

Looking Up

Daniel 4

Series: Unshakable | A Study in the Book of Daniel

Pastor Jarrett Stephens

This Sunday evening, my wife is hosting the wives of the ministers on our team over at our house...they are having a little get together...a little party. They do this from time to time. It's something that Debbie and Carol Young, the wife of our executive pastor, Jeff Young (who has been on our team for three years this past weekend!) work on together and love doing just to provide a sense of community for our staff wives.

I'm sure they have a good time...I'm not there. I exit the premises just as soon as I can and have my own party elsewhere.

But with the party taking place this evening, we've been getting the house ready (by "we", I really mean Debbie) but I have partying on my mind because of where we are in the book of Daniel.

Daniel chapter five starts with a party, and so that's how I thought I'd outline the passage today. I'm calling the message: **Party Time**

And what we are going to see is: The party that takes place. There's going to be a Party-crasher - that'll be a fun part of the message. And then like any good party, we'll have some party favors to leave you with (i.e. this will be our take home, application points) for the message today.

Let's get into the text and talk first about: **The Party**

Daniel 5:1-4 – “King Belshazzar made a great feast for a thousand of his lords and drank wine in front of the thousand.

²Belshazzar, when he tasted the wine, commanded that the vessels of gold and of silver that Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken out of the temple in Jerusalem be brought, that the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them. ³Then they brought in the golden vessels that had been taken out of the temple, the house of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines drank from them. ⁴They drank wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone.”

Now, context is extremely important here because kings throwing parties...showing off their wealth and prosperity...drinking themselves into a stupor is nothing to turn a head about.

This is something that has been a regular occurrence for kings ruling over kingdoms throughout history – in addition to ruling and warring, it's what kings do...they throwing parties!

What makes this party different though is the timing of the party as well as well as, the dumb decision to bring out some of the vessels from the temple in Jerusalem and drinking from them WHILE praising and gloating in celebration the power of the Babylonian gods.

Let's discuss the timing first. Twenty-three years have passed since the conclusion of Daniel chapter four. Daniel is now in his 80's and there is a new king in charge. Nebo has passed away. And like in any monarchy, while the crown is passed down to your son, there is blood in the water for who is going to get to wear that crown.

Nebo's son is the original heir to the throne, but is assassinated by his own brother-in-law. There's a series of power plays that go on and 2-3 kings and short reigns later, Belshazzar, who we are introduced to us in this text is in charge...and this episode in his life we are reading about today is toward the very the end of his reign – a reign that lasted just over a decade.

We know this is toward the very end of his reign because of the last two verses in Daniel 5. Let's look at it and it's a "spoiler alert" for sure.

Daniel 5:30 – “That very night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was killed. And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old.”

So, going back to the timing of this party. Belshazzar is on the throne, and he has a thousand people over for a P Diddy kind of party...and yet his reign is going to end that VERY evening!

Now, he didn't KNOW it was going to end, but he did know that the Medes were knocking on the door! Kings are “in the know”., and Belshazzar would've known that there was an opposing army set up outside the walled city making plans to go to war.

Belshazzar wasn't afraid though. Babylon had been impenetrable for 1000 years. We talked about the glory of the city of Babylon in previous messages...it's walls were 85 feet tall and 27 feet thick. It was a city that was fifteen miles in circumference and wide enough for two and in some places three chariots to race or pass one another.

In other words, Belshazzar THOUGHT he was sitting safe and secure. And probably with a beating of the chest sent out those invites to come to his party. He didn't seem worried...didn't seem scared in the least. He is drinking it up and having the time of his life.

He's feeling so confident that he calls for the vessels that were taken from the temple when his grandfather, Nebo captured Jerusalem to be brought out and starts serving his guests wine from those cups!

This would be like the ultimate spitting in the face of a god you triumphed over. You're praising your gods using the cups from the temple of the “god” you overthrew. It was the height of arrogance but also a major crossing of the line into idolatry and trampling upon the holiness of God.

