

Even kings must bend before the King: the sequel

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[0 : 00] And let's pray. Gracious God, we thank you that you have not left us in the dark, in his name we pray. Amen.

There was an aircraft carrier that was cruising along quite happily one day when the radio came to life. Attention, attention. The message said, move five degrees to the east.

Though the admiral on board wasn't happy, how dare this other ship ask them to change course.

They were the most important ship in the Navy. So the reply was sent.

We will maintain our course. You move. Immediately the response came back. Coalition imminent. Please divert your course.

The admiral got even more indignant. He replied, this is the aircraft carrier, USS, whatever it was called. We are the flagship of the Navy being accompanied by three other destroyers.

[1 : 29] You move. A second later, the message came back. I am a lighthouse. Your call. Every preacher has their favorite illustrations, and that was one of the favorites of my old pastor, Vaughan Roberts.

And that story helpfully sets up the question we want to ponder today. What happens when you set yourself on the mission? What happens when you set yourself on a collision course with something that cannot be moved?

What happens when you set yourself on a collision course with the creator of the universe? Let me remind you once again of the main message of Daniel.

Despite appearances, the God of God of God is always in charge. He is the one and only true God. So he rules over all kings and all kingdoms.

And if you've been following on in this series, hopefully that has been pretty clear. That was certainly the lesson King Nebuchadnezzar had to learn last week, to humble himself before the Lord Most High.

[2 : 47] That's the wise thing to do. But today, we have a sequel. We have another king. And this king has decided to put himself on a coalition course with God.

He's decided to do the opposite of King Nebuchadnezzar. So what happens when you decide to put yourselves on a coalition course with the creator of the universe?

Well, this sequel will show us it is the most foolish thing you could possibly do. So let's pay close attention as we move through this story, scene by scene, focusing on the key actions in particular.

And let's begin by looking firstly at the insolent desecration. The insolent desecration. The story begins with a new character, King Belshazzar.

Given that the last few chapters have been all about King Nebuchadnezzar, this feels rather abrupt. Who is this guy? What's he doing here? So it's probably worth pausing just to set some historical context.

[4 : 05] It appears we have a time jump. Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 BC. And by this point, he's been dead for over 20 years.

There have been a few other kings in the meantime. But at this point, a guy called Nabonidus is on the throne. But Nabonidus had to be out of town a lot.

So his son, Belshazzar, served with him as co-regent and was basically the de facto king in his absence.

Now, you might say, wait a minute. I thought in verse 2, Nebuchadnezzar is called his father. But actually, by father here, they really mean something like ancestor or forefather, rather than his literal biological father, as the footnote in the NIV makes clear.

So that's who Belshazzar is. And in verse 1, he's feasting. And actually, I wonder already if that is a hint of what kind of king Belshazzar is.

[5 : 21] While Nebuchadnezzar's legacy included great military success, competent government, and even one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, Belshazzar's one claim to fame is throwing a party.

Quite a step down from one king to another, right? Nebuchadnezzar builds an empire. His grandson books the caterer.

And even more shockingly, the historians tell us he's holding this party even when his enemies are camped outside the city walls.

For him, thinking about how to defend his people is clearly not on the agenda. He's much more interested in pleasing himself and satisfying his desires.

So no wonder there is so much focus on drinking. Did you notice that? Verse 1, the king is drinking wine.

[6 : 28] Verse 2, it says, while Belshazzar was drinking his wine. Verse 3, the king and his nobles, his wives and concubines, drank from them.

Verse 4, again, you've got that phrase, as they drank the wine. So that is the kind of party we're talking about. Champagne, vodka, tequila are all on free flow.

But that's still not enough for Belshazzar. After all, he has a thousand nobles in attendance, all dressed to impress. And Belshazzar has to make the biggest impression of all.

So in verse 2, Belshazzar calls for the temple goblets. The ones Nebuchadnezzar had taken from Jerusalem, but kept tucked away in Babylon's temple.

Out of respect for their sacred character. But Belshazzar has no respect for holy things. He treats them like eye candy.

[7 : 33] Like show props. And hands them out like plastic cups for another round of drinking. This is sacrilege of the highest order.

And make no mistake. This isn't just showing off. The king is mocking what those goblets stood for. The god of Israel.

You see, these items had been used to honor God. And here in exile, they were symbols of God's presence and promises. But for Belshazzar, these items were simply another opportunity to put down Yahweh.

And that's why, verse 4, he uses them to raise a toast to other gods. And that, my brothers and sisters, is the real issue.

