

# GOD'S GRAFITTI

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## Reading the Writing on Your Wall

### Daniel 5:1-6

#### I

The scene was like something out of the grandest party you've ever attended. A vast ballroom teemed with revelers who spilled out of the room and into the adjacent courtyard. The air was filled with the strains of music as a marvelous orchestra accompanied a steady parade of singers and dancers. The candlelight at a hundred long tables glittered off of golden bangles and bejeweled fingers. Servants passed silver platters laden with mounds of steaming food, carefully trying not to spill sauce on the guest's richly dyed robes or the host's fine rugs. As people swapped the latest jokes and shared juicy rumors of who had been seen with whom, gusts of laughter rose above the roar of a hundred conversations and the clank of silver on fine porcelain. It could have been the ballroom of the Ritz-Carlton on New Year's Eve. Except it was the palace of King Belshazzar of Babylon and the year was 539 B.C.

It had been nearly 23 years now since the death of the great Nebuchadnezzar. The passing of the brilliant monarch had led to a series of short-lived administrations punctuated with assassinations and scandal. At long last, a bloody coup had placed a general by the name of NABONIDUS on the throne, and he had managed to hold on for almost seventeen years. The truth is, however, Nabonidus preferred to shore up trade alliances in Arabia or oversee the excavation of the antiquities of Sumeria than bore himself with the drone of domestic affairs. THAT job Nabonidus left to his son and co-regent, BELSHAZZAR.

Belshazzar had neither the intellect nor the moral fiber equal to the task of holding together a decaying culture -- and rotting it was. That sense of noblesse oblige that marks any great society had all but dissolved, as the poor of the inner city grew more and more desperate, and the sheltered wealthy grew more and more convinced that they deserved their decadent pleasures. Immense sexual license was not only tolerated but glorified: "trial marriages" -- easily dissolved by one or the other partner -- became the norm; and taboo-breaking acts and temple prostitution were so accepted that even the liberal Greeks referred to Babylon as a "sink of iniquity."

Religion provided no restraining influence on this downward slide. One official census listed some 65,000 recognized gods -- designer deities to cover anyone's individual tastes. In the words of historian, Will Durant, in the midst of this spiritual swamp: *"The army fell into disorder; businessmen forgot the love of country in the sublime internationalism of finance; the people, busy with trade and pleasure, unlearned the arts of war. The priests usurped more and more of the royal power, and fattened their treasuries with wealth that tempted invasion and conquest."*<sup>1</sup>

As the moral hollowness at the center of Babylonia grew, all that was left in time were the walls of a once-formidable civilization. But, then, the Chaldeans put a lot of faith in their walls. The ancient historian, Herodotus, tells us that the City of Babylon was surrounded by massive double walls, each 25 feet thick, 200-300 feet high and separated by a moat. Along the top of the outer wall ran a broad highway by which troops and weaponry could be rapidly deployed to any point on the city's 56-mile long defenses. In time of enemy siege, the surrounding population could retreat inside through any one of 100 heavily fortified gates. Within were farmlands rich enough to feed the city for many years; and, because the River Euphrates actually ran beneath one of the gates, the populace were assured a virtually limitless supply of fresh water.

It was thus that in the year 539, when a Persian general by the name of Darius laid siege to the ancient city, its citizenry didn't exactly panic. On the contrary, we're told in another source that the Babylonians jeered at their attackers from atop the walls, saying: "Till mules foal" -- the Chaldean equivalent of "till pigs fly" -- "you won't take our city!" And it was with the same absolute confidence in their impregnable lifestyle, that the elite of Babylon gathered behind the walls of the King's palace for the party I earlier described. Let's pick up the story at chapter 5 verse 1...

## II

The Scriptures say that... **King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles, and drank wine with them. (Dan 5:1)** The time in the feast came when the party was beginning to drag. It was then, the Bible says, that Belshazzar, **"while drinking his wine,"** hit upon a colorful idea. Perhaps he was drinking to fight a tiny bit of edginess over the reality of all those Persian soldiers massing outside the city ramparts. Maybe he'd been reminiscing on the good old days, as people are wont to do after a few cocktails. In any event, it's clear that Belshazzar remembered that in one of his storerooms were some interesting relics that were sure to amuse and enliven his guests with the reminder of just how big, bad, and bold Babylon truly was.

We're told in verse 2 that **Belshazzar gave orders [for his servants] to bring in the gold and silver goblets that Nebuchadnezzar his father** -- actually his grandfather -- **had taken from the temple in Jerusalem, so that the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines might drink from them.** Now, to get what's going on here, you need to understand what these "goblets" were. Centuries before, King Solomon of Israel had built a stupendous temple in Jerusalem. As a show of utter respect for God's incalculable worth and glory, Solomon had equipped the temple with a magnificent collection of bowls and goblets to be used by the priests only for the highest worship rituals. The bowls were employed in rites of purification before the holiness of God. The goblets were used at the time of the Passover to hold the wine that commemorated the blood of the innocent lambs sacrificed in atonement for Israel's sin and for the release of God's people from slavery in Egypt.

Are you getting all this? These vessels were the ancient Hebrew equivalent to the actual bowl Jesus used to wash the disciple's feet or the cup of redemption he raised at the Last Supper. It was these sacred vessels that a bunch of grimy-fingered Babylonian soldiers had stolen from the great Temple as they sacked and destroyed it. It was these holy objects, created for the sole purpose of glorifying the awesome God of the Universe, which Belshazzar ordered brought out for the purpose of stroking his ego. It was these vessels, set aside for the humble and heartfelt worship of the Most High God... the One who said **"Thou shalt have no other gods before me, nor shall you make and worship any graven image" (Exo 20:3-4)**... It was, ironically these of all vessels from which Belshazzar and his guests -- as verse 4 reports -- **drank the wine [while they] praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone. (Dan 5:4)**

It's a wonder to me that there isn't a nuclear blast crater the size of Iowa on the spot where Babylon used to be. I mean I wouldn't have been surprised if the next thing that happened was something right out of the *Indiana Jones* movies -- where the guy who selfishly trifles with the Ark of the Covenant or the Holy Grail suddenly gets vaporized. But then, isn't it a good thing that God doesn't always *immediately* destroy those who misuse his sacred vessels?