Just a lesson of biblical history here. When those vessels were dedicated to the Lord, they were anointed and to be used only for the holy purposes of the work in the temple...they were...the word used, “consecrated” (Lev. 8:11) to the Lord.

So, this party taking place...the king is so FULL of pride that if had any sense to him in the first place, it’s completely gone!

He is NOT concerned with the safety and well-being of his city and kingdom. He feels no threat to his life with an opposing ruler and kingdom coming against him. He’s the MOST powerful man in the world.

In his eyes he is “untouchable”. Neither man NOR gods can control him or conquer him...at least that’s what he thinks! Talk about the hubris!

Interesting to me that the last lesson recorded by his grandfather is in:

Daniel 4:37 – “Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to humble.”

This lesson that was either forgotten at best or was ignored at worst, but one Belshazzar was about to be reminded of. So, you have the party taking place – it’s FULL of debauchery, idolatry and stupidity!

Next, you have what I’m calling: **The Party Crasher**

Daniel 5:5-6 – “Immediately the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace, opposite the lampstand. And the king saw the hand as it wrote. ⁶ Then the king's color changed, and his thoughts alarmed him; his limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together.”

You’ve heard the term “the handwriting is on the wall”? Well, this is where it comes from!

Belshazzar is partying it up...reveling in his revelry and all of the sudden he is sobered! He looks up and sees the fingers of a human hand writing on the wall. Talk about a reality check! Talk about getting your attention!

That’s been a theme in the book of Daniel hasn’t it? We’ve mentioned it nearly every single week – God knows how to get our attention!

Well, here he gets the attention of Belshazzar and it so messes him up that he messes himself! That’s literally what the text teaches here! What he observes makes:

- The color in his face to change – he turns white as a ghost!

- His mind starts racing...the scripture says, “his thoughts alarm him”.
- His knees buckle – they gave way! Some translate (v. 6) as “the knots of his loins were loosed” meaning, “he messed himself”...he was so scared it caused him to tinkle a bit!”

I don't blame him...I would've done the same thing! You see a human hand appear out of nowhere with no physical body attached to it and it is writing something on the wall...that's an Unsolved Mystery episode right there!

Party is crashed! By none other than God himself! He's the one behind this “hand-writing”!

Illus. Handwriting – I've always wanted to do a sermon series on God writing in the scripture. We see it three times. He etches the 10 Commandments in stone. We see it here. And we see it in John 8, when the woman caught in adultery is thrown before Jesus and he stoops down and begins writing in the sand. I think it would be a cool series.

There's A LOT to this writing right here. In the Hebrew world body parts had both physical and metaphorical meaning AND it can help convey a profound idea using physical imagery.

Last week in talking about pride and judgment, we referenced: **Prov. 29:1 – “He who is often reproved, yet stiffens his neck, will suddenly be broken beyond healing.”**

Use of the term, “neck” here represents of course pride and arrogance. We are not to stiffen our necks and be stubborn toward the Lord.

We see in scripture God's face representing his favor: **Numbers 6:25 – “the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you.”**

Likewise, turning his face away represents the removal of his favor in our life. We read that God has eyes to see and ears to hear. He has a mouth to speak, and here it's his hand, writing on the wall of the king's quarters.

God's hand in scripture represented his power...it represented his authority and control. He delivered the people of Israel by the power of his “strong hand” (Deut. 4:34).

Look back at (Daniel 4:35) – NO ONE and NOTHING can stay his hand! God HAS – get this DIVINE POWER!

But we see not just his hand...he is writing with his finger! (v. 5) - “The fingers of a human hand appeared”. “Fingers” represent precise or detailed work!

Psalm 8:3 – “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place.”

The finger of God represents precision! In Exodus 8 when the plagues are coming upon the Egyptians, the magicians say to Pharaoh, “this is the finger of God”...he’s the one doing this! The finger can also represent the judgment of God. He is proverbially “pointing the finger!” Put this all together, and you have God himself coming to crash Belshazzar’s party! And he crashes it by showing his power and bringing his judgment.

