

# Daniel 5

## INTRODUCTION

Chapters 5 & 6 are the last two what we might call, historical narrative chapters in Daniel.

The first half of the book gives us a series of scenes in the prophet's life, while the last half is the recounting of the major visions he was given by God.

Chapter 5 tells us the story of the end of the Babylonian domination of the Middle East and the emergence of the Persians as the next power to take over.

## CHAPTER 5

**<sup>1</sup>Belshazzar the king made a great feast for a thousand of his lords, and drank wine in the presence of the thousand.**

Let's stop right there and set the scene.

We've gotten pretty familiar with Nebuchadnezzar, the mighty king of Babylon whose career as a prince and general of Babylon is the kind of thing legends are made of.

As a general, Nebuchadnezzar had led the armies of Babylon in a tremendous victory over the Egyptians at the battle of Carchemish.

This battle brought an end to the Assyrian domination of the area and set the power of Egypt back for several generations.

Following this victory at Carchemish, the Babylonians stood virtually unopposed and marched their troops throughout the area.

When his father died, Nebuchadnezzar ascended the throne and set out on a campaign to make the city Babylon a spectacle that would overwhelm any and all.

As we've read in Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar had a problem with pride that resulted in his exalting himself to the place of deity.

God judged him with a period of insanity that lasted for 7 years.

During this time he lived outdoors like an animal till he was sufficiently humbled and realized who and what he was in himself.

With his sanity restored, he regained his throne and demonstrated his conversion by worshipping God.

As we come to chapter 5, Nebuchadnezzar has died and a new king has ascended the throne of Babylon.

Actually, the Belshazzar we read about here is NOT Nebuchadnezzar's son.

Daniel shortens the story and drops out the kings between Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar.

Nebuchadnezzar reigned for 43 years – which is a long time for that period in history!

After him, his son Evil-Merodach came to the throne.

He was a frivolous and empty-headed fool and was assassinated by Neriglissar after only 2 years.

Neriglisar then reigned for 4 years.

When he died, his son Labashi-Marduk reigned for only 9 months.

A palace conspiracy saw him beaten to death.

The conspirators then appointed a man named Nabonidus, who was one of their number to take the crown.

He ruled for 17 years until the Persians conquered Babylon.

Nabonidus realized that if things continued as they had recently in the court of Babylon, there would be another conspiracy and another assassination.

So in an attempt to secure the throne for his house for generations to come, he married a daughter of Nebuchadnezzar.

This, he thought, would unite all the factions of Babylon under his reign because any children born to him would be a direct descendent of the great Nebuchadnezzar.

Now, if you're paying attention you might say, "Wait a minute *Lance – v. 1* says that the king of Babylon was this guy *Belshazzar*. How can you say *Nabonidus* was the last king?"

If that's what you were thinking – you're very sharp.

And in fact you've stumbled on one of the reasons why the critics of Daniel assign it a later date and say it's a forgery.

You see, while Daniel says *Belshazzar* was the king at the time Babylon fell, there's no extra-biblical evidence for his existence.

Ancient historians all agree that Nabonidus was the last king of Babylon.

So what are we to do?

Until the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century, we depended on the lists of kings developed by the Greek historians.

But in 1854, archeologists working in southern Iraq found some small clay cylinders about 4" long with cuneiform writing on them.

The writing commemorated the rebuilding of a temple, and contained the words of a prayer for the long life and good health of King Nabonidus AND for his oldest son, Belshazzar.

Since that find, several more Babylonian documents have been unearthed that mention Belshazzar.

We now know that during most of Nabonidus' reign, he was away on military campaigns.

While he was gone, he appointed Belshazzar to rule in Babylon.

This was a normal course of action: If a king went off on a military campaign in which he might be killed, he would place his heir designate on the throne to act as His surrogate while he was gone.

This way there would be a peaceful transition of the throne in the event he really did die.

So, Belshazzar acted as king - as his father's agent.

The 2 of them were co-regents for 14 years.

Once again, the Bible narrative stands vindicated and the critics who will not admit their error, shift their attack to other ground until they find that that

too is taken from them.

As we come to Chapter 5, Cyrus, the king of Persia, was close outside Babylon's walls.

He had already won most of the country of Babylonia, having already defeated Nabonidus, who fled to the city of Borsippa with the remnants of his army. With the main body of Babylon's army defeated, Cyrus knew he had to take the capital in order to defeat the Babylonians.

Remember last week we had talked about the magnificent security fortifications built at Babylon - the massive walls and gates and towers.

In addition, the people and the army inside Babylon had food stores for probably 20 years, and since the Euphrates River ran right through the city, there was no lack of water. They could withstand any attack.

