

Daniel - Found Wanting

by William Fitch

The sermon teaches that the folly of a sinner is seen in the life of Belshazzar, who knew God's word but acted as though he hadn't, and that the fearlessness of a Christian preacher is seen in Daniel's ministry.

Duration: 30:00

Topics: "Daniel"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the contemporaneousness of the word of God, stating that it is relevant and applicable to modern times. He refers to the story of Daniel and Belshazzar, highlighting the folly of a sinner like Belshazzar and the faithfulness of his mother in reminding him of God's blessings. The preacher also mentions the fearlessness of a preacher in delivering God's message. He concludes by discussing the finality of God's finger, referencing instances in the Bible where the finger of God is mentioned, and encouraging young men studying for the ministry to follow this pattern.

Transcript

Before the message, a prayer. O Lord, wilt Thou hold me that I may uplift only Thee, and may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in Thy sight. O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer, for Thy great love's sake.

Amen. Daniel chapter 5, verse 1, Belshazzar of the king made a great feast to a thousand of his lords, and drank wine before them. Verse 5, in the same hour came forth fingers of a man's hand, and wrote over against the candlestick.

Verse 25, and this is the writing that was written, mene, mene, tekel, yefason. Verses 26 to 28, and this is the interpretation of the thing. God has numbered Thy kingdom.

Now it weighed in the balances, and was found wanting. Thy kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and to the Persians. We continue our studies this morning in the book of Daniel.

So far, Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, has occupied much of the stage, and all to show certain great facts. For instance, the fact of the sovereignty of God in the history of man, the fact of the security of the people of God at every level of their experience, the nature of the salvation of God offered to all men, to rebellious and willful people. That's the kind of lesson that we've been learning, noting.

We've seen how God would not let Nebuchadnezzar go, and ultimately how God brought him to himself. And now today, in the fifth chapter, we read of another king, of another king who was not saved at the last. A man who, though blessed with so many great and precious things, was nonetheless careless and heedless of the things that matter most.

And ultimately, when the hour of destiny struck, was found wanting, and God's judgment falling upon him. To that study we now come. I want to lift up some of the significant and salient lessons of this fifth chapter of the book of Daniel.

First of all, I want to suggest to you that out of this chapter we see so clearly the folly of a sinner. That's of course seen in the life of this king, Belshazzar. You recall the story.

30 years have passed since the end of chapter 4 and the beginning of chapter 5. And the power of Babylon is now slipping, and the empire is beginning to crumble. Cyrus the Mede is growing in strength, for God is with him. You read the prophet Isaiah, and you will read this prophecy which God sends through his prophet to Cyrus.

I girded thee, though thou hast not known me. God was with Cyrus. He grows in strength.

And at this very moment, when the chapter 5 opens, the armies of Cyrus are outside the gates of Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar is, of course, dead. Belshazzar is king, or at least king-regent, for a time.

But he was a disillusioned youth. In fact, Xenophon, the Greek historian, calls him an impious man. And this night, when the enemy is at the gate, and disaster is overhanging the city and its king, Belshazzar orders a great feast for a thousand of his lords, and drank wine before them.

It was a night of wine, women, and so on. All the barriers are down. Sin roams uninhibited across the palace floors.

Sin drips from the palace walls. Sin floods through the palace gates. Therefore, the cup of the wrath of God is full for this people.

And the whole nation, together with its monarch, is ripe for the overthrow. But in spite of this, the thoughts of Belshazzar are still only for dissipation, and for rite of living. Over the banquet there hangs the damp, sultry atmosphere that hung over Sodom and Gomorrah in the days of Lot, and over the flood generation in the days of Noah.

But the king makes this the occasion for a final throw. In an unprecedented act of impiety, he orders the special vessels of gold and silver that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from Jerusalem, holy and sacred vessels. He orders that they be brought into the scene of rite, and out of them they drank wine and praised the gods of gold and silver and brass and iron and wood and stone.

This, for Belshazzar, was the ultimate of evil, the absolute end of his folly and of his sin. Because, you see, Belshazzar knew so much. This man knew all that God had done for Nebuchadnezzar.

Nothing that had happened to Nebuchadnezzar was done in accordance. Nebuchadnezzar made a royal decree when he turned his portrait, his throne into a portrait and his state papers into sermons. And Nebuchadnezzar gave his testimony to all the world concerning the grace of God.

Belshazzar knew all this, but he hasn't profited from that experience as we might have imagined. We might have thought that so striking were God's dealings with Nebuchadnezzar that no subsequent ruler could ever have forgotten. But Belshazzar did forget.

Belshazzar did despise the lessons of the past. He did thank God to his face. He was untrue to the light that had been given him.

He acted as though God had never spoken. In all that, do we not see the folly of a sinner? For this is sin, to know that God has spoken and yet to act as though he hasn't. To know that God has sent his word into the world, and yet to disregard that word, to close one's eyes and ears to the verdict of the past.

