

THE LAST BATTLE

Wining Life's Most Crucial Conflict

Daniel 5:7-31

I

At the center of the life of every individual and nation is a battle. Some people define it as a contest between the Voice from above that says, "I am God," and the voice from within that says, "I'd rather be king." Others see it as the conflict between the impulse to live life in service to God-defined goals or in service to self-defined ones. I tend to think of it as the struggle between the way of Humility and the way of Pride. But of this much I am sure: Upon the outcome of that battle hangs the character of every individual's life, and of the societies which we individuals make up.

Nowhere is that truth more evident than in the story we'll look at together today. If you are just joining us, the setting for this tale is the year 539 B.C. The site is the ancient city of Babylon, the glorious capitol of one of the most impressive and influential societies ever to grow upon the face of the earth. As chapter 5 opens up, however, a coalition of the Persian and Medean armies are camped outside the walls of the city, zealously looking for a way in.

The ominous threat outside provided an odd counterpoint to the celebration that was taking place within. If you were with us last week, then you know that King Belshazzar had decided to throw a huge feast for a thousand of his nobles. That very fact suggests something of the character of the man and the culture he led. Babylon was a nation that had faced and won dozens of conflicts in the past, each time growing stronger in the wealth and wisdom of the world. Yet, in the process of winning those battles, the Babylonians had been steadily losing the most important contest of all. In the fight between the way of Humility and Pride, Humility was taking a terrible beating.

II

Do you know how you spot someone who is losing that battle -- someone in whom pride is winning out? There are three clear signs worth noting. The FIRST of these signs is that a prideful person tends to use sacred things for selfish purposes. You see, the humble heart sees all of life -- our money and power, our sexuality and speech, our position and talents -- all of these as sacred vessels, gifts from God, to be used according to God's priorities and purposes.

But someone in whom pride is winning the battle, well, he or she forgets that. After those vessels have been in a prideful person's storehouse for a few years, well, he begins to think that he owns these things, and that they are, therefore, mainly for his amusement. In fact, he or she'd be kind of irritated if someone suggested that there

was some kind of obligation or responsibility that goes along with holding these gifts. That's probably why no person in the room at Belshazzar's feast raised any kind of objection when the King ordered that the sacred vessels from the Temple at Jerusalem be passed around as toasting goblets with which to **"praise the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone"** – to exalt the icons of human authority and achievement -- the exact opposite of what those vessels were for (Dan 5:3-4).

It was then, the Scriptures say, that a mysterious hand began writing a message upon the wall of the banquet hall (Dan 5:5). This is how the great artist, Rembrandt, pictured the scene. And that's where we were left hanging last week – wondering what the message was that made King Belshazzar's legs go weak and his knees start knocking together. I'm so glad you clicked on this next episode, because now we're going to find out!

The hand wrote four words on the wall in Aramaic. Aramaic was the language of the ancient Middle East that everyone understood, even if it wasn't their primary tongue. You would speak Aramaic when you wanted to make sure that everybody within earshot got the message. The only challenge with Aramaic is that when it is WRITTEN, only the *consonants* in the words are inscribed. It works like those vanity license plates some of us have on our cars. Now, if you see this license plate on the back of my car ["PSTR"], you can make a good guess at the vowels based on the context in which the consonants are used, can't you? You know the actual word is "PESTER," because that's what I do to people every weekend!

In similar fashion, most people looking at the writing on Belshazzar's wall would have seen these consonants, and they would naturally supply the most common vowels used with those consonants. By doing that, the words would read -- *Mina, Mina, Tekeel, Upharsin* -- which in rough translation meant "100 Bucks, 100 Bucks, Twenty Bucks, a Dollar." Now, on one level, you just have to admire God's ironic sense of humor. I mean, if you're trying to get the attention of a guy who is very wrapped up in his own power and wealth, what better way than letting money talk? And boy did Belshazzar believe in money, as the very next thing he does shows us. Understandably shaken up by the sight of that disembodied hand, the King immediately says: *"O.K., whoever can tell me what this message means wins the jackpot. I'll outfit him in an Armani suit. I'll give him a Rolex. I'll make him Executive VP."* That's a rough but fair translation of what the scripture actually says! You can read it for yourself in Daniel chapter 5.