The night is October 12, 539 BC - It was the date of the annual feast to the gods of Babylon.

So Belshazzar, in a brazen demonstration of his supreme confidence in the imperviousness of the City's defenses, stages a massive holiday feast for his chief officials.

The wine was flowing freely . . .

**<sup>2</sup>While he tasted the wine, Belshazzar gave the command to bring the gold and silver vessels which his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple which *had been* in Jerusalem, that the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them. <sup>3</sup>Then they brought the gold vessels that had been taken from the temple of the house of God which *had been* in Jerusalem; and the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines drank from them.**

Archeologists have uncovered the throne room in the palace of Nebuchadnezzar where this event would have taken place.

It is 173' long and 56' wide.

Along one long wall is a niche where the throne was elevated.

This is where Belshazzar would have sat as he presided over this feast.

There's a bit of historical perspective that we may not see here that's critical to the story.

Get the scene – the wine's been flowing, and everyone is feeling the warmth and effect of the alcohol.

Normal inhibitions are falling and thoughts that a clearer head would never allow become reasonable.

Belshazzar gives a command for some servants to go to the temple treasury of his gods and retrieve the gold and silver vessels that had been used in the Temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem.

These were sacred vessels that were to be used only in the worship of Israel's God.

They had been taken by Nebuchadnezzar and placed in the temple of his gods as trophies of their victory over Yahweh.

But Belshazzar has a plan.

He intends to use them as common drinking vessels in the drunken revelry of this feast to his gods.

What we may not realize is that this was a shocking and scandalous thought.

The people of the ancient world were superstitious in the extreme and you simply did not profane the sacred vessels used to worship a god.

This just wasn't done!

Why does Belshazzar do it now?

It's another demonstration of arrogance and pride.

Think about the situation:

- 1) The armies of Persia are outside the city walls
- 2) His father the king has fled in defeat
- 3) Most of the region of Babylon lies under Persian control

But Belshazzar throws a party and laughs off the danger and threat.

His pride in the defenses of Babylon, in the security of his own position is so great he is willing to defy centuries old conventions about what is right and proper.

Look at v. 4 . . .

**<sup>4</sup>They drank wine, and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze and iron, wood and stone.**

They were boasting in their wealth, and in their strength

Really, this is a bold dare – a dare of Israel's God.

And they're in for a rude awakening because God is going to call their bluff!

**<sup>5</sup>In the same hour the fingers of a man's hand appeared and wrote opposite the lampstand on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace; and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote. <sup>6</sup>Then the king's countenance changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his hips were loosened and his knees knocked against each other. <sup>7</sup>The king cried aloud to bring in the astrologers, the Chaldeans, and the soothsayers. The king spoke, saying to the wise *men* of Babylon, "Whoever reads this writing, and tells me its interpretation, shall be clothed with purple and *have* a chain of gold around his neck; and he shall be the third ruler in the kingdom." <sup>8</sup>Now all the king's wise *men* came, but they could not read the writing, or make known to the king its interpretation. <sup>9</sup>Then King Belshazzar was greatly troubled, his countenance was changed, and his lords were astonished.**

Picture Belshazzar sitting on his throne, yucking it up with his friends.

He looks around the room to see what everyone is doing and as his gaze scans the far wall, he sees a sight that chills him to the bone – there is a hand, nothing but a hand, and it is holding a stylus like the scribes of that day used.

In the splash of light on a wall from one of the torches that lit the room, the hand is pressing letters into the plaster of the wall.

When the archeologists unearthed Nebuchadnezzar's throne room, they found the remains of white plaster walls just as this text relates.

Immediately Belshazzar is stricken with overwhelming terror.

He gets so weak his legs won't support him – they begin to shake and the knees bang together.

He called out for wise men to come and give a reading of the words pressed into the plaster by the magical hand.

His promise of reward is enlightening and adds another touch of integrity to the story:

He says he will give him a rich new outfit, jewelry and make the interpreter 3<sup>rd</sup> in the kingdom – which is the highest position available since Nabonidus is 1<sup>st</sup>, and as co-regent he is 2<sup>nd</sup>.

Try as they might, even with that incentive, the wise men were unable even to read the writing, let alone give it's interpretation.

It seems the letters were such that the Babylonian scholars could not decipher them.

**<sup>10</sup>The queen, because of the words of the king and his lords, came to the banquet hall.**

Belshazzar's wives are mentioned as part of the revelers, so who is this who is called the queen?

This is the Queen mother as her speech and bearing prove.

