of a man's hand, and wrote over against the candlestick upon ◷ the plaister of the wall of the king's palace: and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote. 6 Then the king's countenance was changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his loins were loosed, and ⚠ his knees smote one against another.

Setting

About twenty-three years after Nebuchadnezzar's death, Babylon is under siege by the Medes and Persians. Inside the walls, "Belshazzar the king held a great feast for a thousand of his nobles, and he was drinking wine in the presence of the thousand" (v1). It is October 539 BC, and this is Babylon's last night. Daniel is now an old man, probably in his early eighties.

Structure

- vv1–4 — **the feast:** while drinking, Belshazzar "gave orders to bring the gold and silver vessels which Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken out of the temple which was in Jerusalem" (v2). The king, his nobles, wives and concubines drink from them (v3). "They drank the wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone" (v4).
- vv5–9 — **the hand:** "Suddenly the fingers of a man's hand emerged and began writing opposite the lampstand on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace" (v5). "the king's face grew pale and his thoughts alarmed him, and his hip joints went slack and his knees began knocking together" (v6). He promises purple, a gold necklace and the position of "third ruler in the kingdom" to anyone who can read it (v7). The wise men can't (v8).
- vv10–16 — **the queen remembers Daniel:** the queen enters: "There is a man in your kingdom in whom is a spirit of the holy gods" (v11) — the one Nebuchadnezzar made chief of the wise men, who had "an extraordinary spirit" (v12). Daniel is brought in (v13). The king makes the same offer (vv14–16).
- vv17–24 — **Daniel's sermon:** "Keep your gifts for yourself or give your rewards to someone else; however, I will read the inscription to the king" (v17). Daniel reminds him of Nebuchadnezzar: God

gave him greatness (vv18–19), but "when his heart was lifted up and his spirit became so proud that he behaved arrogantly, he was deposed" (v20), until he recognized "that the Most High God is ruler over the realm of mankind" (v21). "Yet you, his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, even though you knew all this, but you have exalted yourself against the Lord of heaven" (vv22–23). "But the God in whose hand are your life-breath and all your ways, you have not glorified" (v23). So the hand was sent (v24).

- vv25–28 — **the writing:** "MENĒ, MENĒ, TEKĒL, UPHARSIN" (v25). "MENĒ — God has numbered your kingdom and put an end to it" (v26). "TEKĒL — you have been weighed on the scales and found deficient" (v27). "PERĒS — your kingdom has been divided and given over to the Medes and Persians" (v28).
- vv29–31 — **that same night:** Daniel is clothed in purple and proclaimed third ruler (v29). "That same night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was slain" (v30). "So Darius the Mede received the kingdom at about the age of sixty-two" (v31).

Repeated words

vessels (vv2, 3, 23); drank / drinking wine (vv1, 2, 3, 4, 23); gods of gold and silver … (vv4, 23); writing / inscription (vv5, 7, 8, 15, 16, 17, 24, 25); interpretation (vv7, 8, 12, 15, 16, 17, 26); third ruler (vv7, 16, 29); purple and a gold necklace (vv7, 16, 29); face / countenance changed (vv6, 9, 10); father (Nebuchadnezzar) (vv2, 11, 13, 18); the Most High God (vv18, 21).

Contrasts

a thousand drinking (v1) ⟷ one hand writing (v5). Holy vessels for God (v2) ⟷ used to praise idols (v4). The king's knees knocking (v6) ⟷ Daniel calm, refusing gifts (v17). Nebuchadnezzar humbled himself (v21) ⟷ Belshazzar "knew all this" and didn't (v22). Gods "which do not see, hear or understand" (v23) ⟷ "the God in whose hand are your life-breath and all your ways." Purple and gold for Daniel (v29) ⟷ death for the king that same night (v30).

Chapter theme (my words)

Belshazzar knew what God had done to his grandfather and mocked Him anyway — on the last night of his life. God numbered his days, weighed his life, and gave his kingdom away before morning. Knowing the truth isn't enough; I must humble my heart.

02 Interpretation

WHAT DOES THE TEXT MEAN?

KEY VERSE · DANIEL 5:25–28 (KJV)

25 And this is the writing that was written, MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN.
26 This is the interpretation of the thing: MENE; God hath numbered thy kingdom, and finished it. 27 TEKEL; Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting. 28 PERES; Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians.

