

DON'T DEFY GOD

5 Belshazzar the king gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine with them. ²While Belshazzar was drinking wine, he gave orders to bring in the gold and silver goblets that Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken from the temple in Jerusalem, so that the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines, might drink from them. ³So they brought in the golden goblets that had been taken from the temple of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines, drank from them. ⁴They drank wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone. ⁵In that very hour the finger of a man's hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall, near the lamp stand in the royal palace. The king watched the fingers as they wrote. ⁶Then the king's face became pale and his thoughts terrified him. His hip joints went slack and his knees began knocking together. ⁷The king called out for the enchanters, the Chaldean [astrologers], and the soothsayers. The king said to the wise men of Babylon, Whoever is able to read this inscription and give me the interpretation, shall be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed around his neck, and he will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom. ⁸Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the inscription, nor make known to the king the interpretation. ⁹Then King Belshazzar became greatly alarmed, and his face [again] became pale, and his nobles were perplexed.

¹⁰[Now] the queen entered the banquet hall, because [she had heard] the words of the king and his nobles. The queen said, O king, live forever! Do not let your thoughts alarm you; do not let your face become pale. ¹¹There is a man in your kingdom in whom is the spirit of the holy gods. In the days of your father he was found to have insight and understanding and wisdom like the wisdom of the gods. The king, Nebuchadnezzar your father, [I say,] the king, your father, made him chief of the magicians, enchanters, Chaldean [astrologers], and soothsayers; ¹²because an extraordinary spirit and knowledge and understanding, the ability to interpret dreams and explain enigmas and solve perplexing problems, were found in this Daniel whom the king named Belteshazzar. Now let Daniel be summoned, and he will provide the interpretation. ¹³So Daniel was brought in before the king. The king asked Daniel, Are you that Daniel, one of the exiles of Judah, whom the king, my father, brought out of Judah? ¹⁴I have heard about you. [I have heard] that the spirit of the gods is in you, and that you possess insight and understanding and extraordinary wisdom. ¹⁵The wise men and the enchanters were brought before me to read this inscription and make known to me its interpretation. But they could not provide the interpretation of this thing. ¹⁶But I have heard that you are able to provide interpretations and solve perplexing problems. Now if you can read this inscription and make known to me the interpretation of it, you shall be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed around your neck, and you will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom. ¹⁷Then Daniel answered the king, You may keep your gifts for yourself and give your rewards to someone else. Nevertheless, I will read the inscription for the king and make known to him the interpretation. ¹⁸O king, the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father the kingdom and the greatness and the glory and the majesty. ¹⁹Because of the greatness he gave him, all the peoples, nations, and [men of every] language feared him and trembled before him. He killed whomever he desired, and he kept alive

whomever he desired. He promoted whomever he desired, and he demoted whomever he desired. ²⁰But when his heart became arrogant and his spirit was hardened, so that he behaved in a proud manner, he was deposed from his royal throne and they took his glory from him. ²¹He was driven away from men and his mind became like that of the beasts. He lived with the wild donkeys, he was given grass to eat like the cattle, and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, until he acknowledged that the Most High God rules in the kingdom of men and that he sets over it whomever he desires. ²²Yet you, his son, O Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, even though you knew all this. ²³On the contrary, you have exalted yourself against the Lord of heaven. You had the goblets from his temple brought before you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines, drank wine from them. You praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone, [gods] that cannot see or hear and do not have intelligence. But the God who holds your life in his hands and who governs all your ways, you have not glorified. ²⁴Therefore the fingers of the hand were sent from his presence and this inscription was written. ²⁵And this is the inscription that was written: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN. ²⁶This is the interpretation of the thing: MENE, God has numbered [the days of] your kingdom and has brought it to an end. ²⁷TEKEL, you have been weighed on the scales, and you are found to be deficient. ²⁸PERES, your kingdom has been divided and given to the Medes and Persians. ²⁹Then, at Belshazzar's command, they clothed Daniel in purple and placed a gold chain around his neck, and he was proclaimed to be the third highest ruler in the kingdom. ³⁰That [very] night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was killed. ³¹And Darius the Mede took over the kingdom; he was approximately sixty-two years old. (Dan. 5:1-31)

Introduction

There was once a young man—a lawyer by profession—who was converted to Christ. Following his conversion, with his newfound peace with God and joy in the LORD, he witnessed to everyone he met. But in particular, he witnessed to and prayed for one close acquaintance.

