

# THE GONER PARTY

DANIEL 5:1-12    November 14, 2018

What's the most uncomfortable party or social gathering you've ever been to? I remember years ago Kelly and I were going to do some music at a wedding, so we were invited to the rehearsal dinner. And at the dinner, the father of the bride made a speech, in which he talked about how his soon-to-be son-in-law really didn't make enough money and wasn't good enough for his daughter. Things sort of trended down from there.

Most parties don't crash and burn *quite* as badly as the one we see in Daniel chapter 5. The evening starts off as you might expect: The king and a thousand of his nobles are throwing a rager, but before the night is over, the king will be dead, the empire will fall and a new world power takes over.

In verse 1 we find we're no longer reading about Nebuchadnezzar. Now we see a king named Belshazzar. We've got some catch up to do, historically speaking, because a *lot* has happened since the close of chapter 4. Let me try and get us up to speed.

The year is 539 B.C. At least 25 years have passed since the close of chapter 4. Nebuchadnezzar is long dead and, as was common in those days, there were a few shake ups in the palace once he was gone. Charles Ryrie gives a good summary for us:

*"Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 [B.C.] and was succeeded by his son, Amel-Marduk. He in turn was murdered by his brother-in-law, Nergal-sareze. [Nergal] was succeeded 4 years later by his son Labashi-marduk, who was assassinated that same year by a group that included Nabonidus, who was made king."<sup>1</sup>*

Nabonidus was married to one of Nebuchadnezzar's daughters. They had a son named Belshazzar, who eventually became co-regent with his dad. Nabonidus was often far and away from Babylon, so Belshazzar was there on the throne in the city, keeping the home fires burning. This explains why, later in the text, Belshazzar will offer the reward of the position of third ruler in the kingdom. His dad was first, he was second, and the third would be given to whoever could interpret the writing on the wall.

At this point, Daniel is in his 80's at least. He had been taken from Jerusalem around 605 B.C., it's now 539 B.C. So, if Daniel was 15 when he was captured, he'd be 81 now. He's no longer actively serving in the empire or the palace. At some point after Nebuchadnezzar's death he had either retired from public service or had been pushed out by one of the other kings.

One other major piece of historical context: The army of the Medes were right outside the gates of Babylon. They had been winning battles, making their way to the capital. They had, perhaps, laid siege, or (at least) arrived in hopes of toppling the empire.

Why was this of so little concern to Belshazzar that he threw this huge party? Well, it's possible that this was an *annual* festival, city-wide and that the king wanted to keep morale high. And, some historians record that when the Medes breached the city walls, there was no fighting because all the Babylonian soldiers were drunk.

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<sup>1</sup> Ryrie Study Bible

It also seems likely that Belshazzar was so confident in Babylon's strength and supplies that it didn't bother him when an invading force showed up. It's true that the city *seemed* invulnerable. Her walls were 15 miles square, 300 feet high, made of brick. They were so thick that 4 chariots could travel abreast across the top.<sup>2</sup> The people within had enough food and water to last upwards of *twenty years*!<sup>3</sup> And so, with bravado, Belshazzar commences his wild bacchanal. As Bible students, we know that some trust in chariots, some trust in horses, some trust in thick walls and stores of grain, but it is *the Lord* who is in charge of this world and the flow of history.

**Daniel 5:1 - Belshazzar the king made a great feast for a thousand of his lords, and drank wine in the presence of the thousand.**

Human beings have an incredible capacity to *ignore* the warnings and dangers of life, especially in regard to spiritual things. I'm sure we've all heard someone say something like, "When I'm on my deathbed I'll become a Christian." I don't know if you've noticed, but very few people end up dying in their bed, on the night they assume they will. Here, the Babylonians think they're having a swell time, while killers were right outside the doors. The king and his leadership were getting hammered, while Darius diverted the waters of the Euphrates, which would dry up the canals that fed into the city, giving the Medes space enough to walk right in.

The scene reminds me of how, in the Great Tribulation, while the whole world is crashing down in wrath and disaster, the unbelievers will have a holiday jubilee to celebrate the death of the Lord's two witnesses. They'll send gifts and make merry while death is at the door.

By the way, archaeologists have uncovered a great hall in the ruins of Babylon that would accommodate a party of this size. As usual, human research is always playing catch up to the truth God has already revealed.

**Daniel 5:2-4 - <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. <sup>4</sup> They drank wine, and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze and iron, wood and stone.**

To clarify: When the text calls Nebuchadnezzar his 'father' the word doesn't have to be defined the way we do. It can mean ancestor or father or grandfather.

In the ample stores of Babylon's riches, these vessels from the Temple of the Lord stood out in magnificence and rarity. And in the ample flood of his unholiness, Belshazzar, in his drunken delirium, thought they would make the most impressive chalices for his party. He felt that it would be good to mock the God that Nebuchadnezzar had come to honor, instead magnifying the gods of gold and silver, bronze and iron. You'd think they'd be petitioning their god of war, but instead they made merry, unaware of their impending doom.

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<sup>2</sup> J. Vernon McGee Thru The Bible study

<sup>3</sup> Believers Knowledge Commentary

These party-goers illustrate for us the fact that, often times, people don't realize how lost they are. In 2015 two California hikers went missing for 4 days in the Southern California wilderness. After running out of their meager water supplies, they began hallucinating, became separated. At one point one of the hikers had to fight off an animal. When she was finally found, "her mouth was so full of dirt the first man to reach her was afraid she would choke if he gave her water." She would later say in an interview: "I honestly didn't even know I was missing, I didn't know I was gone, I didn't know anything was going on...I just thought I was in a big dream."<sup>4</sup> That particular story has a happy ending, the hikers survived and were rescued. But the average unbeliever is out there, lost in the wilderness, held captive by Satan, unaware that they're a few breaths away from an eternity in hell.