But, more importantly, can you see what this response tells us about how Belshazzar is doing in the battle between humility and pride? I mean, I have a sense of how someone in whom humility was winning out would respond to such a disturbing event. I talk to such people all the time. When their spouse tells them the marriage is over or when their kids are out of control... when the doctor's news is bad or the quarterly report is frightening... when they've fallen off the wagon, or into a dangerous relationship, or behind in their mortgage... the humble people I know almost always

turn to God or to one of God's people, and with a tone of meekness say: "Wow. I'm in trouble. I'm out of my depth. Would you be willing to help?" When confronted with crisis, humility confesses need. Even though it means honest vulnerability, humility dares to handle problems by reaching up or out.

Pride doesn't. And that's a SECOND sign that someone is losing the battle. A prideful person confronts crisis by trying to control his way out of it. Crises aren't opportunities to look more deeply at myself or awaken me to my dependency upon my relationships; crises are moments to manage my resources more skillfully. If a prideful person has to get help from someone else, she won't beseech someone for it, she'll try to buy it. Pride doesn't want to be beholden to someone else; doesn't want to appear needy; doesn't want to admit that he or she is not a self-sufficient, self-made being.

Maybe it is that very quality that accounts for one additional sign you'll often see that gives such a soul away. A prideful person will rarely admit when he's been wrong. Boy, that's where we can learn something very important from the story of Belshazzar. The Bible says that after all of his hired wise-men were unsuccessful in interpreting the message on the wall, the queen mother told the King that he had a much better resource in his crisis interpretation department. At this point, God's servant, Daniel, is ushered into the banquet room. Daniel is now at least 80 years old, and he proceeds to remind the king of the lesson that Belshazzar's grandfather, Nebuchadnezzar, learned the very hard way -- the lesson that it is GOD who makes people, kings, and nations, not the other way around.

Daniel then goes on to tell the King what those words on the wall really mean. You see, everybody has the *consonants* all right, but the *vowels* all wrong. The correct translation involves inserting the vowels that form the passive participle of the words. When that is done, the words no longer describe various denominations of money. They take on a much more sober meaning. To put it simply, the message now says: *mene, mene, tekel, parsin*. Literally, says Daniel to Belshazzar: Your days of living are "**numbered**"; your character has been "**measured**" and found hopelessly lightweight, and the impenetrable walls of your empire have been "**divided**" -- as they literally would be before that night was over by a coalition of the Medes and the Persians.

The German pastor, Helmut Thielicke, once observed that: "*It is always much easier to become religious after the second heart attack!*" But it's amazing how many people don't change in response to their own repeated crises or those of their parents before them. Belshazzar hadn't learned from what happened to his grandfather; and now, even after Daniel's prediction that God was about to severely judge him for his pride, Belshazzar still doesn't repent. He doesn't do more than try to pay Daniel for his services.

III

Let me say it again: There are three clear signs that someone is losing the vital battle between humility and pride. The prideful person will tend to use sacred things for selfish purposes. He or she will try to control their way out of crises. And even when confronted by hard truth, such a person will rarely, if ever, admit that he or she has been dead wrong. And DEAD is the right word. For this story, and the vast weight of scripture, suggests that there are two clear and deadly consequences to losing the battle between humility and pride.

