

Daniel 5 – The Path of Pride

Exegetical Big Idea: Belshazzar blasphemes the LORD and refuses to give him glory when all the while he knows the power of God. His pride leads to his weighing against the holy scales of God and his ultimate downfall.

Homiletical Big Idea:

Pride is sweet on the lips, but destructive to the soul

Fallen Condition Focus: It feels good to think prideful thoughts and to act in prideful ways because it feeds the sinful nature. Pride may seem satisfying in the moment, it only serves to distance us from the Lord if we do not humble ourselves.

Background:

In many ways we are to see a great number of similarities between this chapter and the one that came before. In the previous chapter there was a king, who was prideful and received a judgment from God. God's servant interpreted the judgment, the king was brought low but God humbled him and he repented and gave glory to God. In this chapter there is a king again who is prideful and receives a judgement from God. God's servant interprets the judgment, but the king will not humble himself and is judged by God.

Nebuchadnezzar is now in the past. We are never told of his death, but it can be assumed since now a new king sits on the throne. We are introduced to king Belshazzar. Now it is likely that Belshazzar is technically not the king, but his father Nabonidus is. The historical records indicate that Nabonidus was on an expedition and he had entrusted the kingdom to his son, Belshazzar. Perhaps this is why Darius the Mede thought this to be the perfect time to plot his secret invasion of Babylonia and assassination of Belshazzar.

Intro:

When I was a kid I remember having a set of 4 or 5 books about animals in different regions of the planet. I remember there being an arctic animals book and a forest animals book, but by far my favourite was the underwater animals book. And my favourite pages in that book was by far the deep sea animals. Way down in the deepest parts of the ocean are these amazing creatures that somehow survive in pitch black, and extreme conditions. And my favourite of these animals by far was the angler fish. I'm sure many of you have heard of the anglerfish. The anglerfish is amazing because it has a special ability. On the top of its head, is a long antennae type thing that reaches out in front of its face. At the end of that antennae think is a small bulb that can light up. The point of this is not to help the anglerfish see where it's going. It's not for him, it's for the other fish. Other fish who live in the darkness will see this little light and be curious as to what it is. They'll swim over and investigate. Many fish will decide that this seems like a nice tasty treat. Unfortunately for those hungry fish it will be the last mistake they ever make, because as soon as they go to take a bite of the little bulb, the giant mouth of the anglerfish opens up revealing a whole bunch of razor-sharp teeth and the little fish becomes lunch.

How innocent does this little light look to a hungry fish? Except what looks so innocent and even tasty, only leads to destruction.

Pride is an anglerfish. It seems so innocent on the surface doesn't it? Who among us has not felt the warm feeling of dwelling on prideful thoughts in our minds or acting in such a way that puts us above others? Pride feels good!

It's easy to justify isn't it? Pride is not murder, or adultery, or stealing is it? No it's not. It's actually worse, since pride is the root of those sins and more.

We return to the subject of pride in Daniel chapter 5 with a king who has set himself up against the Lord. He is comfortable in his pride, but will learn the all-important lesson that everyone eventually learns whether in this life or the next:

Pride is sweet on the lips, but destructive to the soul

Verses 1-9 Posturing against the Lord only reveals our shame.

We immediately get special access to a huge party being thrown by the entrusted ruler or Babylon, whom Daniel refers here as the king of Babylon. It is an insanely massive party with a thousand guests, and the itinerary for the party is one of drinking and revelry. The picture we see here is that the keys of the kingdom are given to the spoiled son and the thing that he wants to do most is not enlarge or protect the kingdom, but to party it up.

Alcohol is abundant and in the midst of the drinking, probably spurred on by the drinking, Belshazzar calls for the sacred articles that were taken from the temple of YHWH in Jerusalem when Nebuchadnezzar his predecessor defeated Judah.

Now Belshazzar I'm sure had many gold and silver cups. What we see here is not that he was drinking out of a paper cup and wanted something more elegant. Belshazzar wants to dishonour the God of Israel. This is a victor dance. They are treating these goblets with contempt. These goblets were holy and used solely for use in the temple as worship of YHWH was taking place. And now, they are being used by non-Israelites, in party, to sing songs of worship to the gods of gold and silver and wood which are no gods at all.

God will not have his glory dragged through the mud. You see it's not the cups themselves that are the problem! God doesn't care about gold mugs, he has no use for gold mugs, and if he desired he could make more with the words of his mouth. It's the motive behind the act that elicits the wrath of God.