Who was Belshazzar?

For centuries critics said Daniel was wrong: ancient lists named Nabonidus as Babylon's last king, and no Belshazzar was known. Then cuneiform records — including the Nabonidus Cylinder and the Nabonidus Chronicle — turned up naming Belshazzar as Nabonidus's eldest son, who ruled in Babylon as co-regent while his father lived for years in Arabia. Guzik dates the co-regency from about 553 BC to the fall of the city in 539. That explains the strange offer of "third ruler" (vv7, 16, 29): Nabonidus was first, Belshazzar second — the best he could give was third. "Father" (v2) is normal ancient usage for an ancestor or predecessor; Belshazzar may have been Nebuchadnezzar's grandson through his mother.

A party under siege (vv1–4)

The Medo-Persian army was outside the walls. Babylon's walls were famous and its supplies huge, so Belshazzar threw a party. Then, drunk, he did what Nebuchadnezzar never did: he brought out the holy vessels from God's temple to toast his idols. It was deliberate mockery — a statement that Babylon's gods had beaten the God of Israel. Trapp, in Guzik, says drink takes "ale out of the pot, money out of the purse, and wit out of the head" (Eph 5:18; Prov 20:1).

The writing on the wall (vv5–9)

Our phrase "the writing on the wall" comes from here. The hand writes on the plaster "opposite the lampstand" — in the brightest spot, where everyone could see. The king who mocked God falls apart: face pale, legs giving way, knees knocking. A guilty conscience knows when God has spoken (Prov 28:1). His wise men can't read it — perhaps they could read the letters but not make sense of them, perhaps God veiled it until Daniel came.

The forgotten man (vv10–16)

The queen — most likely the queen mother, perhaps Nebuchadnezzar's daughter — remembers what the king has forgotten: Daniel. Guzik notes he seems to have been set aside, out of the current administration. Faithful men are often forgotten by the powerful until a crisis. Belshazzar's words "I have heard about you" (v14; compare v16) show he has never sought Daniel out.

Daniel's sermon (vv17–24)

Daniel refuses the gifts — he can't be bought, and he won't soften the message to earn a reward. Then, before he reads a word, he preaches. He retells chapter 4: God gave Nebuchadnezzar everything, humbled him when he was proud, and restored him when he acknowledged the Most High. Then the

charge: "you … have not humbled your heart, even though you knew all this" (v22). Guzik: Belshazzar was judged by the light he had. He had the testimony of his own family, and he sinned against knowledge (Luke 12:47–48; James 4:17). And the deepest charge: the God who holds your every breath, you have not glorified (v23; Acts 17:25, 28; Rom 1:21).

Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin (vv25–28)

The words are Aramaic weights and measures — a mina, a shekel, and halves (*parsin*, plural of *peres*, "half") — like writing "dollar, dollar, dime, half-dollars" on the wall. Daniel reads them as verbs:

- **MENĒ — numbered.** Repeated twice for certainty: God has counted the days of your kingdom and they are up.
- **TEKĒL — weighed.** You were put on God's scales and came up short (1 Sam 2:3; Ps 62:9; Prov 16:2).
- **PERĒS — divided.** Your kingdom is broken and handed to the Medes and Persians. *Peres* also sounds like *Paras*, Persia.

Clarke, in Guzik, sums them up as numeration, weighing and division.

That same night (vv29–31)

Belshazzar keeps his word and honors Daniel — and is killed hours later. Guzik cites Herodotus: Cyrus's engineers diverted the Euphrates, which ran through the city, so his soldiers could walk into Babylon along the riverbed under the walls. Isaiah had named Cyrus as Babylon's conqueror more than a century earlier, and spoke of drying up its rivers and opening its gates (Isa 44:27–45:2; compare Jer 50:38; 51:30–32, 39, 57). The city fell almost without a fight. The head of gold is gone; the silver kingdom of chapter 2 has arrived. Darius the Mede — about sixty-two — receives the kingdom; Guzik identifies him with Gubaru, the governor Cyrus set over Babylon. Daniel has outlived the whole Babylonian empire.

