

BELSHAZZAR'S FEAST

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Lessons: Daniel 5

King Nebuchadnezzar had died, and after the short reign of three other kings, his grandson, Belshazzar came to the throne. The Empire of Babylon was now at the height of its glory. Many nations had been conquered and reduced to tribute. Nearly the whole ancient world lay at its feet. Enormous wealth derived from the spoils of war and from heavy tribute levied upon the conquered provinces was pouring into the great capital city, and King Belshazzar thought within himself, "I am the strongest, and the richest ruler in the world. None would dare oppose my will. None would be so bold as to make war against me. I am safe, and may live at ease, and be merry." He and his people became puffed up with pride. His soldiers began to live at ease. The army became corrupt, and lost its spirit and love of country, its willingness to sacrifice and undergo hardship for the country.

In the meantime there was a little country called Media, near the mouth of the Euphrates River. The men of this country were brave and ambitious; they wished to lift their country out of a state of slavery, to make it free. And they were quietly working, training, raising an army, studying warfare, and watching the great armies of Babylon. They made a treaty with the Persians, to the south of them, and together they planned and plotted to throw off the yoke of Babylon. Of all this Belshazzar knew nothing.

One day Belshazzar held a great feast, to which he invited 1000 of his nobles. They gathered in the great banqueting hall of the palace where they reclined on couches, while they were served with rare and costly dishes by many slaves, listened to the finest music, and were amused by dancers while they drank deeply of delicious wines. The king was not satisfied with this. He wanted to give an even greater sign of his power and wealth. So he ordered the golden vessels of the Temple, which had been captured at Jerusalem, to be brought in that he and his nobles might drink from them. These were the most beautiful and the most precious treasures of all his spoils of war. But more than this, having them in his own possession seemed to show that he was stronger, that His people were mightier than the Lord for whose worship they had been made. If this were not so, why had the Lord allowed them to be captured? So he set himself up in pride, even above the Lord Himself. He was beside himself with conceit as he used these holy vessels consecrated to the worship of the Lord, casting contempt upon them, and upon the Lord, in profane thought and word.

But in the midst of the feast, he was suddenly stricken with terror, for looking up he saw a hand, not of a man, but of a spirit or angel, writing in large letters on the wall of the palace. He turned white with fear. He forgot his pride. His whole appearance was changed. The writing being finished, the hand disappeared, but the words that had been written remained on the wall, and every one could see them. But they were in a strange language, which no one present could interpret. All the wise men were called, but they could not read the writing. And the king was sorely troubled.

Then the queen came in and told him that there was one among the Jewish captives, who in the days of Nebuchadnezzar had shown great wisdom, and if he were called, he would be able to read the writing. So Belshazzar called for Daniel, and promised him great wealth and honor if he would interpret what was written on the wall. Daniel refused the reward, but he read the words which the hand had written. He said that that writing had appeared because Belshazzar, in his pride, had defied the Lord, had profaned the holy vessels of His Temple, had thrown contempt upon the power of the only true and living God. Wherefore he was to be punished, of which punishment this writing was the warning. That which was written on the wall was "MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN," meaning "God hath numbered thy kingdom and finished it; thou art weighed in the balance and found wanting; and thy kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians." (Daniel 5:25-28) Because of his pride, his kingdom was to be taken away from him, and given to one who was more worthy of it.

When Belshazzar heard this he feared for his throne, and tried to atone to the Lord for his wickedness. He made Daniel the third ruler in the kingdom; he clothed him in scarlet, and put a chain of gold upon his neck. But he did all this because he was afraid, not because he loved the Lord. And so the Lord did not listen to him.

That very night, the army of the Medes and Persians, under Darius the Mede, came suddenly upon the city, surprised the guards and the soldiers who were feasting and unarmed, and not prepared for fighting. They overcame them and took the city, and slew King Belshazzar, depriving Babylon, in one stroke, of all its power, greatness, and wealth, of which he had so vainly boasted.

The Lord is over all the earth. He gives all power, wealth, and happiness, to men. We have nothing of our own. The Lord gives us these things, not that we should glory in them; not that we should become proud and exalt ourselves above others; but that we may use them wisely and well, and worship the Lord as the one from whom they come. If we do not use them wisely, then will the Lord take them away from us, even as He did from Belshazzar.