[About a week ago, my wife went out to our van in the morning to load the kids and take them somewhere. She noticed that the glove box was open and a few phone cords were on the passenger seat. I wasn't home, so she called me and asked if I had open up the glove box and removed some of the stuff. I hadn't. Obviously what had happened was that I had forgot to lock the van the night before. Someone has opened the passenger door and rooted through the glove box looking for anything of value. Now, there is nothing of real value in my van! If the thief was looking for mismatched kids socks and empty granola bar wrappers they would have been very happy, but he didn't take anything because

there was nothing of value. But was I mad, yes. Why? Because they purposefully went into my van, where my family sits with the intention of robbing me.]

Belshazzar postures himself against the Lord here. But God cannot be mocked.

God judges Belshazzar's brazen act. Suddenly, in v. 5 what appears to be a human hand appears and writes a message on the wall. Understandably, Belshazzar is absolutely terrified at this. Verse 6 tells us that his face turned pale, his knees knocked together and his legs gave way. I can't help but to point out what the original language says here. This part of the Bible is actually written in Aramaic, and it reads "*the knots of his loins were loosened*". You can use your imagination as to what that means, and if you're thinking it means that he soiled himself then you are in agreement with many scholars.

The king doesn't look so royal now does he?

After his embarrassing episode, he calls for his magicians and sorcerers (we've seen this before) to tell him what the message means. But (and we've seen this before as well) they cannot. He even offers them a royal prize if they can figure it out, but they still do not know what this means.

Here is Belshazzar, king of the most powerful kingdom of the world and surrounded by luxury, brought low. Terrified, unable to understand what is happening, powerless against what is happening, without help from anybody, and to top it all off he is embarrassed in front of a thousand people.

How hard must it have been for the exiled Israelites to have kings who declared victory of the God of Israel? I think the church in North America knows something of this today. We are surrounded by a culture who declares victory over our God and desires to rob God of his glory. The worship of false gods is all around us.

But just as God turns it around for Belshazzar, we are sure that God will turn it around on those who seek to rob God of his glory and set themselves up over God.

As we look around at our culture that seem to constantly blaspheme the name of our God, may we put our confidence in the immovable truth, that God will vindicate his people for the glory of his name.

Pride is sweet on the lips, but destructive to the soul

And God's not done with Belshazzar yet.

Verses 10-17 Humility seems foolish to the world.

The queen hears the commotion and comes into the banquet hall. Now she may be the queen or she could also be the queen mother, meaning Belshazzar's mother. She comes in and reminds Belshazzar of the man named Daniel. She says in verse 11 emphatically that Nebuchadnezzar had appointed Daniel chief of the wise men of Babylon. Notice in verse 12 what she calls Daniel. She calls him Daniel, whom the king called Belteshazzar! Remember back in chapter 1 when Nebuchadnezzar gave Daniel and his friends new names to erase their Israelite identities and incorporate them into Babylon culture? Here we are, years later, and Daniel is still known as Daniel.

Daniel has distinguished himself against the magicians and astrologers of Babylon because he is set apart for the glory of God.

I also can't help but point out a pun the queen mother says here to Belshazzar. You'll remember that a few verses ago we were told that the knots of the king's loins were loosened. When the queen mother is describing Daniel we read that Daniel is able to solve difficult problems in verse 12. What she literally says is that Daniel is able to "untie knots". The picture of course is if you have a knot in a rope, you have a problem, but if someone can untie that knot they have fixed it for you. But it's also a pun to remind us of the embarrassment of the king, whose own knots were untied moments before!

Of course Daniel's ability to "untie knots" comes not from his own wisdom or intelligence, but because he seeks to glorify God, and God uses him to do just that. There is a stark contrast between Daniel and the astrologers of Babylon, but there is another contrast here: the contrast between Belshazzar and Nebuchadnezzar.

Nebuchadnezzar recognized Daniel as a servant of the Lord and appointed him his closest advisor. Nebuchadnezzar also came to humble himself and glorify God in the previous chapter.

We are reminded here that there is a stark difference between the people of God who desire his kingdom and the people of the world who rage against it! The difference is that the people of God, deep in their hearts, ultimately do not want to seek glory for themselves. We seek to glorify God. This is foolishness to the world.