That's what Belshazzar did. God had been writing this story so clearly at every point before him, but he would have none of it. And because of that, we are present not only at the overthrow of an empire, but we are spectators of the death of a soul.

Just at this point, God breaks writing. There in that scene of mad rioting, revelry, and impiety, God suddenly broke in. Because, you see, there is a point in the affairs of man when God cries enough, when God cries, this is the end.

There in the midst of that siege, that night, came forth the fingers of a man's hand, brought upon the wall, in the plaza, the wall of the king's palace. Never pays to trifle with God. Somewhere along the line, finality is reached.

Every day is a judgment day in the sight of God. Every day is a gift of God to us, a day in which we can repent of the folly of our sin. Every day is a day given to us by God in which we might learn from the lessons of the past, and listen with greater intentness than ever before to the voice of the Spirit.

But, though Shadzer would have none of it, until the patience of God is ended under the hand, God writes, and the utter folly and futility of a sinner is seen in this, that having despised the patience and mercy of God and the grace that God has revealed to others, he's only brought to his senses when it's too late. It's the first thing to know. Here's the second.

I want to suggest to you that we see here not only the folly of a sinner, but we see the faithfulness of a mother. At the heart of this story is the queen mother. Let me read.

Verse 9. Then was the king, Belshadzer, greatly troubled, and his countenance was changed, and him and his lords were astonished. He called for Chaldeans and Seussers to give to them the writing and the interpretation, but they once again failed. And then the queen mother came.

Now the queen came into the banquet house, and she spake to Belshadzer. This is Queen Laetocris, a woman of great wisdom, extolled by Herodotus as being one of the greatest women of the east of that time, daughter of King Nebuchadnezzar and the child, no doubt, of his late repentance. She wasn't at the feast.

And why? Because she knew what was going to happen, and she would most certainly disapprove of it. She knew that there were certain things that a child of God just does not do. She knew that there were certain places to which a child of God just does not go.

And when she heard of this being arranged, she most certainly covenanted with God within her own heart that she wouldn't be there. You see, sometimes the only way in which we can truly witness for God is by not being in a certain place. Sometimes people tell you that the Christian should be in every point witnessing.

I sometimes wonder if that's true, because I rarely believe that oftentimes the only way in which we can witness is by not being there. That's what the Queen Mother did. But she hears the tune, and tidings of this that has happened, the fingers of a man's hand writing upon the wall, those speeding along the palace corridors to her room.

I think you can see her bowed in prayer, prayer for that disillusioned monarch and his men. See her come with complete integrity, with absolute serenity of heart, she addresses the king, because she knows that God has spoken. What does she do? She reminds the king of Daniel.

She speaks of Daniel's ministry. She recalls the way in which he had been such a help to Nebuchadnezzar, and how Nebuchadnezzar the king had promoted him to such high office. And she suggested, seek the aid of this good man, hearken to his word.

What is this? The piety of a godly mother, the witness of the faithfulness of a godly mother. And is there any greater gift? Here is this Queen Mother pointing to the bearer of the divine word, and she is faithful in her testimony. The piety of a godly woman is seen at the heart of this sinful community.

I never cease to marvel at the contemporaneousness of the word of God. Because as we've been noting Sunday by Sunday, this isn't only ancient history, this is as modern as today. And this, thank God, is a story that can be written again and again and again, so that it may be written more and more amongst us here.

Because God here at the heart of this disillusioned and decadent society has still got a godly mother who will remind a king of a preacher. What does she say? She tells Daniel about this great witness to the truth that the land has known in the past. She reminds Belshazzar that he is a man who is the spirit of God resting upon him.

She reminds Belshazzar that he is a man for whom God has spoken in the past, and who has become the instrument under God of such tremendous blessing to the palace and to the throne. And she says, go for that man. Go and listen to that man.

Forget about all these others, but go for him. Oh, mothers of Knox, listen. Never underestimate your power.

God has given to you a special minister and a special grace. God has given to you a unique gift so that you can point your children to the word of the Lord, point them to the preacher of the truth, point them to the one who can point them to the Lord, and you aid him. I suppose it's true to say that there are children who have gone home from church and heard their parents criticize the preacher, tear the message apart, no doubt.

And the children, whose ears, of course, are always open more than we realize, have learned that art from the parents. But God will require that of our hands. Alexander White, as he stood in free St. George's pulpit, used year after year after year to counsel, to counsel his congregation, to train their children in such a way that when they got home and as they were on their way home and sat around their Sabbath meal

together, the children would never hear anything that would in any way derogate from the authority of the word of God.

He that hath ears to hear, let him hear. Let him hear the message from this godly and faithful mother. For in this drunken mob, hard-broken though she be, she will yet speak.

God will never be without a voice amongst men when he has a praying mother at his feet. Oh, there are two things to note very special. The folly of a sinner, the faithfulness of a godly mother, but then also we must not hear the fearlessness of a Christian preacher.

I think that every preacher of the word of God should continually read Daniel 5, 17 to 24. You young men studying for the ministry, take this as a pattern. Keep it much before you.

