



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Daniel 5:1-31

Daniel

"Writing on the Wall"

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] Thank you Mark, and good morning. We are continuing our studies in the Book of Daniel and we're in chapter 5, another of the well-known passages out of this great book. Years have passed since the end of chapter 4 when Nebuchadnezzar was humbled and repented. And now, a new king is on the throne. And throughout the text it's translated – he just speaks of Nebuchadnezzar, or Nebuchadnezzar is referred to as Belshazzar's father. He's his grandfather, but the word father is often used as ancestor or forefather. But that's where we come to Daniel 5, verse 1.

"Belshazzar the king held a great feast for a thousand of his nobles, and he was drinking wine in the presence of the thousand. When Belshazzar tasted the wine, 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. Then they brought the gold vessels that had been taken out of the temple, the house of God which was in Jerusalem; and the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines drank from them. They drank the wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone. Suddenly the fingers of a man's hand emerged and began writing opposite the lamp stand on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace, and the king saw the back of the hand that did the writing. Then the king's face grew pale and his thoughts alarmed him, and his hip joints

went slack and his knees began knocking together. The king called aloud to bring in the conjurers, the Chaldeans and the diviners. The king spoke and said to the wise men of Babylon, 'Any man who can read this inscription and explain its interpretation to me shall be clothed with purple and have a necklace of gold around his neck, and have authority as third ruler in the kingdom.' Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the inscription or make known its interpretation to the king."

As the chapter goes on, Daniel was brought in. He gave the king a brief sermon, then he explained the writing on the wall. Verse 25: "Now this is the inscription that was written out: 'MENĒ, MENĒ, TEKĒL, UPHARSIN.' This is the interpretation of the message: "MENE" – God has numbered your kingdom and put an end to it. "TEKĒL" – you have been weighed on the scales and found deficient. "PERĒS" – your kingdom has been divided and given over to the Medes and Persians.' Then Belshazzar gave orders, and they clothed Daniel with purple and put a necklace of gold around his neck, and issued a proclamation concerning him that he now had authority as the third ruler in the kingdom. That same night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was slain. So Darius the Mede received the kingdom at about the age of sixty-two." And note that word, "received the kingdom."

May the Lord bless this reading of His Word and bless our time of study in it together. Let's bow together in prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we are pleased to be here. It's a great honor; it's a great blessing. It's a privilege to gather with your people as we do on this Lord's day every Sunday morning. It's a blessing to be with your people. It's a blessing to come together and see each other – we haven't seen each other for a week or more – and be able to visit.

But the real blessing of a time like this is doing what we've just done: read the Scriptures and then spend time studying **it**. That is a great blessing. We have the privilege of possessing your Word, the inerrant Word of God that's been challenged and ridiculed down

through the centuries but always proves reliable. The skeptics have been scattered and will continue to be. Your Word stands firm.

It's our authority. And we have the privilege of reading it now, and then for the rest of the hour considering the meaning of the text that we looked at. And every child of God has been equipped to do that. It's another blessing we have. You have given us new minds, new hearts.

We have the faculties with which to read and understand what we've read. And, equally important, we have a teacher in the Holy Spirit who is the seal upon our hearts, who keeps us, guards us unto the day of redemption and never let us go. He's our helper; He's our guide; He's our interpreter. He's the teacher, ultimately. And so, Lord, we pray that his teaching ministry would go unhindered and He would guide us in the things that we've read and what we'll study, that we would not only understand the text but also how it applies to each one of us, individually, as He makes the application as well.

So, Lord, we pray your blessings upon us. Teach us, build us up in the faith. Bless us spiritually. Bless us also materially. We thank you for all that we have in Christ. And now, Lord, as we sing our next hymn, we pray that you would prepare our hearts for a time of study and a time of worship. We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.

[Message] In the next state over, there was a politician in the 1930s who was powerful. He was the governor of Louisiana and then became its senator. Huey P. Long. He built roads, he built bridges, he built Louisiana State University. He built a formidable political machine.

