

War of the Gods

Messages from the Book of Daniel

Message 6

God is Judge
Daniel 5:1-31

The Conquest of the Conqueror

Daniel spent most of his life in the court of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon who conquered Judah. King Nebuchadnezzar was violent and ruthless, but also ambitious. Part of his empire-building program involved accumulating wise men to serve in his court. So when he conquered Judah, he carried Daniel and other promising young men back to Babylon. There he re-educated them in the culture and religion of Babylon. These young Jewish boys faced huge obstacles to success in this strange land, but Daniel and three friends succeeded famously. In spite of, or perhaps because of their insistence on faithfully serving the true God, they rose to the top of the class and served in the very highest positions of the court. Now we come to the end of Babylon, and the story of the fall of this great empire contains a lesson for all of us.

As we have said, Nebuchadnezzar was not a worshiper of Judah's God. On the contrary, like all the other ancient pagans, he assumed that his own gods were more powerful than Judah's God. It was simple and obvious. He, Nebuchadnezzar, serving his god Marduk, had easily defeated Judah. If the God of Judah could not protect Judah from Nebuchadnezzar, Judah's God must be weaker than his god. But we know that God is in control all along. We read from the prophet Habakkuk where God predicted that the Babylonians would come conquer Judah. No, God did more than predict – God set up the plan. Listen again to Habakkuk.

Look among the nations and watch –
Be utterly astounded!
For I will work a work in your days
Which you would not believe, though it were told you.
For indeed I am raising up the Chaldeans,
A bitter and hasty nation
Which marches through the breadth of the earth,
To possess dwelling places that are not theirs. (Habakkuk 1:5-6)

Notice the use of the first person pronouns. Nebuchadnezzar thought he had conquered Judah, and as a sign of his supremacy, he carried the best of her young men to Babylon, along with the gold and silver vessels from the temple of God. But in fact he was merely carrying out the plan God had for him. He never suspected that God had trapped him into a contest he was bound to lose.

Far away in Babylon God sneaked into Nebuchadnezzar's bedchamber and gave him a terrifying dream. Then God made him forget it. Nebuchadnezzar was very upset, and called for his wise men to remind him of the dream and interpret it. No one was able – until Daniel, one of those Jewish refugees, offered his services. Nebuchadnezzar was greatly relieved to hear his dream and learn its interpretation. As he promised, he honored Daniel – but gave scant attention to the God Daniel credited with revealing his dream.

In the dream God revealed that Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom would someday be replaced by other, successively less glorious kingdoms. This greatly bothered Nebuchadnezzar. He was determined to secure his kingdom permanently. So to unify the empire with its diverse cultures he instituted a state religion. He built a huge golden idol and commanded all his servants to worship it. This time Daniel's three friends were

present and refused to go along with this idolatry. This also enraged Nebuchadnezzar, who demanded to know, “who is the god who will deliver you from my hands?” (Daniel 3:15) God answered that question. He showed up in person! When Nebuchadnezzar attempted to burn Daniel’s friends alive, God came and protected them from the flames. Nebuchadnezzar was impressed! He issued an empire-wide decree that no one might slander the God of Judah, or Nebuchadnezzar would destroy them and their families.

God visited Nebuchadnezzar again. Near the end of his life, when the kingdom was at rest and the king had made Babylon the most beautiful city in the world, God gave Nebuchadnezzar another dream. This time God warned him against pride. God warned the king to give glory to Him for all his accomplishments. Nebuchadnezzar would not listen to God, so he became insane for a while. After some time his sanity returned and he returned to the throne. At that point great, proud Nebuchadnezzar humbled himself and confessed that the God of Heaven is the true God who must be worshiped by all. Even *he* was nothing before this God. He wrote all this in a letter and published it in the whole kingdom.

For His dominion is an everlasting dominion,
And His kingdom is from generation to generation.
All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing;
He does according to His will in the army of heaven
And among the inhabitants of the earth.
No one can restrain His hand
Or say to Him, “What have You done?” (Daniel 4:34-35)

In the end the conqueror was conquered. King Nebuchadnezzar thought he had triumphed over Judah and her God, but in the end he simply fell into God’s trap. But what a trap it was! God’s trap was a plan to reveal Himself to this pagan king and call him to worship the true God. I think we shall see Nebuchadnezzar in heaven, where he is no doubt praising God every day. In the battle of the gods, the God of Judah appeared to loose, but in reality He was in control all along. In the end everyone on earth knew that Daniel’s God was superior to all other gods.