The feasting is ended, the preaching begins. The sign has been given. The signification thereof is now going to be made.

Here we see the fearlessness of a Christian preacher. First of all, there is a complete scorn of reward. Belshazzar promises the kingdom almost to Daniel.

If only he will tell him, if only he will read the writing, if only he will interpret, he will have gold chains around his neck and all the fat and honors that the nation can confer. Daniel, as he begins to speak, says, I am going to perish with thee. Thy reward be to thyself.

Yet I will read the writing. Some there are who say that every man has his price. Some there are who think that the mighty dollar can dictate to the pulpit.

Some there are who believe that a man can be taken and carried along the way of popular favor. If only the money is big enough. But men of Daniel's band scorn such traffic.

I never cease to be amazed at the way in which I see gifted young men with the world before them, young men who could go into commerce and business and the profession, make plenty of money. Yet, when the call of God comes to them to go and be his preacher and to live on a mere pittance, are still ready, still willing, to sit here in office constantly. I thank God that in the past 21 years of my own ministry, I have never spent a year yet without someone or more young men studying for the ministry out of my congregations.

And I think I could say of them all that they were men who could have gone to their limit in leadership. But no, the call of God was upon them. You see, that's the thing that matters.

When God says and whispers within the ear of his child, I want you there, somewhere I've got a sacred desk behind which you're going to preach the gospel of peace. I want you to be there, and I want you to be my servant. I want you to scorn rewards of time.

I want you to begin to lay up treasure in heaven. Will you do it? My money perish with me. He scorns reward.

And then note how he goes on to recall the past. He rehearses all that God has done. Forty years have passed since Nebuchadnezzar was won to the Lord, but Daniel hasn't forgotten.

How could he? You don't forget converts like that. He recalls Nebuchadnezzar's greatness and glory. He recalls Nebuchadnezzar's pride and chastening.

He recalls Nebuchadnezzar's repentance and regeneration and restoration. In other words, he uses God's illustration. He uses the very man whom God has created and made.

He takes God's miracle, and he says, look, that's what God did in that land, and you saw it all. That's what we do, Sunday by Sunday. You come to the sacred desk, and you study God's Word, and you point to the illustrations that are here.

That's why we read God's Word. This is what the preacher is doing. But that's not all.

He goes on to accuse the king of stubbornness and rebellion. Thou his son, O Belshazzar, hast not humbled thine heart, though thou knewest all this. And he goes on to indicate the true nature of his sin, that it is pride and sacrilege and profanity and forgetfulness of God.

This is what he says. Thou hast lifted up thyself against the Lord of heaven, and he hath brought the vessels of his house before thee, and thou, thy lord, thy wife, thy concubines, have drunk wine in them. And thou hast praised the gods of silver and gold, of brass, iron, wood, and stone, which see not, nor hear, nor know.

And the God in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, thou hast not glorified. That's great preaching. Finally, he declares God's verdict.

There are no pious platitudes. No, there is blood in every world. But this is the voice of God, which ultimately all must hear.

Kingdom is divided. You're weighed in the balances and unwanted. Folly of a sinner.

The faithfulness of a mother. The fearlessness of a preacher. I want you to note this last lesson, the finality of God's finger.

Came forth the fingers of a man's hand. Four times in the Bible you read of the finger of God, only four times. One during the plagues of Egypt, and the astrologers there said this is the finger of God.

Another in Mount Sinai, when God gave the ten commandments, and how were they written? They were written with the finger of God. Another occasion is when our Lord himself says, if I by the finger of God cast out demons, then the kingdom of God is undoubtedly come to you. And then again in John's gospel, when we are told the story of the woman taken in adultery.

We read that our Lord kneeled down and with his finger wrote. And in them all there was finality, because the judgment of the plagues of Egypt was an absolute judgment. The commandments of the Decalogue were an absolute commandment.

The way in which our Lord cast out demons was absolute, because they departed and entered no more. When our Lord stooped down and wrote with his finger in the dust of the ground, the accusers of the woman departed. There is finality, and that's what we see here.

Fingers of a man's hand declaring three things. The days of the king and the kingdom are numbered. The king is weighed in the balances and the fanguante.

The kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and to the Persians. And the lesson of that for you and me this morning is just this. First, the day of man's probation is a limited day.

Second, the worth of every life is estimated. And third, the opportunity we abuse is forfeited. Be not deceived, God is not mocked.

Whatsoever man sows, that shall he also reap. If he sows to the flesh, he will of the flesh reap corruption. But if he sows to the spirit, he will of the spirit reap life everlasting.

For Bill Shamson, the verdict was this. You're weighed in the balances and fanguante. Just as Pilate was at the loss.

Pilate, who there stood confronting Jesus Christ and to whom there was given the supreme opportunity to take his stand by the side of the Son of God and then swore then to him. He took water and he washed his hands. He did nothing about it.

But in doing nothing, he sealed his destiny. He too, like Belshazzar, was weighed in the balances and fanguante. May God give us grace today to seek his face, knowing that in God alone is our salvation.

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