[Alana and I have completely different views as to what would be called "camping". My dream camping trip is to trek out to a remote place where there are no other humans for miles, bringing little supplies and enjoying nature. Alana's idea of camping is to bring along a trailer with plumbing and running water and a stove and fridge. She thinks I'm crazy. And she's probably right. But we desire two totally different things!]

Daniel doesn't worship the gods that Belshazzar does. Daniel doesn't act like the other wise men of Babylon. Daniel doesn't even eat the same food as them! Daniel has been pushed out of the king's service because his desires differ from what Babylonian culture says they should be.

Daniel even rejects the gifts of the king in verse 16.

I can only imagine the audible gasp in the room when Daniel said "keep your gifts"

Belshazzar offers his luxurious reward to Daniel in exchange for Daniel's services in interpretation in verse 16. These are desirable gifts! These gifts represent wealth and power. The wisdom of this world says "take it! If you can do this you deserve it!" If Daniel is so amazing at his job, then he deserves all of this right?

But isn't this the sin of the king? Isn't this pride? Isn't this the same sin that brought down Nebuchadnezzar to act like a beast for a period of time? Isn't this the same sin that caused the hand to appear and pronounce the judgement of God on Belshazzar? Daniel knows better! Daniel knows that his ability to interpret dreams and know the plans of God does not come from within himself, but from the Lord. And if from the Lord, then Daniel deserves no credit. In stark contrast to the world, Daniel gives glory where it is due, to the Lord.

Daniel's reward, is the glory of God.

May we be a people who stand in stark contrast to the people of this world by what we desire as reward. May we as a church be motivated, not by personal gain or power or authority, but by the glory of God alone.

That's what sets us apart from the world. The desire for the glory of God above all else. There are only 2 groups of people, those who desire glory for God, and those who desire glory for themselves. Only one of those groups will be standing in the end.

Pride is sweet on the lips, but destructive to the soul

Verses 18-24 Pride numbs the heart towards the Lord

Daniel tells the king that he can keep his gifts, but he will nonetheless read the writing and tell the king what it means. But is that what Daniel does right away? No! First Daniel gives an overview of the entire previous chapter, which was a long one. Why? He wants Belshazzar to realize something. Look at verse 22.

He says *"but you his son (or successor), o Belshazzar, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this"*

The events of king Nebuchadnezzar are no secret! Belshazzar is well aware of all this. Belshazzar is well aware of what the God of Israel can and does do! If Nebuchadnezzar was Belshazzar's grandfather, then it is very possible that Belshazzar could have when he was a young boy looked out his window to see his grandfather crawling around in the field and eating grass like an animal.

And yet, says Daniel, instead Belshazzar has set himself up *against* the Lord in heaven.

Oh how pride and sin numbs the human heart towards God! Belshazzar had even less to be proud of than his predecessor Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar conquered Judah. He constructed the massive statue, he ruled with an iron fist. But Belshazzar? He did none of this! His only accomplishment was holding a party. Pride numbs the heart doesn't it?

Daniel reveals the foolishness of Belshazzar's actions by pointing out that he used the articles from the Lord's temple to worship the gods of silver, gold, bronze, iron, wood, and stone. These gods are nothing. They are inanimate objects that cannot see or hear or act in any way. And yet the only true God who holds Belshazzar's life in his hands, and all Belshazzar's ways, he did not honour.

[Imagine an employee of a company, and this employee is just one of those people who complains all the time about everything. Imagine going in to work every day and hearing this person just bad mouth the owner of the company all day saying how useless and incompetent the owner is. They just go on and on about how they can't stand the owner and how the printer could do a better job than the owner at running the company. What advice would you give that person? Probably something like "hey man, you might want to cool it badmouthing the owner, he does sign our paycheck after all." Say the person does not take your advice and keeps insulting the owner. You come in on a Monday and his desk is empty and he's gone. What's your response? "he had it coming!"]

Talk about biting the hand that feeds you! That is the height of foolishness, but that's what pride does. Not a single person or a single thing exists outside of the active will and action of God to keep it in existence. God doesn't just hold our paycheck, he holds our very existence!

Nebuchadnezzar's numb heart was softened by the Lord to learn this lesson and repent. Belshazzar does not. God can soften your heart if you humble yourself before him and ask. Otherwise, it means destruction.

These words were penned by Isaiah about a hundred years before Belshazzar's reign.