Nebuchadnezzar’s story is your story, too. Scripture tells us that we all enter this life in rebellion against God. All of us were dead set on our own plans and were determined to please ourselves. No one is born loving God. Everyone hates God for mucking up our plans. The worst fate that can happen to anyone is when God allows him to pursue his own plans. The man or woman who goes through life hating God will end up in hell where he or she will cry out in torment forever. Our only hope is that God will attack our pride, conquer our will, and humble us before Him. Our only hope is that God will not let us alone, but pursue us day and night until we surrender to Him. If you are here tonight because you love God, it is because God loved you so much He broke your sinful rebellion. If you do not worship the true God, let Nebuchadnezzar be a lesson to you. Humble yourself and worship Him. He is the God of heaven and earth. You are insane if you refuse to worship Him.

The Last King

Now we come to the last king of Babylon. Before we consider chapter 5 we should give brief attention to the question of who Belshazzar was. His name is not found in the ancient records of the kings of Babylon. This led some people to conclude that this book was flawed. Perhaps it was written centuries later than the events it describes. Unbelievers took to these ideas like flies to a fly-catcher. Since they do not believe in God, they do not believe this book is a supernatural prophecy of future events. Their natural disposition is to assume it was written after the events it predicts actually happened. That would make its composition in the second century B.C. And after such a long time you would expect the author to get some of his facts wrong. However, in 1854 a British explorer discovered some cylinders with cuneiform writing which mentioned a king of Babylon, Nabonidus, and his oldest son Belshazzar. Putting together the latest

historical data, it seems that three kings rapidly followed Nebuchadnezzar. Nabonidus was the last. He was eccentric and spent much of his time outside of Babylon. So for much of his reign Belshazzar ruled as king in his place. It was common to refer to a great predecessor as one's father, so the reference in verse 18 to Nebuchadnezzar as father does not mean that he was the blood ancestor of Belshazzar – simply that he was a preceding king. Since Belshazzar reigned under his father Nabonidus, anyone Belshazzar promoted would occupy third rank in the kingdom.

As we said Nebuchadnezzar's two immediate successors were short-lived. So when Nabonidus came to the throne, and Belshazzar with him, they were well acquainted with the reign of Nebuchadnezzar. They knew of Nebuchadnezzar's gory, spectacular military campaigns, his lavish building program, and – most important – of his encounters with the God of the Jews. The embarrassment of the first dream, the debacle of the fiery furnace, and Nebuchadnezzar's insanity were public events. (It shows how powerful Nebuchadnezzar was to survive such threats to his rule.) Then there was the proclamation that everyone one should worship the Most High God of Heaven. No one in the empire could claim to be ignorant of the work of the God of the Jews during Nebuchadnezzar's reign.

Belshazzar began his reign in an entirely different position than Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar knew nothing about the true God. Over time, God revealed Himself to the king. But when Belshazzar ascended the throne, he *did* know all that God had done. He knew that God required humility. He knew that God must be worshiped. He knew that there was one supreme God of heaven and earth – a God far, far superior to any other gods. He knew that God made Nebuchadnezzar insane until he repented and worshiped Him. Belshazzar knew all this – but he refused to acknowledge God.

But Belshazzar went beyond simple refusal to worship God. He taunted God. Belshazzar threw a great party. A thousand nobles attended, along with their wives and mistresses. Wine flowed freely, as everyone partied into the night. When merriment was at its peak, Belshazzar ordered his servants to bring out the cups and bowls dedicated to God's service in His temple. The king took these holy vessels and used them for a drunken orgy. Nebuchadnezzar had seized these things and placed them in the temple of his god as a sign that his god had conquered the God of the Jews. But at least he treated them with a certain measure of respect. Belshazzar engaged in open sacrilege. Then to further aggravate the situation, he praised the gods of gold, silver, bronze, etc. This was an open challenge to God. Belshazzar had spit in God's face. Woe to him if God were to show up!

That is exactly what happened. God's hand appeared and wrote a message on the wall. Belshazzar was horribly terrified. We might say he wet his pants in fear. He screamed for the wise men, but no one was able to interpret the message. Then the queen, probably the king's mother, reminded him of the man who interpreted dreams for Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel was hurried in, and Belshazzar promised him the third place in the kingdom if he would tell the meaning of the dream.

Daniel had no interest in Belshazzar's honors and gifts, for the writing was a message of doom. Before he gave the interpretation, Daniel preached to Belshazzar. He reminded him of the lesson of king Nebuchadnezzar – that God will not tolerate pride. Then Daniel condemned Belshazzar for his arrogance and sacrilege in profaning the vessels of God. Finally he interpreted the message. *Mene* means numbered. God has numbered the days of Belshazzar, and the number is up! *Tekel* means weighed. God has weighed Belshazzar in the scales of justice, and he falls short. *Parsin* means divided. God has divided the kingdom, and the Medes and Persians will take it for themselves. Within hours Belshazzar was dead, and the Medes and Persians ruled Babylon.

