

## **UPSIDE DOWN: HANDWRITING ON THE WALL**

Sermon written by Martha-Jean Fitch

October 11, 2020

**TEXT:** Daniel 5

How many of you like ghost stories? With it just two weeks until Halloween, we are seeing a lot of scary TV shows coming out – about monsters and mummies, vampires and witches – and ghosts. I must admit I have never been that big of a fan of ghost stories. I just didn't like to be scared and have nightmares at night over those scary stories. And they always seem so pointless, doing nothing to lift me up. So, the only ghost I really liked as a child growing up was Casper the Friendly Ghost! And the movie – “The Ghost and Mrs. Muir”.

But there is one GREAT ghost story that is found in the Bible that is a true story – and it *does* have an important meaning and purpose for each one of us today – just like it did over two thousand years ago.

We are continuing our sermon series on the book of Daniel today. We had a brief break last week with our World Communion service – which, might I add, we so appreciated having Mary's message about the unity we have in Christ. But today, we return to our series, “Upside Down” – and we go to the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of Daniel. Let me give you just a bit of a review to refresh your memory.

You will remember the book of Daniel begins with the Israelites being captured by the Babylonians, led by King Nebuchadnezzar. The Babylonians destroyed all of Jerusalem and even destroyed that Temple that Solomon had built....taking with them all the sacred gold goblets and bowls and lampstands that had been used in worship.

Daniel was one of those Israelites that was taken as a captive when he was about 15 years old. Daniel remained true to his faith and ended up being a wise advisor to King Nebuchadnezzar. When last we were with Daniel, in chapter 4, Daniel had warned Nebuchadnezzar about being too proud and not bowing down to the one and only God. Nebuchadnezzar ended up going insane and lived as a wild animal for 7 years before he finally came to his senses and praised and glorified the Most High God.

As we turn to chapter 5, it is 25 years later. King Nebuchadnezzar has died. And now Belshazzar is reigning in Babylon. Belshazzar is the grandson of Nebuchadnezzar – and more than likely grew up hearing the stories of his grandfather. But it is apparent he didn't learn the lessons of his grandfather.

We know from extra-Biblical sources, that at the time of Belshazzar's reign, the Medes and Persians were threatening the Babylonians and attacking all throughout the empire. In fact, their armies had surrounded the walls of Babylon, poised for attack.

But Babylon was a wealthy kingdom, and the city was considered impossible to attack. The walls were said to be 56 miles long, 80 feet thick and 320 feet high.<sup>1</sup> It was said that the

walls were wide enough for a 6-lane highway and chariots could be ridden across the top of them! There was no way any foreign power was going to take their city. So, was Belshazzar concerned at all that his city was surrounded by the enemy? Absolutely not! So, he decides to throw a party.

Let's begin reading at verse 1 of Daniel 5.

*Many years later King Belshazzar gave a great feast for 1,000 of his nobles, and he drank wine with them. <sup>2</sup> While Belshazzar was drinking the wine, he gave orders to bring in the gold and silver cups that his predecessor, Nebuchadnezzar, had taken from the Temple in Jerusalem. He wanted to drink from them with his nobles, his wives, and his concubines. <sup>3</sup> So they brought these gold cups taken from the Temple, the house of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his nobles, his wives, and his concubines drank from them. <sup>4</sup> While they drank from them they praised their idols made of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone. <sup>5</sup> Suddenly, they saw the fingers of a human hand, writing on the plaster wall of the king's palace, near the lampstand. The king himself saw the hand as it wrote, <sup>6</sup> and his face turned pale with fright. His knees knocked together in fear and his legs gave way beneath him.*

Now there's the ghost story. Just imagine what that was like. All of the sudden to see just a hand – no arm, no body- just a hand, writing on the wall! That would certainly catch your attention. Belshazzar calls for his astrologers and fortune tellers to come and tell him what those words meant – but none of them could tell him. Finally, the Queen Mother - who might be the wife of Nebuchadnezzar – came in and told Belshazzar that there is one in the kingdom - a man with the Spirit of the God upon him, that Nebuchadnezzar trusted in. And that is Daniel. He would be able to read the message and interpret its meaning. So, Daniel is called and Belshazzar promises to make him 3<sup>rd</sup> in the Kingdom if he can just tell him what those words mean. Daniel begins his reply by helping him remember the story about his Grandfather Nebuchadnezzar – and how he was so proud and didn't repent - so he was punished by God...until he finally learned that God rules over the kingdoms of this world. Let's look at verse 22, Daniel continues his response to King Belshazzar:

*<sup>22</sup> "You are his successor, O Belshazzar, and you knew all this, yet you have not humbled yourself. <sup>23</sup> For you have proudly defied the Lord of heaven and have had these cups from his Temple brought before you. You and your nobles and your wives and concubines have been drinking wine from them while praising gods of silver, gold, bronze, iron, wood, and stone—gods that neither see nor hear nor know anything at all. But you have not honored the God who gives you the breath of life and controls your destiny! <sup>24</sup> So God has sent this hand to write this message. <sup>25</sup> "This is the message that was written: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, and PARSIN. <sup>26</sup> This is what these words mean:*

*Mene means 'numbered'—God has numbered the days of your reign and has brought it to an end.*

*<sup>27</sup> Tekel means 'weighed'—you have been weighed on the balances and have not measured up.*

*<sup>28</sup> Parsin means 'divided'—your kingdom has been divided and given to the Medes and Persians."*

*<sup>29</sup> Then at Belshazzar's command, Daniel was dressed in purple robes, a gold chain was hung around his neck, and he was proclaimed the third highest ruler in the kingdom.*

Mene – Mene - Tekel – Parsin. What a strange message! Belshazzar, your time is up. God is judging you – weighing you on the scales of righteousness and you failed! You have lived just as you wanted – prideful and self-willed – shaking your fist in the face of God. You have not humbled yourself nor bowed your knee to the Most High God. So now your kingdom will be destroyed and will be taken over by your enemies that are standing right outside of the walls of the city, ready to attack.