Word study (Aramaic)

- **feast — *lechem* (H3900):** bread, a feast, a banquet.
- **vessels — *maʾn* (H3984):** vessels, utensils.
- **concubines — *lechenah* (H3904):** a concubine.
- **praised — *shebach* (H7624):** to laud, praise, glorify.
- **lampstand — *nebrashta* (H5043):** a lamp, lampstand.
- **plaster — *gir* (H1528):** lime, plaster.
- **interpretation — *peshar* (H6591):** explanation, solution.
- **third ruler — *talti* (H8523, v7) / *telath* (H8531, vv16, 29):** third in rank.
- **extraordinary — *yattir* (H3493):** preeminent, surpassing.
- **humbled — *shephal* (H8214):** to bring low, humble.
- **life-breath — *nishma* (H5396):** breath, life.
- **MENĒ — *mene* (H4484):** numbered; a mina (a weight).
- **TEKĒL — *teqal* (H8625):** weighed; a shekel.
- **PERĒS / UPHARSIN — *peras* (H6537):** divided; a half-mina; plural *parsin*, with *u-* "and."
- **scales — *moʾzenayaʾ* (H3977):** balances, scales.

- **deficient — *chassir* (H2627):** lacking, wanting.

Cross-references

Exod 20:7; Lev 10:1–3; 1 Sam 2:3; 2 Chr 36:7, 10, 18; Ezra 1:7–11; Ps 2:4; Ps 62:9; Prov 16:2, 18; Prov 20:1; Prov 28:1; Prov 29:1; Isa 13:17–22; Isa 21:1–10; Isa 44:27–45:2; Jer 25:11–12; Jer 50:38; Jer 51:30–32, 39, 57; Luke 12:16–21, 47–48; Acts 17:24–28; Rom 1:21; 1 Cor 10:20–22; Gal 6:7; James 4:17; Heb 9:27; Rev 18:10.

03 Application

HOW DOES IT CHANGE ME?

KEY VERSE · DANIEL 5:22–23 (KJV)

22 And thou his son, O Belshazzar, ⚠ hast not humbled thine heart, though thou knewest all this; 23 But hast ⚠ lifted up thyself against the Lord of heaven; and they have brought the ⇄ vessels of his house before thee, and thou, and thy lords, thy wives, and thy concubines, have drunk wine in them; and thou hast praised the gods of silver, and gold, of brass, iron, wood, and stone, which see not, nor hear, nor know: and ▲ the God in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, hast thou not glorified:

Command to obey — humble your heart

"Yet you … have not humbled your heart, even though you knew all this" (v22). Knowing isn't enough. I know the stories, the verses, the warnings. The question is whether I've bowed. Today I'll name one truth I know but haven't obeyed, and humble myself in it. For the men I disciple, this is the man who has heard every sermon in rehab or prison and still won't surrender.

Sin to confess — treating holy things as common

Belshazzar took what belonged to God and used it for his party. My body is a temple (1 Cor 6:19–20); my time, my gifts and the Lord's Supper are holy. Where have I taken something God set apart and used it to serve myself? I'll confess it and give it back to Him.

Warning to heed — weighed and found deficient

Every life will be weighed. On my own, I come up short (Rom 3:23). Belshazzar's last night looked like any other party. There may be no warning but the one I already have (Prov 29:1; Heb 9:27). Only in Christ am I found complete (Col 2:10).

Promise to trust — God holds my breath

"The God in whose hand are your life-breath and all your ways" (v23). For the proud man that's a warning; for the humble man it's comfort. Every breath I take, every road I walk, is in His hand. I don't need to grasp for control.

Example to follow — Daniel at eighty

Forgotten by the powerful, called in only when there was trouble, Daniel was still ready — still faithful, still unbought, still telling the truth with courage. I want to finish like that: not chasing gifts or position, but ready to speak God's word when it's needed.

Worship

The God who numbers kingdoms numbers my days too (Ps 90:12). He weighs nations on His scales, and He gives kingdoms to whom He wills. Babylon fell in a night; His kingdom never will.

Prayer

Lord of heaven, You hold my breath and all my ways. Forgive me for knowing the truth and not humbling my heart. Keep me from treating holy things as common. Teach me to number my days, find me clothed in Christ when I'm weighed, and keep me faithful like Daniel to the very end. Amen.