Now, in these verses we are twice reminded that the vessels had been set apart for holy service unto the Lord. And so are you! We're not made of gold or silver. We're of much greater value than that. Paul said in Second Corinthians:

**2 Corinthians 4:7 - But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.**

Then, in Second Timothy, he said that we are meant to be:

**2 Timothy 2:21 - ...vessel(s) for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work.**

You are a precious vessel, set apart for the Lord. You were meticulously fashioned. You're a prized possession in the Lord's Kingdom. And you are meant to be filled with holiness and power, useful in God's hands for good work and for honor.

The question is: If our lives were a cup, which god are we toasting? What is filling us up? Whose table are we serving? Good questions for each of us to answer tonight.

**Daniel 5:5 - <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.**

That hall which archaeologists uncovered that I mentioned before was *also* found to have plaster walls. Just a fun tidbit for us tonight.

Here we learn that God attends your parties! He invites Himself. The action of Belshazzar taking these Temple vessels and using them in such a carnal way was the final straw, the last drop of iniquity that caused the cup of God's wrath to spill over. No more long-suffering. No more patience. Judgment would come that night.

The message written on the wall would be one of doom, not in a generation or a year or 40 days, but before the sun rose.

Now, wait just a minute...what about the many decades of wickedness perpetrated by Nebuchadnezzar? Wasn't his gold image even *more* blasphemous? What about chapter 4? Why did *he* seemingly get chance after chance in comparison to Belshazzar?

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.foxnews.com/us/california-hiker-missing-4-days-says-she-hallucinated-wildly-tried-to-eat-rocks-and-dirt>

Well, we don't know all of God's...calculations (to use an insufficient term). We don't know why King Saul seemed to get in trouble 'faster' than David from our perspective. What we *do* know is that God *is* long-suffering and patient. We know He *is* merciful. Speaking in Genesis the Lord said, "The iniquity of the Amorites isn't full yet. So I'm going to wait to destroy them." He said something similar of His own people Israel and Judah in Ezekiel 9. But we also know that God is *just*. And, eventually, mercy expires and judgment comes. *When* God pours out His wrath, we can be sure it is done with justice.

**Psalm 9:8 (NIV) - <sup>8</sup> He rules the world in righteousness and judges the peoples with equity.**

That night, the iniquity of Babylon was full and the end had come for them.

**Daniel 5:6 - <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.**

The Lord was able to get Belshazzar's attention, even in his drunken stupor. But boy did he sober up in a hurry. He didn't know what the words meant, but it obviously wasn't good. He was convicted, exposed to his guilt and about as scared as a person can be.

**Daniel 5:7-9 - <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.**

At this point, my question is: What are these guys good for? They're never *any* help in these stories! Isn't this your job?!? To be able to decipher this stuff? I mean, we joke about the weathermen getting it wrong, but this is a whole other level.

But it reminds us that worldly wisdom and worldly training only go so far. There is truth and understanding and discernment that is found in God that *cannot* be found elsewhere. This is why, in a time of crisis, you want a Spirit-filled, Bible-believing Christian around. This is why in a time of national distress church attendance swells. People at your job who never want to talk about the Lord suddenly start seeking you out asking tough questions. It's because we're wired to know that some answers are only found in God. So, *be* that Spirit-filled, Bible believer wherever you find yourself.

In Belshazzar's case, there was someone who could point him in the right direction:

**Daniel 5:10-12 - <sup>10</sup> The queen, because of the words of the king and his lords, came to the banquet hall. 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 Belshazzar, now let Daniel be called, and he will give the interpretation.”**

This isn't Belshazzar's wife. This is the queen mother. Based on her kind, belabored, comforting words to him *and* her opinion of Daniel we can assume that this is either Nebuchadnezzar's widow or his daughter. She hadn't been at the party and, clearly, had more of Nebuchadnezzar's perspective when it came to Daniel and the God of Israel.

Now, I find her action to be a great encouragement. Because *she* didn't know the answer or what to do, *but* she said, "Listen, here's what you do: Call Daniel. He's a spiritual man, he knows things, his God speaks to him." For us, it's an encouragement. Maybe you *don't* know what to say in a situation or what answer to give to some tough question, but you *do* know other Spirit-filled Christians. And you *do* know how to go to God's word and see what the Lord has said. So, even if you aren't sure the answer, help direct people to where they *can* find it.

We're going to leave off there for tonight, with Belshazzar weak at the knees.

A question that came to my mind is this: It's been 25 years since chapter 4...what has Daniel been doing all this time? Well, we don't know. But we *do* know that the testimony of his faith had spread far and wide. Ezekiel references Daniel as a profoundly righteous man, like Noah or Job. And one of the wisest men ever.

In the first 4 chapters of the book we saw how he lived as a young man. In chapter 6 we'll see how he lived as an old man. We can be sure these middle years were the same. He was a man of prayer. A man of integrity. A man of thankfulness. A man who allowed God to use him in his regular life. He reminds me a little bit of these golden vessels. Set apart for the Lord, but finding himself in some far corner of the world. But, despite being there, he could still shine and serve and remain holy.

Perhaps you feel like you're on a shelf somewhere in some wicked Babylon. The Lord is with you, just as He was with Daniel. And you are of much more value than gold. You're the Lord's masterpiece, meant to be filled with His power. A vessel made for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work. *You're* the Daniel wherever you find yourself. Whether you're old or young or somewhere in-between. You can be God's man or God's woman wherever you are, filled with the Holy Spirit who has been given as your Helper and Sustainer, so that you can shine light in the dark, bring truth to the world and be a part of rescuing those who don't even know they're lost.