It's not alcohol. It is the blatant mockery of God. It is the way Belshazzar isn't afraid to show his middle finger to him.

[8 : 47] It's the insolent desecration of taking what belongs to the living God and treating it like a mere plaything.

Good for a laugh or for a cheap thrill. And this isn't merely a Babylonian problem. You see, we might not drink wine out of a sacred temple cup today.

But are there other ways in which we might show disdain for God? Or desecrate what belongs to him? The answer is yes.

We also show disdain and desecrate the things of God when we trivialize spiritual things. Take church, for instance.

God designed the church to be the very place where his manifold wisdom is put on display, according to Ephesians 3 verse 10. It is his temple, his priesthood, his dwelling place.

[9 : 56] But when we treat church like a shopping mall, where it's all about providing a service to us, the religious customer, when we treat church as if it's all about pleasing ourselves and satisfying our desires by giving us the best worship experience possible, whatever that might mean, we're in danger of doing exactly what Belshazzar did.

Or when we invoke the name of God, or the symbol of the cross, or the words of the Bible simply to score political points, or to impress a religious constituency, in order to show people how moral or righteous or fearless we are, we are making light of what we shouldn't.

We're taking something precious and sacred, something intended to glorify God, and twisting it into a tool for our own personal gain or entertainment.

We turn the things of God into playthings. And in doing so, we are playing a dangerous game. We are setting ourselves on a collision course with the creator of the universe.

So what happens if we go down that road? Verse 4 already sounds a warning bell. Anyone who knows the Old Testament can see that this is not going to end well.

[11:36] Because every time people worship silver and gold, like Belshazzar and his crew are doing here, things unravel fast.

To take just one of many examples, listen to what God says in Hosea 8 verse 4. It should be on the screen. Hosea 8 verse 4.

It will be on the screen. Are we good anyway? They set up kings without my consent. They choose princes without my approval. With their silver and gold, they make idols for themselves to their own destruction.

And that is exactly what happens. We come now to the next pivotal action in our scene.

Secondly, the divine interruption. The divine interruption. Belshazzar gave God the middle finger.

[12:40] So what does God do? He shows his own fingers. Verse 5. A hand appears out of nowhere. The finger of God.

The same finger that struck Pharaoh in the plagues. Exodus 8. The same finger that carved the Ten Commandments out of stone. Deuteronomy 9.

The same finger, Jesus says, drives out demons. Luke 11. And now those fingers begin to write. Slowly.

Silently. On the wall. By the lampstand. Where no one can miss it. And you have to understand.

The atmosphere now is less kids cartoon. More horror movie. Just look at how freaked out the king is.

[13:37] Verse 6. His face turned pale. And he was so frightened that his legs became weak. And his knees were knocking. And actually the NIV is just being polite.

Literally, it says, the knots of his loins were loosened. In other words, he lost control of his bladder. And possibly bowels.

He is absolutely terrified. As he should be. He's messed around with God. And now he's literally made a mess of himself.

You see, all this while, Belshazzar thinks he is untouchable, doesn't he? His social, his power, his wealth, his position can keep him safe from any consequences of sin against God.

Oh, nothing could touch him. But the truth is, he's in more danger than he could ever imagine.

Because no amount of money, power, power, fame, can protect you the moment God decides the right thing is on the wall.

[14:58] And not even religion can protect you either. You see, sometimes we can treat Jesus like some comprehensive insurance policy.

We say, hey, there are no consequences to my sin. and I can do whatever I want because Jesus, right? Isn't he all grace?

But once again, to talk like that is to treat the most sacred being of all, Jesus himself, like a plaything. It's to desecrate him.

And the scriptures are filled with warnings and examples of how our actions, even as believers, have real and painful consequences.

For God is too kind to leave us alone. He must interrupt when we treat his beloved son in this way and are recklessly squandering our greatest treasure.

[16:03] But even now, Belshazzar isn't thinking about God at all. Instead, verse 7, he summons the enchanters, astrologers, and diviners and offers them rewards if they can interpret the writing on the wall.

And if you have been reading Daniel from chapter 1 onwards, you almost want to do a face palm because every time these guys are caught in, how do they do?

They're absolutely useless. Makan gaji buta sahaja. And here again, it's no different.

They don't know anything. It's absolutely ridiculous. And I think that is how we are meant to read it.

We are meant to treat them almost as a joke at this point.