He was known as the Kingfish. He was flamboyant; he was popular; he was ambitious; he had aspirations of challenging Franklin D. Roosevelt for president. Then in 1935, at the height of his career, he was gunned down in the state capital. His last words were, "God, don't let me die. I have so much to do." He was 42.

We never know when death is coming. Sometimes it comes at the most inconvenient time. It did for Belshazzar. It happened the

night Babylon fell. The Persian army was outside the city. But you would never have known it from what was happening inside.

The king was giving a party. A new king was on the throne. Nebuchadnezzar was gone. Belshazzar was now king of Babylon. He was actually co-regent. He ruled with his father, Nabonidus.

Now, until the 19th century only Nabonidus was known to history. Belshazzar was unattested, except here in the Book of Daniel and in some of the writings that depended on Daniel, like the writings of Josephus. So Belshazzar was considered a fictional character. It's not unusual. There are many occasions like that where the skeptics have doubted the Bible.

They doubted it, for example, with its statements about the Hittite Empire. We'd never heard of the Hittites, and then archeology discovered this vast Hittite Empire in central Anatolia, Turkey. Well, since the skeptics dismissed Belshazzar, lots of evidence has been found to prove his existence and show that he not only lived, but he ruled Babylon. In fact, the very hall in which these events we read about taking place has been discovered or they think it has. Babylon, 100 years ago was excavated and the great hall was found and they were using plaster on the wall that's mentioned in this text.

Nabonidus had, for all intents and purposes, retired from politics. He retained the title of king, but he left the running of the Empire to his son, Belshazzar. Belshazzar means, *Ba'al* protect the king, and the king clearly put a lot of confidence in *Ba'al* and the gods of Babylon to do that. The Babylonians were in a bad situation. Babylon had lost a major battle to the Persians.

The army had fled. Some had taken refuge in the city of Babylon. It alone was unconquered, and the Persians were at the gates. But the king wasn't worried. He thought he was absolutely secure. He was in a city that was thought to be impregnable, behind walls that were tall and thick.

The Euphrates River ran through the city so there was plenty of water, and the city was stocked with food for years. Belshazzar

believed he had lots of time, and so he gave a big banquet. He invited a thousand friends, fed them lavishly and served them wine, lots of wine. It wasn't long before the party got rowdy. From what's known of ancient royal banquets, drinking often led to debauchery.

Wine is a mocker, the Proverbs tell us. Under the influence people lose all sense of propriety and make fools of themselves. That's what happened to this king. When he began feeling the effects of the wine, he called for the gold and silver goblets that Nebuchadnezzar had brought from Jerusalem so that he and his guests could drink from them. Now, these were the treasures from the temple.

These were goblets that had been used in religious services and libations. Nebuchadnezzar had brought them from **Babylon** some 50 years earlier, and he put them in a pagan temple as trophies of war. He'd taken the treasures of the temple of the Lord and put them in the temple of a pagan god, to say in effect, "My gods triumph over Yahweh." Jehovah has been defeated. The gods of Babylon had triumphed.

And so now, Belshazzar had them brought out and filled with wine so that he could use them to toast his gods. And he did. They all did. Verse 4 tells us: "They drank the wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone." Now, this wasn't just a crass, flippant prank of the kind we might expect from a drunken fool. It was deliberate.

This was intended blasphemy. It was calculated to mock the Lord, not the other gods. He doesn't mock the gods of the world. He mocks the Lord God. And what provoked him is anyone's guess.

But I can imagine that this was an act of arrogance on the part of the king, who knew well the story of Nebuchadnezzar's humiliation and hated it. Well, we know that he knew because Daniel later says that he knew all about that. But with the Persians at the gate and Babylon suffering a humiliating defeat, it's as though the king is making an absolutely defiant statement. He knows the situation, that

so much has fallen and that the enemy is without. But nevertheless, this is a gesture that he's not going to become humble.

He was defiant. To quote the poem, "His head was bloodied but unbowed." Maybe he believed that in their darkest hour, Ba'al and Ishtar and Marduk would deliver them. Babylon, he thought, was too great to fall. So he toasted the gods of god with Jehovah's goblets.

But, of course, gods of gold are just gold, just objects. They have luster but no life. They're just inert things. And when men need help, really need help – when death comes, the gods of the world cannot help. Belshazzar learned that.