This is Nabonidus' wife, a daughter of the Great King Nebuchadnezzar – Belshazzar's grandfather.

The Queen had not been a part of this feast because she was more than likely in a state of mourning over the exile of her husband in Borsippa.

With the Persians just outside the city and poised for a long siege, she knew it would be a long time till she might see her husband and so was not a part of the frivolity taking place in the court.

When word reaches her of her son's great distress she comes to the hall and sees the writing.

**The queen spoke, saying, "O king, live forever! Do not let your thoughts trouble you, nor let your countenance change. <sup>11</sup>There is a man in your kingdom in whom *is* the Spirit of the Holy God. And in the days of your father, light and understanding and wisdom, like the wisdom of the gods, were found in him; and King Nebuchadnezzar your father—your father the king—made him chief of the magicians, astrologers, Chaldeans, *and* soothsayers. <sup>12</sup>Inasmuch as an excellent spirit, knowledge, understanding, interpreting dreams, solving riddles, and explaining enigmas were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Belteshazzar, now let Daniel be called, and he will give the interpretation."**

Almost 70 years have passed since chapter 1 and Daniel was taken captive from Jerusalem!

He is now in his 80's and in retirement.

As the queen here identifies, there was a time when Daniel was the *wisest* of the wise men and their chief – but apparently he's left that post and now has passed from the scene of public life.

She uses the same words to describe Daniel that Nebuchadnezzar used in chapter 4 – that he is one in whom the Spirit of the Holy God dwells.

This Daniel has a long record of dream interpretation and for solving complex problems.

Now it's time to bring him out of retirement and call upon his skills once again. The queen keeps referring to Nebuchadnezzar as Belshazzar's "father."

There is no word in Aramaic for grandfather or grandson.

The relationship is determined by the context, so in this case we understand her to mean that Nebuchadnezzar is his grandfather.

**13**Then Daniel was brought in before the king. The king spoke, and said to Daniel, “Are you that Daniel who is one of the captives from Judah, whom my father the king brought from Judah? **14**I have heard of you, that the Spirit of God *is* in you, and *that* light and understanding and excellent wisdom are found in you.

The queen’s suggestion of Daniel to come and interpret the writing jogs the king’s memory – he remembers about Daniel and his career as chief of the wise men. He even knew Daniel’s origins.

**15**Now the wise *men*, the astrologers, have been brought in before me, that they should read this writing and make known to me its interpretation, but they could not give the interpretation of the thing. **16**And I have heard of you, that you can give interpretations and explain enigmas. Now if you can read the writing and make known to me its interpretation, you shall be clothed with purple and *have* a chain of gold around your neck, and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom.”

**17**Then Daniel answered, and said before the king, “Let your gifts be for yourself, and give your rewards to another; yet I will read the writing to the king, and make known to him the interpretation. **18**O king, the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father a kingdom and majesty, glory and honor. **19**And because of the majesty that He gave him, all peoples, nations, and languages trembled and feared before him. Whomever he wished, he executed; whomever he wished, he kept alive; whomever he wished, he set up; and whomever he wished, he put down. **20**But when his heart was lifted up, and his spirit was hardened in pride, he was deposed from his kingly throne, and they took his glory from him. **21**Then he was driven from the sons of men, his heart was made like the beasts, and his dwelling was with the wild donkeys. 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 rules in the kingdom of men, and appoints over it whomever He chooses.

Let’s pause there before going on with Daniel’s reading of the words on the wall. Belshazzar repeats the offer to enrich Daniel if he can interpret the words, but Daniel isn’t impressed and tells the king to keep his baubles.

What good is it to be 3<sup>rd</sup> in a kingdom that is only going to last for another few hours?

And signs of favor with the Babylonian king who will be dead in a few hours may mean *disfavor* with the new king who is about to come to the throne.

Also, Daniel knows what’s ahead for Belshazzar, and the way he speaks here stands in stark contrast to the way he spoke to Nebuchadnezzar in ch. 4.

Remember last week when Daniel understood the interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream to mean that he would be stricken with insanity for 7 years, how he paused in great dismay and hesitated to tell the king the meaning of the dream?

Nebuchadnezzar had to encourage Daniel to speak up, he was so reluctant to tell the king the bad news.

We see none of that here!

Daniel doesn’t have the same sense of respect or loyalty to Belshazzar he had

for Nebuchadnezzar.

And at this point, for very good reason – Belshazzar had just profaned the holy relics of God’s temple and worship.

He was a very little man, trying to bolster his pride and courage by bold acts of defiance of the gods.

It’s easy for small men like Belshazzar to get plastered and try to act like big men, taking daring steps tempting fate.