Belshazzar thought he was untouchable, but he wasn’t! He didn’t think anyone could break into Babylon, let alone his own quarters where he’s throwing a party, but God can!

God is the ultimate authority and with precision, he points his finger in judgment to Belshazzar and writes a message on the wall.

But here’s the deal: no one can figure out what the message is! So, Belshazzar does what his grandfather always did. He calls in the wisemen and scholars and philosophers of the day.

Daniel 5:7-9 – “The king called loudly to bring in the enchanters, the Chaldeans, and the astrologers. The king declared to the wise men of Babylon, “Whoever reads this writing, and shows me its interpretation, shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around his neck and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom.”⁸ Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or make known to the king the interpretation.⁹ Then King Belshazzar was greatly alarmed, and his color changed, and his lords were perplexed.”

No one can interpret what’s been written on the walls, and he along with all his party goers are perplexed...they can’t wrap their minds around what has happened!

You can almost feel what it must have been like to be there that evening.

- Everyone is gathered around...
- The king is panicking and pacing...
- The crowd is mummering...

I’m thinking the music has stopped. I bet there isn’t any more laughter or lightheartedness.

Evidently, news of what has happened has made it to the queens quarters – this is most likely Nebo’s wife...it would have been Belshazzar’s grandmother. Look at (v. 10)

Daniel 5:10 – “The queen, because of the words of the king and his lords, came into the banqueting hall, and the queen declared, “O king, live forever! Let not your thoughts alarm you or your color change.¹¹ There is a man in your kingdom in whom is the spirit of the holy gods. 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 (grandfather) —your father the king—made him chief of the magicians, enchanters, Chaldeans, and astrologers,

¹² because an excellent spirit, knowledge, and understanding to interpret dreams, explain riddles, and solve problems were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Belshazzar. Now let Daniel be called, and he will show the interpretation.”

Now, we don't know what Daniel has been doing up to this point. Some mention the fact that he was probably retired from officially serving in the king's court – after all, he is in his early 80's now – that's pretty amazing to think about!

Here was a man that was exiled to a foreign land and was never able to go back! Talk about broken dreams...talk about disillusioned.

But, Daniel...he has served and is serving his God faithfully and he is summoned back to the king (v. 13).

Daniel 5:13-16 - “Then Daniel was brought in before the king. The king answered and said to Daniel, “You are that Daniel, one of the exiles of Judah, whom the king my father brought from Judah. ¹⁴I have heard of you that the spirit of the gods is in you, and that light and understanding and excellent wisdom are found in you. ¹⁵ Now the wise men, the enchanters, have been brought in before me to read this writing and make known to me its interpretation, but they could not show the interpretation of the matter. ¹⁶ But I have heard that you can give interpretations and solve problems. 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.”

“Solve this, Daniel, and you're back in business...back in power.” But look at how Daniel responds! He's not MOVED by the promise of prestige or power or prominence in the kingdom – he doesn't care about any of that!

Daniel 5:17-21 – “Then Daniel answered and said before the king, “Let your gifts be for yourself, and give your rewards to another. Nevertheless, 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 kingship and greatness and glory and majesty. ¹⁹ And because of the greatness that he gave him, all peoples, nations, and languages trembled and feared before him. Whom he would, he killed, and whom he would, he kept alive; whom he would, he raised up, and whom he would, he humbled. ²⁰ But when his heart was lifted up and his spirit was hardened so that he dealt proudly, he was brought down from his kingly throne, and his glory was taken from him. ²¹ He was driven from among the children of mankind, and his mind was made like that of a beast, and his dwelling was with the wild donkeys. He was fed grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, until he knew that the Most High God rules the kingdom of mankind and sets over it whom he will.

Daniel is just filling him in on a bit of history here (which Belshazzar knows – he's fully informed on the reign of his grandfather)...and Daniel is making a point of contrast between Nebo and Belshazzar.