I'm thinking of those sacred vessels that have fallen into your hands and mine. God's Word tells us something about how they are meant to be handled. The vessel of full sexual expression, for instance, is not meant for momentary pleasure and casual social connection; it's meant to be a means of honoring, bonding to, and discovering joy in someone to whom we'll commit our whole life for life. The vessel of speech isn't given to make us look good or to put others in their place; it's meant to praise God and to build up others in His name. The vessel of earthly treasure is not intended to be used to lavish luxury after luxury on ourselves; it's meant to provide a sufficient lifestyle for our own household, and then to generously meet the needs of others not so blessed.

I can't speak for you, but let me confess that I tend to lose sight of this stuff now and then. I have to be reminded sometimes that the vessel of parenthood isn't primarily meant to provide me with jollies from seeing my child go to a great school or excel in sports; it's meant to be used to help children to know the joy and purpose of living after God's character. I get to thinking sometimes that the purpose of the vessel of a vocation is to make a name for myself or to build a little empire, but it's not; it's supposed to be used as an instrument for helping the values of God's kingdom infiltrate this world. Even the vessel of the arts isn't really meant for personal expression or entertainment alone; no, painting and singing, playing and dancing, film-making and writing are ultimately meant to be vessels that either help to purify people's spirits for relationship with a holy God, or else serve to bring the grace and truth of God to thirsty people. In the words of the Westminster Shorter Catechism: "*The chief end of*

*humanity is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.*" So let me dare to ask: How have you been using what was created for God's glory alone?

### III

You know, there's something I learned from reading the story of Belshazzar and many like his. When a person isn't honoring God in the use of such sacred vessels, it is crazy to think a mere wall will stop the hand of God from reaching in and bringing about a change. The Babylonians were unclear on that concept. They reasoned that if they built big enough temples, palaces, and fortifications, they'd be in control of destiny. They could safely do just about anything they chose with the vessels of their lives or those of others. A lot of people today feel that way. But the truth is wealth isn't high enough; fame isn't thick enough; health isn't long enough; and other human securities aren't strong enough to hide from God if He decides His will isn't being done.

Some years ago, the congregation of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery Alabama discovered this for themselves. For more than a decade, they had enjoyed their pastor, Dr. Vernon Johns. And then the minister began to feel led to challenge the membership of his affluent conservative church to consider how God might use them to take a stand against the racism that was dividing the society, even as I suppose it may still be doing today -- on both sides of the color canyon.

Boy, you should have seen the walls go up against that message at Dexter Baptist. It was sort of like the reaction I suppose Nebuchadnezzar must have gotten when he suddenly found religion towards the end of his life. Influential members of the old guard got very upset. They successfully masterminded a movement to oust Dr. Johns, and began to search for "a more traditional pastor." Finally they found one. With great relief, they welcomed inside the walls of that stony church their new minister, a promising but obviously serene young fellow by the name of Martin Luther King, Jr.

**Where can I go from your spirit, Lord?** asked the Psalmist. **Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me. (Psa 139)** And so the scriptures record, in verse 5: **Suddenly the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall, near the lampstand in the royal palace. The king watched the hand as it wrote. His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his legs became weak and his knees were knocking. (Dan 5:5-6)**

In the interest of time, I'm going to stop the story there and unpack the actual message Belshazzar saw when we return next week. Let me just close with a question for each of us to take away and ponder. Just suppose God were to penetrate all the walls that you and I tend to put up against giving Him total Lordship over of our lives. Imagine

for an instant that He could get past the tall rationalizations and the thick habits and the long history we've built up of doing things a certain way. Suppose there really was a God who could materialize on the vulnerable side of our fears and secret securities -- as once upon a time He did stretch out a nail-pierced hand to write upon the trembling hearts of some disciples in an upper room. If the hand of God were to write a personal message upon the wall of your life right now, what words would appear next to the lampstand? What would be God's Graffiti to you?

What sacred vessel might He challenge you to restore to proper use? What wall of bitterness or prejudice or apathy that divides you and another human being would God ask you to start taking down? What fortified gate in your soul would He ask you to throw open that He might come in and establish His kingdom in your decaying empire? Ask the Holy Spirit to interpret God's message to you; He'll give you the power to make sense of the words. Talk to a wise man or woman if you need some help.

Then, for God's sake and yours, do something about what He's telling you. For there's one thought that I can't get out of my mind and with which I'll end. Belshazzar honestly thought he had all the time in the world to respond to the writing on the wall. But, as chapter 5 concludes: **That very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain, and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom. (Dan 5:30-31)**

Let us pray...

*Lord, some of us are living right now amidst the sort of party Belshazzar threw on that night so long ago. There may be moments when we tire of the pace or the people, but we're part of the world nonetheless. We know that if this Babylonian culture in which we live is ever to change, some of us who sit in positions of influence have got to do some changing first. Thank you that you do choose to come behind the walls we build. Help us to open our eyes to what you are writing for each of us to read right now. If you are calling us to repent, to restore to their proper use some sacred vessel, show us what it is and we will respond... before our opportunity is over. In Jesus' name, we pray.*

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<sup>1</sup> Will Durant, *Our Oriental Heritage*, p. 263.