But are we sure the joke isn't on us? You see, when we're faced with problems, where do we so often turn first for wisdom?

[17:16] Is it the counsel of scripture? Or the Instagram reel of influencers? Do we turn to the word of God or hot takes from TikTok?

If we pause and reflect, I think many of us will admit we are far quicker to scroll for wisdom than to search the scriptures.

And sometimes, God has to peel back the curtain and show us that those voices, however confident they sound, are powerless when it comes to matters of utmost significance.

But thankfully, in Daniel 5, there is someone present who knows where to go. The queen. Or more likely, the queen mother, as in the NIV footnote.

I say queen mother because if she was just the queen, she probably would already have been in the banquet hall and she probably wouldn't speak to Belshazzar the way this woman does. In verse 10, she basically tells her son, forget all these wise men.

[18:30] You only need one man in your kingdom, Daniel. Now it appears that Daniel by now in his 80s has been out of the spotlight for a long time.

Once Nebuchadnezzar died, perhaps he was pushed aside and forgotten. But now, verses 11 and 12, the queen mother recalls his remarkable gifts, the ability to interpret dreams and solve problems and so on.

So she says with confidence, call for Daniel. He will tell you what it means. And at this moment of divine interruption, Daniel was ready.

And isn't it interesting that the queen mother calls him by his Hebrew name, not his Babylonian one?

Again, it hints at his long-term distinctive faithfulness. By this point, Daniel is so clearly identified as God's loyal servant that even the queen mother uses his Hebrew name without a second thought.

[19:46] And so Daniel comes into the king's presence, which brings us to the next pivotal action, which is really one big dialogue.

And I've called this section the repudiation of wisdom. So thirdly, the repudiation of wisdom. Verse 13. So Daniel was brought before the king, and the king said to him, Are you Daniel, one of the exiles my father the king brought from Judah?

And you can hear the itch in his voice, can't you? Why? Because if Daniel really is from Judah, then the one man who holds the answer is linked to the very god Belshazzar has just mocked.

That's an uncomfortable thought, and the king knows it. So he attempts to downplay Daniel's status. Look at verse 14.

I have heard that the spirit of the gods is in you, and that you have insight, intelligence, and outstanding wisdom. Then verse 16. Now I have heard that you are able to give interpretations and to solve difficult problems.

[21:13] Now notice how twice he says, I have heard. It's like he is saying, I'm not really convinced, but the rumor is, you're good at this, so I'll give you a chance.

You see, Belshazzar isn't coming to Daniel out of reverence for his god, or genuine belief in Daniel's abilities. He's only gone to him because he's been back into a corner.

That's why he offers rewards in verse 16. He's treating Daniel like a hired gun, someone potentially useful for getting him out of this mess, but not someone who could teach him to honor this god.

But Daniel doesn't even blink. He doesn't flatter, but stands there like an unimpressed prosecutor. Without hesitation, verse 17, he just says, keep your gifts.

I don't want them. I'm not for sale. But I will read the writing anyway and reveal to you the wisdom of God. And so let me give you a history lesson, verses 18 and 19.

[22:32] your majesty, the most high God gave your father, Nebuchadnezzar, sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendor.

Because of the high position he gave him, all the nations and people of every language dreaded and feared him. Those the king wanted to put to death, he put to death.

Those he wanted to spare, he spared. Those he wanted to promote, he promoted. And those he wanted to humble, he humbled.

So basically Daniel tells Belshazzar, you know what, your ancestor was the real deal. I mean, people feared him because he had real power.

Whatever he says, goes. Compared to him, you are a lightweight. But here is the thing. everything Nebuchadnezzar had, it's all because the Most High God gave it to him.

[23:42] That's the only reason. His sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendor all came from God alone. Then Daniel gets to the key point, verse 20.

So Daniel now says, remember what happened last week when Nebuchadnezzar got too big for his boots?

The moment he thought, I'm the man, is the very moment God brings him crashing down. Verse 21. He was driven away from people and given the mind of an animal.

He lived with the wild donkeys and ate grass like the ox. And his body was drenched with the dew of heaven until he acknowledged that the Most High God is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and sets over them anyone he wishes.

And so, this mighty king is reduced to an animal-like existence grazing in the fields. Only when he finally admits that God is the Most High does his sanity return.

[25 : 01] The lesson couldn't be clearer. Nebuchadnezzar thought he had built his own empire, but the truth is, every bit of it was on loan from God.

And only when this king bent his knee before the king of kings and acknowledged and worshipped him was he restored.