This acquaintance was a local magistrate and had been elected to the New York State legislature. This man was deeply convicted of sin. The young Christian was praying for his friend daily and urging him to give his heart to Christ. The man's conviction became very deep; but still, from day to day, he put off the necessary submission to Christ and did not obtain the hope of salvation. "My concern for him increased," reported the young Christian.

One afternoon several of his political colleagues held a lengthy interview with this man concerning a political deal they desired him to secure for them at the state capital in Albany. The next morning, when the young Christian encountered his friend for whom he was so greatly concerned, the man declared,

I shall have nothing more to do with the question of submission to God until I return from the legislature. I stand committed to my political friends to carry out certain measures in the legislature that are incompatible with my first becoming

a Christian and I have promised that I will not attend to the subject of becoming a Christian until after I have returned from Albany.

What happened on the night previous to this announcement, and what happened upon his return from Albany, is the rest of the story. But for now suffice it to say, that man, by defying God, did a very dangerous and deadly thing. That man knew he had to submit to Christ; but instead, he willfully and defiantly committed himself to promoting evil.

In the passage of Scripture presently before us we likewise meet a man who knew he had to humble himself before the LORD; but instead, he, too, willfully defied God. He wound up suffering the awful consequences for his defiance. Because it is such a dangerous and deadly thing to do, the Scripture urges us not to defy God, but rather, to render unto Him the submission He demands.

I. Don't Defy God, By Blatantly Scorning Him (Dan. 5:1-4)

Verse 1 speaks of a great feast that was held in the high courts of Babylon. Belshazzar the king made a banquet for one thousand of his lords. In this passage the king's drinking of wine is especially emphasized as being the trigger that unleashes the awful wickedness that follows. When one comes under the influence of intoxicating drink the outward restraints and controls are relaxed and the latent sinfulness of the human heart surfaces to express itself.

As he tastes the wine, Belshazzar commands that the gold and silver drinking goblets that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the LORD's temple in Jerusalem be brought to the banquet (vs. 2.) His intention, as we learn from the latter part of verse 2, is that he and his royal guests might drink from these sacred cups and goblets. As one commentator remarks, here was "a deed that was unparalleled in the records of antiquity" (H. C. Leupold, *Commentary on Daniel*, p. 215.) Foreign gods were venerated; even though their peoples and their lands may have been conquered, the gods themselves were still revered. Nebuchadnezzar's act described in Daniel 1:2 was an act of venerating the things of the LORD: *"the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into [Nebuchadnezzar's] hand, along with some of the vessels from the temple of God. He carried them to the land of Shinar to the temple of his god, and he put the vessels in the treasure house of his god"* (Dan. 1:2.)

What was Belshazzar doing by means of this act? He was intentionally desecrating the sacred vessels by employing them for a common and even an immoral use. He was assuming for himself a divine prerogative and position by using vessels set apart exclusively for the LORD's service. It was a gross act of defiance, calculated to insult the God of Israel and hold Him in contempt.

