

Lake Cities Community Church
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Book of Daniel, 1-6
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The Profile of Divine Punishment Daniel 5

Intro:

I love a good mystery, I really do. I have read many of Agatha Christie's books and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle – I know Hercule Poirot and Captain Hasting, Miss. Marple, Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson. Over the years I watched Cadfael, Perry Mason, Colombo, Matlock and Murder She Wrote; and I've played the game "Clue." And in these books and movies – more often than not – at some point there is a dead body, and the question comes forward: "Who done it?" Was it the butler or the maid? The rogue officer or the priest? The mystery takes the reader or viewer down a twisting turning path – until, finally, the truth is revealed.

Turn with me now to Daniel, chapter 5; because this morning we have a body in front of us – the dead body of a King. His name is Belshazzar and his occupation is the King of the Babylon. The date of his death we know from history to be October 12, 539 B.C. And the question for us this morning is – "Who done it?"

By way of setting the stage -- twenty-three years have gone by since the death of King Nebuchadnezzar, 30 years since the end of chapter four and the Kingdom has been thrown into chaos. Nebuchadnezzar's son Amel-Marduk took the throne after his father's death but was murdered after only eight years by his brother-in-law who held the throne then for four years until he was killed and his only son came to power and ruled for two months when he also was murdered. Three murders in about a year's time until Nabonidus (son-in-law) came to power and

brought some stability to the kingdom, and reigned for 17 years, but about 7 years into his reign, he became a religious fanatic – and spent the last 10 years of his reign on a pilgrimage to worship the Moon god, Sin (you can see it here in this picture of him praying to the moon). During this 10-year pilgrimage he turned the kingdom over to his son – Nebuchadnezzar’s grandson –Belshazzar. Belshazzar – is the one who is dead in front of us this morning. And our question is - “Who done it?” Well... you have already heard the Scripture read - we know who did it – look at chapter five and verse thirty:

Who Done it?

Persian army (5:30-31) “The same night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was slain. So Darius the Mede received the kingdom at about the age of sixty-two.” The King was a casualty of war. The Fall of Babylon to the Medes and Persians is a fact of history, well documented. You might say that death was a job hazard if you were a King in the ancient world and you lost to an enemy. That it. Wrap it up. Book ‘em Danno – Mystery solved. Right? We know who done it – the Medo-Persian soliders - Right? Isn’t that who killed the king? No – All is not as it appears. Continue working backward through the text with me.

God’s Punishment (5:23, 25) Look back to verse 23 – the end of the verse (we will come back to this in more detail later) we hear Daniel say to Belshazzar - “The God in whose hand are your life-breath and your ways, you have not glorified.” And the message becomes clear in verse 26, Daniel says to Belshazzar: “God has numbered your kingdom, and put an end to it.” Wow – the water just got muddy. What seemed clearly to be only a war-time death is now complicated. Are you ready for this? Belshazzar’s death is as a result of God’s punishment. God who held this man’s life-breath in his hand – had him snuffed out by hands of the Medes and the

Persians. God numbered this king's days and said, "They are over today!" We are witnessing divine punishment. Terminal justice. The death penalty according to God's good and perfect will. Are you ready this morning to deal with a God who takes away life? We would rather have the happy endings of chapter 1-4; to study God's love, grace and mercy. But today we study a God whose patience has run out. *We look this morning at the profile of God's punishment.* God back to with me to verse one.

Profile of God's Punishment

"Belshazzar the king held a great feast for a thousand of his nobles, and he was drinking wine in the presence of the thousand." The profile of **God's Punishment begins with our Pride (verse 1)**. Can you believe it? Right when the Medes and Persians were laying siege to the city (they were at the gates), the King decides to hold an extravagant party. What arrogance. You will recall from last week that Babylon was surrounded by two walls, an outer wall and an inner wall. The inner was nearly 90 feet thick – two chariots could ride side-by-side on top of the wall. One commentator I read estimated they had 20 years worth of food inside the city. So, instead of preparing for war - in his pride Belshazzar trusted in his own strength, thumbed his nose at the enemy and got himself as drunk as a skunk. God's punishment begins with pride. A commentator interviewing Muhammed Ali startled him by asking, "Tell me, Ali, what is your greatest weakness?" Ali paused and finally said, "I guess my greatest weakness is I just don't realize how great I am." That is a picture of pride – when we refuse acknowledge our vulnerabilities – and we magnify our own strengths. Do you know what the Persians did? They temporarily diverted the Euphrates River - the river went right through Babylon – and then they

walked under the walls and took the city with hardly a fight. If the book of Daniel has taught us anything is it that God opposes the proud. *God's punishment begins with our pride.*

As we continue in the text we see that **God's Punishment can be Provoked (2-4)** The King, from his position of pride snubs his nose not only as his enemies, but to the Most Holy God of Israel - Verse two: "He gave orders to bring the gold and silver vessels which Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken out of the temple, which was in Jerusalem, so that the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines might drink from them... (verse 4) They drank from them and praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone.

Listen - it is possible beloved, to provoke God to anger. Belshazzar intentionally mocks God through taking the holy vessels and desecrating them. It is willful prideful sin that provokes God. This is a theological truth that runs through the pages of Holy Scripture:

Deut. 9:7 "Remember, do not forget how you **provoked** the LORD your God to wrath in the wilderness... Judg. 2:12 and they forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods... and bowed themselves down to them; thus they **provoked** the LORD to anger. Psa. 106:29 Thus they **provoked** Him to anger with their deeds; And the plague broke out among them. And do you remember Ananias and Sapphira – good church going people in the NT bringing in their offering – but through willful, prideful sin, and they were struck down dead by God.