The FIRST consequence of pride is the loss of life. **"The wages of sin,"** said Saint Paul **"is death" (Rom 6:23).** And pride is the first of the deadly sins. Thus the Bible says that **"that very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain."** Do you know how it happened? The scriptures don't tell us here, but we know from other historical documents exactly how events transpired. Belshazzar went to bed that night a bit ruffled from the days events, no doubt, but still very much in control. After all – as I said last week -- he had those famous impregnable walls to shield him. He had all the food he needed to outlast any siege. He had all the water he needed from the Euphrates river that ran under his walls. But while Belshazzar snored, the Persian and Medean armies did something the Babylonian kings never foresaw. They dug a huge channel that rerouted the mighty Euphrates. They walked under the walls of Babylon on the dry riverbed. And they killed the King in his prideful sleep.

Thankfully, God doesn't exact such a penalty from many of us in this life. He keeps on giving the prideful person chance after chance to turn back to Him. But there will come a day for all of us when our days are numbered, when our character is measured, when we are divided from all our earthly securities. There will come a day when the river of life as we know it dries up. And the New Testament teaches that the only ones who will still be living in heaven after that Day will be those who have humbly surrendered their lives here to Him. Jesus said: **Whoever would save their life must deny self and follow me... For what shall it profit a man to gain the whole world, but lose his soul? (Mark 8:34-38)** I pray that you have humbly surrendered to the saving Lordship of Jesus Christ or will let today be the day that you do.

But there is one last reason to make humility your aim. The last verse of Daniel 5 says that that very night: **Darius the Mede took over the kingdom (Dan 5:31)** A better and more literal translation reads, **"Darius received the kingdom."** I said that the first consequence of pride is the loss of life. The SECOND consequence of pride is the loss of opportunity to be an ultimate influencer. Now, hear me clearly on this, because it's good news: God wants us to be stewards of his kingdom. He has called you and me into the life of His church because He wants to establish his kingdom's character in and through you and me our there in all the spheres of this world. But that can't happen while we are ruled by pride. And if you and I can't humble ourselves, then here's a reality check: He *will* find some Darius to do his work through. He will build His kingdom in and through someone else.

IV

That's why I want to send you out with some specific strategies for helping humility to win the battle for your soul. If you're anything like me, you're going to need some remedial work in this area. That's why I want to suggest that we consciously try to push ourselves beyond what we may usually think of as "humility."

We tend, for example, to think of humility as the capacity to tolerate criticism. But let me suggest that the biblical vision of humility involves being so passionately committed to pursuing righteousness that we actively invite critique from others. That's always a stretch for me because I often spend my time subtly inviting affirmation from others. When I do receive a compliment I'm often left with the nagging suspicion that the person hasn't quite said enough! But let's let our model be the psalmist's prayer instead. David says: **Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting (Psa 139:23-24)**. Ask someone you trust: "Are there any sacred vessels I may be misusing. Any places you can see where I'm putting my confidence in the wrong things?"

SECONDLY, take a page out of Charleton Heston's book. The man who once played Moses says this: *"The three most important words in a marriage are 'I was wrong.'"* Do you see why that is true in all our relationships? There's a world of difference between saying that and simply saying "I am sorry." When I say "I'm sorry" to someone it is often a dangerously false kind of humility. It often really means *"I'm sorry that you felt hurt... that you misunderstood me... that you're giving me grief I don't think I deserve."* But it's hard to say "I was wrong," and not crush my pride beneath that bended knee.

THIRDLY, make humble service of someone else your aim this week. But I don't mean merely serving the people you naturally care about. Jesus once said: **If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same (Luke 6:33)**. No, try being humble the way Daniel was in Babylon's government or Jesus was on the cross, or. Commit yourself in the next few days to serving an enemy -- and watch how your pride gets defeated.

FINALLY, don't merely bow your head and blush when you're given accolades. I know that's our usual vision of humility. Go one step further, and do as Daniel consistently did when the kings of Babylon tried to heap on praises and rewards for his prophetic work. Give glory to God. When someone praises something about you, lift your head, smile, and say: *"Thanks for saying that. It feels great to hear. But, believe me, the glory is God's. I thank Him for all His blessings. It's privilege and pleasure to be used as vessel of the King."* It is, isn't it? Indeed it is.

Please pray with me...