And when they are surrounded by a crowd of fawning sycophants, their little heads swell with the illusions they are more than what they really are.

Then God comes, and does something as simple as write some letters on a wall – and poof! All the braggadocio disappears and they are revealed for the simpering wimps they really are.

Belshazzar was a little man – a little man in a big position.

He had come to think that somehow he deserved his place and wanted everyone else to honor him – including the God of Israel.

So he took His sacred vessels and used them for his own delight and service.

Friends, pride had inebriated Belshazzar every bit as much as the wine had.

Pride is a spiritual drug that dulls our senses to reality.

Pride, that claiming of independence and self-sufficiency, builds a fictional world, an illusion we then try to live in.

It’s inevitable that one day the illusion will come crashing down.

Listen to these words Romans 12:3 we read this . . .

**I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith.**

Do you see how Paul contrasts pride and sobriety here?

To be sober means to be free of anything foreign that can cloud the mind.

Nothing is more deadly as an intoxicant than pride.

So Daniel rehearses Belshazzar’s grandfather’s great lesson about pride and humility and how Nebuchadnezzar came out the other side converted to God and how this was a lesson that the great king had sought to pass on to others through the proclamation we find in ch. 4.

But Belshazzar hadn’t taken that lesson to heart.

**<sup>22</sup>“But you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, although you knew all this. <sup>23</sup>And you have lifted yourself up against the Lord of heaven. They have brought the vessels of His house 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, bronze and iron, wood and stone, which do not see or hear or know; and the God who holds your breath in His hand and owns all your ways, you have not glorified. <sup>24</sup>Then the fingers of the hand were sent from Him, and this writing was written.**

**<sup>25</sup>“And this is the inscription that was written:**

**MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN.**

The words Daniel reads are Aramaic so it's a bit of a mystery why the other wise men couldn't read them.

If they were written in Aramaic script then the vowels would not have been included and this may have been the trouble they had with reading them. They prove no problem to Daniel who goes on to explain their meaning.

**<sup>26</sup>This is the interpretation of each word. MENE: God has numbered your kingdom, and finished it; <sup>27</sup>TEKEL: You have been weighed in the balances, and found wanting; <sup>28</sup>PERES: Your kingdom has been divided, and given to the Medes and Persians."**

*Mene* means "numbered" – God sets the boundaries of each kingdom and the length of their days.

The life-span for Babylon was now up, just as Daniel had foretold in ch. 2. The word *Mene* is repeated to give emphasis to the numbering of God: the days had been pre-determined, and now they had been reached.

*Tekel* means "weighed" - God weighed the Babylonian Empire, and specifically *Belshazzar*, in the scales of his justice and found that he was worthy of judgment.

He was a little man, and remained little of his own choosing.

Interesting isn't it, that pride causes shrinkage while humility enlarges.

Lifting ourselves up results in our fall and humiliation while humbling *ourselves* before the Lord results in Him lifting us up to exaltation!

*Upharsin* means "divided" – God was now turning over the rule and throne of the area to the Persians.

Actually there is a play on words with this third word.

The "U" in *upharsin* is a conjunction meaning "and."

*Pharsin* comes from the word "peres" which means "to divide" but is also a root from which the word Persian comes.

The message on the wall meant that *Belshazzar's* rule was done and it was time for another kingdom to rise and replace the Babylonians.

**<sup>29</sup>Then Belshazzar gave the command, and they clothed Daniel with purple and put a chain of gold around his neck, and made a proclamation concerning him that he should be the third ruler in the kingdom.**

**<sup>30</sup>That very night Belshazzar, king of the Chaldeans, was slain.**

Despite Daniel's earlier decline of the rewards, the king orders him to be decked out with the purple robe, gold chain and new title.

But all of this was frivolous and empty because that very night the Persians took the city and executed *Belshazzar*.

Here's how it happened . . .

The Persians had the city of Babylon surrounded.

It was a night of revelry and partying inside the walls as the Babylonians celebrated this feast of their gods we read about in v. 1.

Cyrus was a brilliant military leader and devised a way to take the dominating fortress of Babylon.

He knew there was no way they could outlast a siege – it was rumored there was a good 20 years of food set in store in the city.



He knew they couldn't attack the walls – they would just waste their men as the defenders on the wall picked them off.

Cyrus decided to turn the great strength of Babylon against itself and exploit what was considered one of the greatest advantages – the River Euphrates. Remember, the Euphrates ran right through the center of the city.

The outer walls of the city spanned the river which ran through gates, then all along the riverbanks were interior walls with hundreds of small gates the people could go through from the inside of the city to get water.