Why did Belshazzar select the vessels of the LORD? Why not those of some pagan deity? Was he openly defying God because of, and in spite of, what the LORD had

done to his father, Nebuchadnezzar—the divine act of humbling the great king as described in Daniel 5:18-21,

O king, the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father the kingdom and the greatness and the glory and the majesty. ¹⁹Because of the greatness he gave him, all the peoples, nations, and [men of every] language feared him and trembled before him. He killed whomever he desired, and he kept alive whomever he desired. He promoted whomever he desired, and he demoted whomever he desired. ²⁰But when his heart became arrogant and his spirit was hardened, so that he behaved in a proud manner, he was deposed from his royal throne and they took his glory from him. ²¹He was driven away from men and his mind became like that of the beasts. He lived with the wild donkeys, he was given grass to eat like the cattle, and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, until he acknowledged that the Most High God rules in the kingdom of men and that he sets over it whomever he desires. (Dan. 5:18-21)

Furthermore, with his moral restraints having been “liberated” by the wine, Belshazzar is expressing the innate defiance of God that dwells deep within the human heart. As the Apostle Paul testifies, *“the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law”* (Rom. 8:7.) Finally, there was also a demonic element present. Belshazzar, though responsible for his evil deed, is being used by the devil to give vent to the devil’s own defiant hatred of God.

Belshazzar and his guests use the sacred vessels of the LORD to blasphemously toast their own pagan deities (vs. 4.) In doing so, they were treading on dangerous ground.

Let us not defy God, by blatantly scorning Him. When the LORD says, “Give Me your heart,” it is dangerous to blatantly scorn Him and refuse to do so. (As we shall see was the case with the New York legislator mentioned in the Introduction.) When the LORD says, “Go and make amends for a particular sin, seek forgiveness and reconciliation, it is dangerous to blatantly scorn Him and refuse to do so. When the LORD says, “Let go of a personal immoral habit, turn it over to Me,” it is dangerous to blatantly scorn Him and refuse to do so. When the LORD says, “Reform your business practices,” it is dangerous to blatantly scorn Him and refuse to do so.

II. Don’t Defy God, By Ignoring His Warning (Dan. 5:18-23)

When he is called upon to interpret the handwriting on the wall, Daniel reminds Belshazzar of God’s dealings with his father, Nebuchadnezzar (vs. 18-21.) The LORD gloriously blessed Nebuchadnezzar with the great empire of Babylon and even gave him God-like dominion:

*O king, the Most High God gave **Nebuchadnezzar** your father the kingdom and the greatness and the glory and the majesty. ¹⁹Because of the greatness he gave*

him, all the peoples, nations, and [men of every] language feared him and trembled before him. He killed whomever he desired, and he kept alive whomever he desired. He promoted whomever he desired, and he demoted whomever he desired. (Dan. 5:18-19)

We might compare what Daniel says of Nebuchadnezzar's authority with what the Scriptures say about the LORD's own divine authority: *"Jehovah puts to death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up. ⁷Jehovah sends poverty and wealth; he humbles and he exalts"* (1 Sam. 2:6-7.)

Daniel goes on to remind Belshazzar that the LORD greatly humbled Nebuchadnezzar for his pride:

But when his heart became arrogant and his spirit was hardened, so that he behaved in a proud manner, he was deposed from his royal throne and they took his glory from him. ²¹He was driven away from men and his mind became like that of the beasts. He lived with the wild donkeys, he was given grass to eat like the cattle, and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, until he acknowledged that the Most High God rules in the kingdom of men and that he sets over it whomever he desires. (Dan. 5:20-21)

But the LORD graciously restored Nebuchadnezzar when he humbled himself before God: *"He was driven away from men ... until he acknowledged that the Most High God rules in the kingdom of men and that he sets over it whomever he desires"* (vs. 21b.)

Daniel then proceeds to rebuke Belshazzar for his insolent and arrogant behavior (vs. 22-23.) He charges Belshazzar with having known all that had happened to his father when his father's heart was lifted up in pride, but refusing to learn from his father's experience. On the contrary, Belshazzar has intentionally done worse than his father. According to verse 20, Nebuchadnezzar's *"heart became arrogant"* (literally, *"his heart was lifted up."*) Now, in verse 23, Daniel confronts Belshazzar with the fact that, *"you have exalted yourself against the Lord of heaven"* (literally, *"you have lifted up yourself against the Lord of heaven."*) What Daniel is saying is that whereas Nebuchadnezzar's pride was a natural sinful response to wealth and success, Belshazzar's insolence was a willfully sinful response against the LORD.