Both were extremely prideful. And Daniel reiterates that the Most High has the power, authority, AND ability to humble...to bring a king down...to take from him his sanity...to remove him from the throne.

God has the power and ability to do this! He can as we have just seen get to you!

The Most High God can...he does...he IS invading your space and showing you exactly WHO he is! Nebo...once he was good and humbled, repented! But, Daniel says, “You, Belshazzar – haven’t!

Daniel 5:22-23 – “And you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this, ²³ but you have lifted up yourself against the Lord of heaven. And the vessels of his house have been brought in before you, and you and your lords, your wives, and your concubines have drunk wine from them. (BAD IDEA!) And you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which do not see or hear or know, but the God in whose hand is your breath, and whose are all your ways, you have not honored.”

I’m going to come back to some of this at the end of our time today, but it’s just another reminder to us that should promote in our lives a healthy fear of the Lord.

God holds our breath in his hands...and he should be honored...NOT taken advantage of...NOT ignored!

Who are we that we “lift ourselves up” against the Lord? It’s crazy to act as if God doesn’t see what we’re doing...how we’re living...the choices we are making.

He does see! He saw king Belshazzar and found him wanting! Look at (v. 24).

Daniel 5:24-28 - “Then from his presence the hand was sent, and this writing was inscribed. ²⁵ And this is the writing that was inscribed: Mene, Mene, Tekel, and Parsin. ²⁶ This is the interpretation of the matter: Mene, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; ²⁷ Tekel, you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting; ²⁸ Peres, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.”

A lot of ink had been spilled in commentaries about these words...they are words of measurement. They are weights. A mina was 50-60 shekels. A tekem is a shekel. A parsin is half – of either a shekel or a mina.

Daniel interprets these words as verbs, not nouns. And essentially, what he determines the message God is sending is a play on these words. And he tells the king the message:

- “King, your days are numbered. Your kingdom is being given to someone else.

- “God has measured you, king...he’s counted you and you haven’t added up to much...you don’t weigh that much...
- “Your kingdom will be lost and divided.”

That’s the message. It’s a message of doom and destruction. And it’s exactly what happens.

Daniel 5:29-31 – “Then Belshazzar gave the command, and Daniel was clothed with purple, a chain of gold was put around his neck, and a proclamation was made about him, that he should be the third ruler in the kingdom. (I’m sure Daniel is rolling his eyes...he’s an old man. His care meter is broken! And all this didn’t matter because...) ³⁰ That very night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was killed. ³¹ And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old.”

So, we have: The Party. The Party-Crasher. And now, let’s look at what I’m calling: **The Party Favors**

If you have children...so much has changed since I was a child. You know, when I was a kid and there was a birthday party, you went to the birthday party carrying a gift for the one who had a birthday!

Today, there is as much emphasis given on the party favors a child that attends the party goes home with as there is on the party that is given for the child having the birthday! It’s crazy. My girls get so excited about the party favors...what’s in the goodie bag they’ll be bringing home from the party they are attending!

Well, let me give you a couple of “party favors” (application if you will) to take home with you as we come to the closing of today’s message. In the goodie bag is a warning and an encouragement.

1. The Warning: Sin is deceptive

We read this passage of scripture and Belshazzar is more drunk on pride than he is alcohol. We talked about this a bit last week, but pride is the root of all sin and God hates it...and it’s VERY easy to see the sin of pride in Belshazzar’s life and in the life of others, but not see it in our own life!

That’s what this warning is about...sin is deceptive, and I want to call on us today to see it in our life. All sin is rooted in pride...and it needs to be rooted out of our heart and life. Pride puts us in direct opposition to God.

1 Peter 5:5b – “...“God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

It’s a promise in scripture that if you exalt yourself, God will humble you!

Prov. 16:18 – “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.”

I'm asking you today to do an internal audit on your life and let the Spirit of God do some soul surgery...let God remove any sin before it metastasizes into something that kills you.