That's the history lesson. But now Daniel moves from history lesson to direct accusation, verse 22. But you, Belshazzar, his son, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this.

Did you hear that? You knew all this. You can't plead ignorance. You knew. You knew that Nebuchadnezzar was the greatest king Babylon ever had.

You knew he even broadcasted his humiliation and his return to God. Chapter 4 is basically his testimony for the whole world to read. So Daniel can say to Belshazzar with total confidence, you knew.

[26 : 19] You knew your grandfather was at the top of the food chain. You knew how God knocked him down to the bottom. You knew the lesson. You knew how Nebuchadnezzar said, I was proud.

That is wrong. It's God who should get all the glory. You know this. And yet you, Belshazzar, just shrugged it all off and said, up yours God.

I've been charged. Verse 23. Instead, you have set yourself up against the Lord of Heaven. You had the goblets from his temple brought to you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines, drank wine from them.

You praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone which cannot see or hear or understand. But you did not honour the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways.

What a stinging indictment. But before we wag the finger at Belshazzar, let's ask ourselves, are our hearts also in the verse 23 mode?

[27 : 44] Are our hearts set against God? It's possible. True, we probably are not as blatant about it as Belshazzar, God.

But whenever we tell God, thanks but no thanks, I would rather do things my way than yours, our hearts are in verse 23 mode.

Or whenever we take the gifts he has given us, our work or our talents or even our money, and are tempted to misuse them for ourselves rather than for him, we are in verse 23!

23 mode. So how does God deal with our verse 23 hearts? Also by a history lesson.

For you see, if you are a Christian today, what do you know? What is it God has revealed to you?

[29 : 03] You know he has revealed himself also through the humbling of a king. Except this king isn't humble because he is forced to be, but because he chose to be.

It is in his very nature. Indeed, this king doesn't defile the holy things, but takes defiled sinners and makes them holy.

He uses his hands not to despise or degrade others, but to heal, bless, and serve them. And eventually he stretched out those hands to die on the cross so that one day even those who are desecrated or disgraced can be on the guest list for the best heavenly party ever.

But even though he died, this humble man hasn't ceased to be king. We know this because the Bible tells us in Romans 1, verse 3 to 4 that Jesus was declared to be the son of God in a powerful way by his resurrection from the dead.

His resurrection is the ultimate sign, the cosmic proof that he is the true and living king, the one with all authority and power.

[30 : 31] It is the ultimate history lesson for all of us. But the difference, my friends, is that this history lesson is intensely personal.

For God is really saying to us, my friends, as you consider history, consider Jesus. This is who he is. He is the Lord of heaven. He reigns. He rules. He is always in charge. And he loves you. He's seen and heard you at your very worst.

And yet he died for you. He's ready to feast with you. The very ones who have set your hearts against him.

So will you open your heart to such a king? He's not Belshazzar. He's not Nebuchadnezzar. He's the best king.

[31 : 40] And aren't we just fools if we reject him. And that in fact is what verse 23 also shows us.

Another pastor taught me this. But look again at the second half of verse 23. Is that not what is being highlighted? wicked? Yes, what Belshazzar does is wicked, but it is also foolish.

Because think about it. What is so wise about praising gold and silver and bronze and all the rest of it when they can't see, they can't hear, they can't understand?

They're not alive. They're nothing. And so what a silly thing to do to go to them. And what is so wise about ignoring the one true God, the God who literally holds your life and every step in his hand?

And who in fact has chosen to give his very life for yours? Isn't that a completely dumb move? That is a complete repudiation of wisdom.

[33 : 04] In fact, Jesus once told a parable that makes very much the same point. Do you remember the parable of the foolish rich man?

This guy was also invested in material things and in fact his philosophy of life was eat, drink, and be married, just like Belshazzar.

And what did God say to him? You fool. What is the use of all that if you don't honor God because he can take your life at any time?

That's why you're a fool. And just like the rich fool, Belshazzar's attitude seals his faith.

that takes us to our fourth and final action in today's story, the fall of the arrogant. The fall of the arrogant. We finally get to the writing on the wall.

[34 : 05] Now, you might be wondering what made it so difficult to read. Well, that's because whether the writing was in Hebrew or in Aramaic, both were written without vowels.

vowels. So the same set of letters could mean all sorts of different things depending on which vowels you insert. And at first glance, the most obvious way to read the words looks like something about money, a mina, a shekel, and two half-shekels.