Belshazzar refused to learn from the experience of his father, and he refused to listen to the counsel of his father, when he warned: *"Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and honor the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just, and he is able to humble those who walk in pride"* (Dan. 4:37.) Belshazzar insisted upon going contrary to all the testimony offered to him by the LORD.

Let us not defy God, by neglecting His warnings. Referring to the judgments that befell Old Testament Israel, the Apostle Paul warns us, *"these things happened to them as examples [for us], and they were written for our instruction—[for us] upon whom the end of the ages has come"* (1 Cor. 10:11.)

III. Don't Defy God, Because the Ultimate Consequence is Damnation (Dan. 5:24-31)

In verses 24-28 Daniel reports God's message and its interpretation. Each of the terms that appeared on the wall is a play on words containing a double meaning: *"MENE"* (NUMBERED)—God has sovereignly counted out for Belshazzar the length of his rule, and now the count down has reached zero, his time is up; *"TEKEL"* (WEIGHED—Belshazzar has been measured in the divine scales of justice, and he does not measure up; *"PERES"* (DIVIDED)—Belshazzar's kingdom is broken up (פָּרַץ), and this breaking up will be done by the Persians (פָּרַס).

At Belshazzar's command, Daniel is now made the third ruler in the kingdom (vs. 29.) Why? Was Belshazzar hoping to appease God by honoring God's servant? Was Belshazzar hoping to impress God by keeping his promise? Note the promise he made to Daniel recorded in verse 16, *"if you can read this inscription and make known to me the interpretation of it, you shall be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed around your neck, and you will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom."* Whatever his motivation, there was no true repentance; and there is no further extension of mercy. Verse 30 informs us that in that same night—within hours of the announcement—Belshazzar was killed and the empire of Babylon was divided up by the Medes and the Persians.

Let us not defy God, because the ultimate consequence is damnation. Let us heed the warning issued by the Apostle Paul:

... do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance? ⁵But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself on the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. ⁶God "will give to each person according to what he has done." (Rom. 2:4-6)

Conclusion

What became of that New York legislator who was so deeply convicted of sin, but chose to defy God? What happened on that night before he left for Albany? And what happened upon his return?

That young Christian who was so concerned about the spiritual well-being of his friend tells the rest of the story:

On the evening of the same day I attempted again to bring his case to God, as the urgency in my mind for his conversion had become very great. In my prayer I had drawn very near to God. I do not remember ever having been in more intimate communion with the Lord Jesus Christ than I was at that time. Indeed, his presence was so real that I was bathed in tears of joy and gratitude and love, and in this state of mind I attempted to pray for this friend.

But the moment I did so, my mouth was shut. I found it impossible to pray a word for him. The Lord seemed to say to me, "No, I will not hear." As anguish seized upon me, I thought at first it was a temptation. But the door was shut in my face. It seemed as if the Lord said to me, "Speak no more to me of that matter." It pained me beyond expression. I did not know what to make of it.

The next morning I saw him, and as soon as I brought up the question of submission to God he said to me, "Mr. Finney, I shall have nothing more to do with it until I return from the legislature. I stand committed to my political friends to carry out certain measures in the legislature that are incompatible with my first becoming a Christian and I have promised that I will not attend to the subject [of becoming a Christian] until after I have returned from Albany."

From the moment of my experience the evening before, I had no spirit of prayer for him at all. As soon as he told me what he had done [upon his return from Albany], I understood it. I could see that his convictions were all gone, and that the Spirit of God had left him. From that time he grew more careless and hardened than ever.

He remained in his sins, finally fell into decay, and died at last, as I have been told, a dilapidated man. (*The Autobiography of Charles G. Finney*, Bethany House Publishers, Minneapolis MN, 1977, pp.42-44)

The Scriptures exhort us, "*Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts*" (Heb. 3:15.)