John Owen – “Be killing sin or sin will be killing you.”

It's been said that sin takes you further than you want to go, keeps you longer than you want to stay, and costs you more than you want to pay – and it's true...and all sin is birthed out of pride!

Like Belshazzar, we can sometimes fall into the thinking that we are safe and secure, and nothing can touch us! And we forget that our very breath is in the hand of God. We think we are getting away with our sin and all that kind of living is, is a living with a lack of a holy fear of God.

Illus. Preacher fell –This king had no fear of God! The fear of the Lord is a response to his awesomeness...to his holiness...it's reverencing him and not taking anything for granted.

Sin is so deceptive! In this goodie bag we are getting today, one of the party favors is a warning: don't be deceived, by sin. You may think you are getting away with something, but God sees...he knows...and he will act! Lower yourself before the Lord today.

As **Bryan Chappell – “There is no human wall so high, no human accomplishment so great that it is secure against the judgment of God.”**

Don't miss the handwriting on the wall! God knows how to get your attention and with his hand...with his very finger he can move, direct and be very precise in his judgment and/or discipline for sin.

Be warned of sin's deceptive nature today...that's what makes it so dangerous! It's subtle...it creeps in. And if we are not humble, we won't notice it or see it.

So, clothe yourselves in humility (1 Peter 5:5) and ask God to open your eyes and soften your heart so that you are spiritually awake and alert to the Devil's schemes!

May this sermon be a wake-up call! This is a party favor some need to leave here with today. Secondly, what's in the goodie bag is a party favor, I'm calling:

2. The Encouragement: God is in control

We've seen this throughout the Daniel series. Everyone else is playing checkers while God plays chess. There is nothing happening outside of God's control, and this should encourage us.

First of all, God foretold that all of this would happen. In chapter two, part of Nebo's dream was seeing the Babylonian kingdom fall and the Medo-Persian kingdom arising afterwards. That takes place in this chapter.

The prophet, Isaiah prophesied about the Fall of Babylon years before it would actually happen. Listen to:

Isaiah 47:8-11 – “Now therefore hear this, you lover of pleasures, who sit securely, who say in your heart, “I am, and there is no one besides me; I shall not sit as a widow or know the loss of children”: ⁹These two things shall come to you in a moment, in one day; the loss of children and widowhood shall come upon you in full measure, in spite of your many sorceries and the great power of your enchantments. ¹⁰You felt secure in your wickedness; you said, “No one sees me”; your wisdom and your knowledge led you astray, and you said in your heart, “I am, and there is no one besides me.” ¹¹But evil shall come upon you, which you will not know how to charm away; disaster shall fall upon you, for which you will not be able to atone; and ruin shall come upon you suddenly, of which you know nothing.”

God was in control...working his plan...he knew all along how this was going to play out and as we've learned in this series:

- His Kingdom is the only everlasting kingdom there is...
- His kingdom is the one that is enduring...
- His kingdom is the one we need to be living for and that our lives need to be revolving around...

Look, we may be living in Babylon, but take heart and be encouraged, God is still in control! This means he can be trusted and we can confidently live for him even when circumstances and situations are outside of our control.

God had the kings days numbered. He was weighing him in the balances. The Most High is sovereign. Anything happening, he's signed off on!

That's an encouragement. I think it was the reformer, Luther who called God's sovereignty...his ultimate control in our life was a "warm blanket" to his wearied soul.

You may feel a bit like Daniel today. 80 years old and still in Babylon. Dreams dashed...the measure of hope in your life may barely even be registered!

Be encouraged. God has a plan...and he is working his plan even if it doesn't all make sense to you right now!

So, as you leave today, leave with a warning on the deceptiveness of sin and an encouragement regarding the sovereignty of God.

Let's pray.

Please Note: This document is not meant to be a published, cited, annotated research paper. It is simply a transcript of a spoken message, provided as a resource. Many commentaries, articles, and other sermon helps were likely studied and contributed to the forming of this message.