But would God send a supernatural message just to count coins? That seems absurd. No wonder the Babylonian wise man was stumped.

But God has sent Daniel and filled him with his spirit, so now he provides the authoritative interpretation for us, verses 26 to 28. Mene, God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end.

Tekel, you have been weighed on the scales and found one thing. Paris, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.

[35 : 16] So this is God's message to Belshazzar. Your days are numbered, you have been weighed and found one thing, your kingdom will be given away.

And whether it is Belshazzar or some other human kingdom, the message of this writing on the wall is the same. Anyone who puts themselves on a coalition course with God will eventually fall.

So what does Belshazzar do? Amazingly, he simply proves his foolishness. He proves he is still not listening. Verse 29. Then at Belshazzar's command, Daniel was clothed in purple, a gold chain was placed around his neck, and he was proclaimed the third highest ruler in the kingdom.

Now notice what he both does and doesn't do. Belshazzar continues to act like a king. He thinks of himself as still being in charge.

And more damningly, he offers zero words of praise and acknowledgement to God, unlike Nebuchadnezzar. He offers no words of confession.

[36 : 36] And so the writing is truly on the wall for Belshazzar. He has had his opportunity, but now judgment comes, verses 30 and 31.

That very night, Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain, and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom at the age of 62. Like the rich fool in Jesus' parable, his very life is taken that very night.

God. And that brings us to today's key takeaway. You see, the whole point of Daniel's speech to Belshazzar, isn't it, is to tell him, it's too late.

You've had your chance. You've had Nebuchadnezzar's testimony. You know who God is and what he's done, but you've been arrogant and your downfall is inevitable.

The writing was always on the wall for you. But now God says, over to us. Just like Belshazzar knew Daniel chapter 4, we know not just Daniel chapter 4 but also Daniel chapter 5.

[37 : 55] We don't just have one testimony, but two testimonies of one king who did bend before the king of kings and another who didn't.

And we've seen the outcome. And in fact, we don't just have Daniel 4 and 5. Unlike these ancient kings, we hold in our hands the breathtaking story of a Christ who welcomes us into his kingdom where he reigns with joy.

We know this. So will our lives echo Nebuchadnezzar's humility or Belshazzar's pride?

And we can't sit on the fence forever. You see, God's patience is real, but it is not endless.

His kindness is meant to lead us to repentance, not to complacency. For as Paul reminds us in Acts 17:30-31, can we put it on the screen?

[39 : 04] Again, Acts 17:30-31. In the past, God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.

For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him for the dead.

In other words, Jesus is alive. Jesus will return, and he will judge. You know this as well.

But that day of judgment has not arrived yet. Which means there is still time. Time today to avoid Belshazzar's mistake.

Time today to confess our foolishness and dishonor of God. Time today to turn back to him and trust in Jesus. That is why the New Testament urges us to turn to God now, because it is not yet the day of judgment.

[40 : 13] And friends, we dare not delay. Remember Belshazzar? The enemies were right outside the city walls, but he was so sure that the city walls would hold.

Historians tell us that Babylon's store of food could last 20 years. So Belshazzar probably imagined he had decades ahead.

In reality, he had only hours. What about you? How much time do you think you have?

And how much time do you really have? It might not be as long as you think. Perhaps today you know that you're sinning in some way.

You have managed to fool everyone else. You've made them think that you are a holy person when really you've been in rebellion. But you haven't fooled God.

[41 : 21] God knows. So if you've put yourself on a collision course with the creator of the universe, right now is the time to change course.

For the hour is coming when it will be too late. But it is not yet here. So why not turn to the one who sees, hears, and understands you best, and let him hold your life in his hands instead.

Let's pause for a few seconds, let what we've heard sing in, and then I'll lead us in a time of prayer. Amen. Heavenly Father, you have spoken.

You have spoken through the words of Daniel 5, and we pray, Lord, that these words would not just go in one ear and come out another ear, but we will ponder on them, we will meditate on them, we will take what you have to say to us to heart.

Father, if in any way we know that our hearts have been set in verse 23 mode, will you help us to confess that before you?

[43 : 04] And will you help us to cling on to that promise again of the Lord Jesus who offers us full forgiveness, and may we cling on to that promise of the new covenant that you are able to give us new hearts, hearts that long for you, that long to worship you, that long to follow you in every way.

So, Father, will you help us to follow the example of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4, rather than Belshazzar in Daniel 5. And may we give you all the glory.

We pray all this in the name of Christ. Amen.