It appears that Belshazzar wasn't too disturbed by this warning – at least Scriptures don't tell us that. It only says that Belshazzar awarded Daniel the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest position in the kingdom. But history books tell us that there the Babylonians were engaged in a festival, with much dancing and reveling – when the Medo-Persian forces surprised them by penetrating the walls and conquering Babylon – and killed Belshazzar. And just an interesting note – that attack was on October 11, 539 BC. Isn't that interesting? 2559 years ago, to this very day!<sup>2</sup>

The handwriting on the wall. I have been reflecting a lot on that phrase – that warning that Belshazzar had – and wondering, what its message is for today. What is the handwriting on the wall of your life? What is the handwriting on the wall for our country in these crazy, upside down times that we are living in?

I asked that question of our Wednesday night Bible Study and one person said, “we're in the end times, we better get ready for the rapture – for Christ to return and take us home.” Someone else said that the message is that “we better change our ways!” What do you think? Is there a message – a handwriting on the wall – for you and me – for America today?

I listened to a 1970's broadcast of Billy Graham this week, preaching a crusade in a packed stadium on this very text. And I was fascinated by how some of his insights were so timely to where we are today. Billy Graham said, *“Is God writing on the wall of America? Mene– Mene- Tekel – Parsin. Have we gone that far? The word Mene also means “remembers”. God remembers our sins. God sees our pornography. He sees our lying and cheating and our corruption that goes all throughout society. And the Scripture says “Be sure, your sins will find you out.” But God remembers something else. It's not too late. God remembers to forget. When any nation, any group of people, repents and turns to the Lord, He will forgive their sins and heal their land.”*<sup>3</sup> I think in this year 2020, we could certainly add that God sees our racism and our violence in the streets, the division and hatred among people, the devaluing of human life, and the corruption of what is truth. God sees it all and is calling us to come and repent – to turn back to Him. He will heal our land ... heal our hearts as we return to the Lord.

And in our own personal lives, God is weighing us on the scales of His righteousness. If you can just imagine, a balance scale where you are here and God is there and He is weighing us to see how we hold up. Judging by your thoughts and actions. First, He'll judge by the 10 commandments. How are we doing following the 10 commandments? And how about the Great Commandment? Are you loving God with all your heart, all your soul and your mind? Have you humbled yourself before God and made Him first in your life? And what about your neighbor – do you love ALL your neighbors as yourself? And God will also judge us on our actions – and our inaction, our missed opportunities. He will ask, when did you feed the poor

and give drink to the thirsty, when did you visit those in prison and those who were sick? What have you done for the least of these, God's children – because if you haven't done it – you haven't done it to God. What have you done with the gifts and talents God has given you? Have you been a good steward of your resources – of this world? God is weighing you. And how are you measuring up? How do you weigh in the balance?

If you are like me, it is very sobering when you are asked those questions. I know that I have not measured up. I am a sinner and guilty. And that is what the Bible says about me – and you. Romans 3:23 says that EVERYONE has sinned and we all fall short of God's glorious standard. We all deserve to be punished for our sins. If we look at all our sins and our failures and weigh it on the scales, we don't have any righteousness at all and could never get to heaven.

But there is good news in the Gospel. God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross for our sins. All of our sins were placed upon Jesus – so that we could live. Romans 3:24 says: *"Yet God in His grace, freely makes us right in His sight. He did this through Christ Jesus, when He freed us from the penalty of our sins. For God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin. People are made right with God when they believe that Jesus sacrificed His life, shedding His blood."* You see, when we believe in Jesus as our Savior, God takes the filthy rags of sin that we are wearing and replaces it with His robes of righteousness. Where once we could not measure up – now through Jesus, we have been found acceptable and the scales are balanced. Now, for all who confess their faith in Jesus, instead of wearing a dirty robe of sin - we can wear a white robe of grace. And so, when God measures us on the scales – He doesn't see our sin, He sees the blood of Christ that died on the cross for us.

And so, what is the handwriting on the wall saying to us? For Belshazzar – he was weighed and "found lacking". When we live without Christ, we will all hear that same message. But for those who repent of their sins and give their lives to Christ – the message will be "sinner saved by grace"! Loved, accepted and welcomed into the kingdom of God!

Where are you today? Have you totally surrendered yourself to Jesus Christ? Have you repented of your sins and asked Jesus to come and live in your heart? Today is the day for you to make that decision. Or maybe, you know you have wandered away and have not been living with Jesus as your Lord and Master. Today may be the day for you to come to Jesus and say, "God, I know I have sinned and turned away – but now I come to confess and repent. I come to rededicate myself to You. Please come into my heart – and have Your way in me. Mold me and make me after Your will."

Won't you make that decision today?

## RESOURCE

<sup>1</sup>Ancient History Encyclopedia, "Wall".

<https://www.ancient.eu/wall/#:~:text=The%20Greek%20historian%20Herodotus.>

<sup>2</sup>Livius.org, "Herodotus on Cyrus' taking Babylon". [livius.org/sources/content/herodotus/cyrus-takes-babylon/](http://livius.org/sources/content/herodotus/cyrus-takes-babylon/)

<sup>3</sup>“Billy Graham – Is the handwriting on the wall, America?” on YouTube, <https://youtu.be/qjT7MjxkRrk>. I was very inspired by this message by Billy Graham and used his ideas for how we are weighed by God in our own personal lives.