Isaiah 47:10-11 reads:

*¹⁰ You have trusted in your wickedness
and have said, 'No one sees me.'
Your wisdom and knowledge mislead you
when you say to yourself,
'I am, and there is none besides me.'
¹¹ Disaster will come upon you,
and you will not know how to conjure it away.
A calamity will fall upon you
that you cannot ward off with a ransom;
a catastrophe you cannot foresee
will suddenly come upon you.*

You know who Isaiah was talking about that in those verses? Babylon. And that day those words came to pass.

Pride is sweet on the lips, but destructive to the soul

Verses 24-30 We are all measured on God's righteous scales.

We finally come to the writing on the wall. Why the other wise men were not able to read this we aren't sure, other than the fact that God has confused the wisdom of the wise men so that they are useless. God however grants Daniel the wisdom and understanding to read the words. These are the words:

MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN.

MENE means that God has numbered the days of Belshazzar and has brought those days to an end. Why MENE is repeated could be to emphasize that God has decided this and he will not change his mind. It could also be to emphasize that he will not be giving Belshazzar the same grace that he showed Nebuchadnezzar in restoring him to sanity and causing him to glorify the Lord.

TEKEL either means "weighed" or is a measurement of weight. The picture here is that God has scales, and Belshazzar has been weighed on them and found wanting. By "found wanting" Daniel means Belshazzar has failed the test! He does not meet God's standard. He is lacking.

PARSIN means "divided" but could also allude to the Persians who will be taking over the Babylonian kingdom. Either way, all that Belshazzar has will be taken from him and given to others. He will be left with absolutely nothing. This is a stark contrast to the beginning of this chapter where it seems that Belshazzar has everything he could possibly want.

After Daniel reveals the mystery, Belshazzar rewards Daniel anyways even though Daniel didn't want it. Was this to try and pay him off? Was this to try and appease Daniel's God? We're not sure, but one thing is certain, the statue in the dream that Nebuchadnezzar had in chapter 2 is already starting to fall.

What Belshazzar does not know in all of this, is that by God's sovereign hand, Darius the Mede is outside the walls of the city that very night. Historical records tell us that Darius was busy damming up the water of a stream that flowed into the city to supply it with water. By stopping the water flow, it opened up a passage into the city through which one or more assassins entered and took the life of Belshazzar that very night.

Here is a king who in his pride has set himself up against the God of the universe by mocking him in blasphemous partying and idolatry, and in a single night he is brought low by God's justice because of his pride. I hope that pride tasted sweet in the moment, because it only led to his destruction.

Belshazzar, and Babylon, were over. Their time had come. But this is not unique to them. All of humanity is weighed on God's righteous scales. Oh we would like to think that Belshazzar is the exception, but he's not. We like to think that it takes a lot of sin to be found lacking on God's scales. But it doesn't. The measurement that God uses for every human being is perfection.

[Have you ever felt a little bit of satisfaction when let's say you're driving down the highway and the police have pulled over an expensive fast car? The German's have a word for that feeling, it's called *schadenfreude*. It means deriving pleasure from someone else's pain. Why do we do that? Because we think they deserve it and we don't! There's another word for it, its called pride!]

We may think Belshazzar deserves what he got, and he does. But the reality is that we all deserve what he got.

MENE: God has numbered our days and because of our sin they will be brought to an end. The wages of sin is death.

TEKEL: We too have been weighed on God's perfect scales and even one sin has left us short of his measurement.

PARSIN: All that we have will be taken from us and divided at our death. We own none of this. What does it benefit someone to gain the world and forfeit his soul.

We have all come up short on God's scales. But that does not mean there is no hope.

If we would humble ourselves, and throw ourselves at the mercy of God, killing pride, then there is a weight that is added to our scales so that we are acceptable to God. That weight is the blood of Christ. If today you will turn to Christ, and admit your pride and sin and ask for forgiveness, then he is ready, willing, and able to grant you forgiveness. And this is a gift, why? So that we cannot boast in it. Pride has no place in the Christian heart, because all that we are is by the grace of God.

God does not owe you anything. God is not wrong in showing patience to Nebuchadnezzar and taking Belshazzar's life that very night. God should show nobody mercy. Do not mock his mercy by turning your back on Christ's suffering for you. If you do not trust in his atoning sacrifice for your sins, then your scales are heavily weighed down by your sin and it will mean your destruction.

May we be a people who are always diminishing in our pride for ourselves, but always growing in our desire for the glory of God. May we be a people who will humble ourselves before God, and receive his eternal reward. It is true, pride is sweet on the lips, but it is destructive to the soul. That's because pride is momentary, but God's glory is eternal.