God's punishment can be provoked. And I wonder if there is someone here today who is in danger of provoking God to anger? It will come through your pride and through your willful sin. God's message is to repent and turn from your sin. Do not push that button and do not cross that line – to provoke God to anger is a terrible thing.

According to a traditional Hebrew story, Abraham was sitting outside his tent one evening when he saw an old man, weary from age and journey, coming toward him. Abraham rushed out, greeted him, and then invited him into his tent. There he washed the old man's feet and gave him food and drink. The old man immediately began eating without saying any prayer or blessing. So Abraham, perplexed and concerned, asked him, "Don't you worship God?" He was provoked to great anger when old traveler replied, "I worship fire only and respect no other god." When he heard this, Abraham, grabbed the old man by the shoulders, and threw him out his tent into the cold night air. When the old man had departed, God called to his friend, "Abraham – where is the stranger I have sent to you?" Abraham replied, "I was provoked to anger and forced him out because he did not worship you." God answered, "I have put up with him these eighty years although he dishonors me. Could you not endure him one night?"

The point of that story is this – God is normally characterized by his patience with us – Be glad that He and not you are in charge of the Universe, because we would put up with far less than He does. But in Daniel 5 we learn that God's patience has a limit – so take care that you do not provoke Him to anger against you. We have been building the profile of God's punishment – that first, begins with pride. Second it can be provoked through prideful willful sin.

For the remainder of the chapter (5-28) we see the third piece of our profile – that God's **punishment is proclaimed**. God's is not silent concerning the punishment for sin – but he is very public. The proclamation comes by the hand of God, and by the voice of the prophet. This is always the way God works. He reveals it by divine revelation – in the Bible – and then calls his preachers and prophets to interpret and proclaim the punishment to those in danger. In our text, first, God's punishment is proclaimed by the hand of God: (4) "The fingers of a man's hand emerged and began writing opposite the lampstand on the plaster of the wall of the king's

palace... (6) Then the king's face grew pale and his thoughts alarmed him and his hip joints went slack and his knees began knocking together.

This is a famous painting by Rembrandt in 1635. He does a great job showing the alarm and terror in Belshazzar's face – and the immediate effect this must have had – Wine is spilt – all attention turn to the bodiless hand of God. In the presence of the supernatural, everything else does not matter. This is such a powerful moment and image – the phrase “handwriting on the wall” continues to this day to mean: “punishment is coming!”

And so Belshazzar (terrified) calls in the wise men, who (again) are not able to make an interpretation of the words. And so the queen – Belshazzar's mother most likely and Nebuchadnezzar's daughter remembers Daniel and so he – now an old man, long forgotten in the past 23 years - is brought before the king.

And he gives a history lesson – look at verses 18-22: (18). Daniel says: “The most High God granted sovereignty grandeur, glory and majesty to Nebuchadnezzar your father.... (20) but when his heart was lifted up and his spirit became so proud that he behaved arrogantly, he was deposed from this royal throne and his glory was taken away from him (21) He was also driven away from mankind, and his heart was made like that of a beast, and his dwelling place was with the wild donkeys. He was given grass to eat like cattle, and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven until he recognized that the Most High God is ruler over the realm of mankind and that He sets over it whomever He wishes.”

Why this history lesson? Why take almost 20% of the narrative and recount what happened in chapter 4? The reason is this – look at what is I think may be the key verse in this story - verse 22. “Yet you, his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, even though you knew all this but you have exalted yourself against the Lord of heaven.” You see Belshazzar did

not learn the lesson of chapter four – He should have known better. He *knew* what happened to his grandfather and God holds him accountable to the knowledge he had been given. And how much more does God hold us accountable today? In other words – God is saying – my punishment against you that I have proclaimed is just and right – You can't claim "You did not know better!" You knew and you rejected me – and now you will be punished.

The hand of God has proclaimed punishment and now the voice of the prophet interprets – go to verse 25. Daniel says: (25-26) This is the inscription that was written out: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN. This is the interpretation of the message: (26-28) MENE – God has numbered your kingdom and put an end to it. TEKEL – you have been weighed on the scales and found deficient. PERES – your kingdom has been divided and given over to the Medes and Persians. And so Babylon the head of gold in Daniel chapter two - is over and the kingdom of silver – the Medes and Persians comes into place.

Application

And so now what? What is our application? Let's go back to our mystery solving friends: When I was growing up, my Dad loved to watch the old Sherlock Holmes movies with Basil Rathbone as the great detective. And in so many stories – after they found the dead body – and assessed the danger, he would realize that if they didn't act quickly – more death would occur. So Holmes would say – "Quick Watson! Grab your coat and hat! Not a moment to lose! If we are quick – we may just be able to prevent another death this day!" There is our application. Jesus says, "Quick Church! Grab my truth and my love – you may be able to prevent another needless death this day!" The good news of the gospel is that **God's punishment is preventable**. It is preventable, by placing your faith in Jesus Christ. Paul says, [1Th. 5:9](#) For God has not

destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. Those who believe in Jesus Christ are saved from the wrath of God. Why? Because God's wrath fell on him on the cross – and therefore does not need to fall on you - if you trust in Him.

That is why we must be out there – in the community. At the softball game, Halloween the Taste and Trade, and Christmas. We can't party in here when the enemy is at the gate. There is an urgency to sharing the good news. This week – continue to pray for your non-believing friends and family – regularly, daily, pleading with God to grant them faith, and sharing the good news when you have opportunity. Don't give up, because Jesus says, - Quick Church – grab the truth in one hand – the truth of a God who hates sin and will punish it – but with love in the other – love that has made a provision for sin – so that we might no die, but truly live.