God is Judge

The name Daniel means "God is judge". *God is* the judge, and He will judge everyone on earth. In

this story it is important to note the basis of God's judgment. God did not judge Belshazzar for his drunken party – although God has repeatedly warned us never to drink to the point of drunkenness. He did not judge Belshazzar for sexual immorality, although scripture holds up monogamy as God's plan for sexuality. God judged Belshazzar for sacrilege.

This comes as a surprise to many people. Why should God care about some cups and bowls? Doesn't He claim to fill the universe with His presence? Doesn't He claim to own the whole earth? Isn't His primary desire that men do good to each other? Isn't it rather trite of God to get so worked up over a few dishes? In a word, No – and this passage shows how far off we are in understanding God. The modern west has become so infatuated with personal freedom and individual liberty, we have lost our grasp that God is sovereign. It is true – and generally beneficial – that civil governments grant us the right to worship as we see fit, but God still has the right to command us.

The first issue is to worship the one true God, not some figment of our imagination. This is the substance of the first commandment.

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me. (Exodus 20:2-3)

God is our creator and provider. He gives us the sun and rain, food and shelter, friends and families. All the blessings we have come ultimately from Him. It is terribly wrong to worship anything else, or to neglect worshiping the true God. Belshazzar sinned despicably by worshiping false gods and despising the one true God who gave him all the riches and power of the throne.

The second issue is to worship God the way He has commanded. Most of you here tonight are already worshiping the true God. Your temptation will be to commit sacrilege by sloppy or shameful worship. God tells us how to worship Him. We worship by assembling together with the pastor God has appointed to lead us. We read the scripture and pray. The pastor explains and applies the scripture to us. We eat the Lord's Supper, and baptize on occasion. We beautify our service with music. And God provides instructions in the Bible for doing these things. We baptize with water, and use bread and wine for the Lord's Supper. The Bible contains some snapshots of worship. Some of the best are in the book of Revelation.

It is sacrilegious to worship any way you want. Perhaps if you get snowed in, the best you can do is gather in your dorm, read some scripture, and pray. But ordinarily you are called to join the church on Sunday. Not all churches are true churches. Look for a church which accepts the Bible as God's word, loves Jesus, cares for the poor, and worships as God commanded. If you have not been in the habit of going to church on Sunday, you can get a ride with many of us here. I always send an email announcement of a ride to our church, but there are many other rides also. What you must not do is claim that worshiping on your own is acceptable. Remember Belshazzar!

Judgment is Coming

The most important lesson of this passage is that judgment is coming. When I was a student, Hebrews 9:27 was part of my scripture memory plan. "And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment." Many of Jesus' parables dealt with the coming judgment. An excellent example is the parable of the sheep and the goats.

"When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. ³² All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. ³³ And He will set the sheep on His

right hand, but the goats on the left. ³⁴ Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.’ ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? ³⁸ When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? ³⁹ Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ ⁴⁰ And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.’ ⁴¹ Then He will also say to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: ⁴² for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.’ ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?’ ⁴⁵ Then He will answer them, saying, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.’ ⁴⁶ And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’ (Matthew 25:31-46)

In this parable you see Jesus as the judge. Here He is numbering the deeds of all people. Here He is weighing them in the balance. Here He is dividing them. One group has followed Jesus. They were not swelled with pride. They did not insist on living according to their own desires, but they obeyed God’s commands. The other group paid little attention to Jesus. They thought God would take them however they were – as long as they did not do anything too awful. But they were wrong – dreadfully wrong. And forever they will weep for their foolishness.

No one can live up to the standard of obedience set by God. But if you believe in Jesus, God will credit His perfect obedience to you. That verse in Hebrews continues by showing us the way to escape God’s awful judgment.

And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, ²⁸ so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation. (Hebrews 9:27-28)

Jesus died to pay for your disobedience. He took upon Himself the judgment for your sins so that you do not have to bear it yourself. If you trust Him, the guilt of your sins is washed away and you get the credit for the perfect life of Jesus. Is Jesus who you are waiting for? Are you trusting Him to save you? I hope so. He is your only chance. If you trust Jesus you can spend eternity with Nebuchadnezzar in heaven instead of with Belshazzar in hell. Chose Jesus and live!

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