Cyrus stationed 1/2 of his best troops at the spot where the river ran under the walls into the city, and the other half where the river ran out.

Then he took the remainder of his army upriver, out of sight of the city and dug a channel from the river to a nearby lake, diverting the river from its normal course.

He had given orders to his men at Babylon that when they saw the river level drop, they were to slip under the outer walls in the river bed.

As soon as the river was about thigh deep. The Persians crawled into the river bed and found the hundreds of little gates along the riverbanks to be wide open – not one was guarding them.

The Babylonians were so confident in the impenetrability of their city they hadn't even set guards on these gates, or closed them in light of the peril outside their walls.

History records that they took Babylon without a fight.

But of course certain executions were necessary – like Belteshazzar.

Because he had refused to surrender the city the penalty was death.

Then finally v. 31 . . .

**<sup>31</sup>And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, *being* about sixty-two years old.**

Now, this introduces a loud howl and cry from the critics because they don't know where Daniel got this name, *Darius the Mede*.

Darius wasn't the Persian ruler at this point – it was Cyrus who conquered Babylon.

And besides that, there is no extra-biblical evidence to date that names someone called Darius at this time.

There's a Darius, a king of Persia later, but that isn't; the guy mentioned here.

Does this mean Daniel is in error and that this is proof this is a later forgery?

Not at all – remember, the critics said verse one was proof Daniel was in error – they said that till 1854 when they discovered writings bearing his name.

One day, it's likely we'll unearth clay tablets with Darius' name on them too.

But in the meantime, we have plenty of evidence that there was another ruler besides Cyrus that was in charge of Babylon.

Several records tell us that Cyrus had two assistants who were with him on this campaign of conquest: Ugbaru and Gubaru - (Sons of Sue Baru)

Ugbaru was a military leader while Gubaru was a political official.

Ugbaru was the one who actually lead the assault on Babylon and served as the

interim governor until order was restored in the city.  
He contracted a terminal illness and died just a few weeks after taking  
Babylon.

That's when Gubaru stepped in as the new governor of the region.  
He was more of a *political* figure than a *military strongman* as Ugbaru had  
been and was better suited to rule the province of Babylon.  
Cyrus of course, as the King of Persia, would need to return home and run his  
growing empire from it's center.

So Darius is none other than Gubaru, a governor from the region of Media.  
Daniel refers to Gubaru by the name given him by the Babylonians – Darius.  
Darius ruled the province of Babylon as governor for the next 17 years, even  
outlasting Cyrus.

## CONCLUSION

Chapter 5 records the fulfillment of Daniel's interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's  
dream in chapter 2.  
The Babylonians golden head has been superceded by the silver chest and arms  
of the Persians.  
And the great lesson on pride Nebuchadnezzar had learned in ch. 4 is repeated in  
ch. 5.

Once again, God proves that He is sovereign over the affairs of earth.  
In the final analysis, mighty men, kings with vast armies and wealth at their  
disposal are nothing more than pawns God uses to accomplish His plan for  
the ages.  
Now, a statement like that is horribly offensive to the proud.  
But these last 2 chapters have proven it true.  
God is sovereign, and man is completely and utterly dependent on him.  
I want to end tonight by looking at v. 23 one more time. Daniel says . . .

**<sup>23</sup>And you have lifted yourself up against the Lord of heaven. They have brought the vessels of His house 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, bronze and iron, wood and stone, which do not see or hear or know; and the God who holds your breath in His hand and owns all your ways, you have not glorified.**

Belshazzar's supreme sin was simply that he did not give God His due.  
He did not glorify the very One who held his life in His hand.  
God owned Belshazzar's every moment – but he lived as though he could do  
what he pleased, when he pleased.  
Don't countless men and women commit this very same atrocity every day of their  
lives?  
They take the life God has given them and that He sustains with every breath  
they breath, and they live as though they are their own gods.  
Daniel's diagnosis of Belshazzar's sin is this – You have not glorified God!

What is the greatest sin? Think about that for a moment.

Is not the greatest sin to violate the greatest commandment?

And what is the greatest commandment?

Jesus said it – to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.

So the greatest sin is to NOT love the Lord with all you have and are.

The only thing that keep us from loving God more, from glorifying Him as He is worthy – is pride and self-sufficiency.

We learned this lesson last week – but it not a lesson we learn once and then go away forever perfected in.

It is a lesson we return to again and again – each time the Spirit peels off another layer of stinky self like the skins of an onion.

May God uses these lessons in the life of Belshazzar and Nebuchadnezzar to wean us off the terrible error of self-sufficiency and independence we call pride.