Belshazzar learned that his name was all wrong. Ba'al couldn't protect the king. He was toasting the gods in toasts and tossing down another goblet, when suddenly he had an encounter with the living God. A hand appeared, a disembodied hand, a mystical hand in the air, and it was writing on the wall strange words, unintelligible words. It was obviously a preternatural thing, and the king was terrified.

His face turned white and his knees began to knock. It was a spooky moment, no doubt, but the fear was equally provoked by the guilt that was there, by the thoughts that he had. That's what Daniel tells him. He had a sense of dread, a sense of doom. At the moment of his greatest arrogance, when he was enjoying great pleasure and he was confidently mocking the Lord God, a hand appeared writing on a wall something, a message, and he feared the worst.

He deserved the worst. He knew it. C.S. Lewis has a sentence in his book, *Miracles*, in which he writes about people who fashion a god of their own making, or maybe it's pantheism, maybe it's the notion of a god as a life force. But it's a deity that, as he points out, they can manage, they can control. It isn't demanding on their lives, doesn't require anything of them.

He, or whatever it is, this god doesn't interfere with their life. It gives, actually, an alternative to the God of the Bible and a reason for not believing in him. That's really the purpose that such a god serves for these people. And then he describes them as being like

children in a room upstairs playing games, imagining that they are burglars, that they're bad guys, when, unexpectedly, they hear something.

As he puts it, a real footstep in the hall. And then, suddenly, they stop playing. They get quiet and afraid, reality's approaching. And so it is with those who play theologian or invent gods and deny reality. When the real God arrives, it's terrifying.

And everyone will have that experience. Many have it in this life. I'm speaking of the unbeliever, the person who dismisses God, the person who's got his own god and imagines a deity of his own making and trusts in that, when suddenly there's something that happens, a scare in his or her life, a divine reminder. Maybe it's a sickness, maybe it's a bad report from the doctor; maybe it's an accident in the family. Something reminds them that, really, they don't have any control.

And if they don't have that here – and listen, many people, many arrogant men and women who live their lives out in unbelief, go to the grave in unbelief and without fear. But I promise, when they enter into eternity, they face reality. So if they don't hear those footsteps in the hall in this life, they certainly have that moment at death. But everyone who rejects the Lord and mocks the truth will have that moment when suddenly they realize God is real. And the God that is real is the God of the Bible, the God of Scripture.

At that moment, they realize how helpless they are, that they aren't self-sufficient, that they aren't the masters of their faith and the captains of their soul. Belshazzar had that experience. In the midst of his levity and blasphemy, when he was so confident of himself and what he believed, so confident in his gods, he had an encounter with God and was terrified. His response is given in verse 7, which records that he "called aloud to bring in the conjurers, the Chaldeans and the diviners." To put it in the vernacular, he lost it.

He was in a panic. He was actually screaming for these wise men. When they arrived, he offered them power; he offered them

riches, whatever he could offer if they could just tell him what all of this meant. "Any man who can read this inscription and explain its interpretation to me," he said, "shall be clothed with purple and have a necklace of gold around his neck, and have authority as third ruler in the kingdom." Quite an offer that he makes.

Belshazzar was a real man of the world. He was a man who understood how the world works. He understood power; he understood wealth; he understood the effectiveness of it all and thought that he could buy what he needed. He had power, he had prestige, he had money. He could get whatever he wanted.

He'd always had that experience. And now, he finds they're no help here. None of that can get him what he wanted. The wise men, in spite of all that they're offered, were baffled, and the king got even more alarmed. Money won't buy you spiritual understanding. Money won't buy you an understanding of what is most important in life, won't get you what's most important in life. And that's one lesson that this king learned.

This worldly man learned all of his wealth, all of his influence were gone and were worthless. So he turns pale again, even more so. He's learning quickly that he's lost control. He has no control. None of us really have control, and every once in a while, there's a reminder of that.

And I don't want to make light of it, but the storm that hit the East Coast is a reminder of just how helpless we are. We are all, all of us, dependent creatures. The natural man doesn't like to think like that, but that's the reality. We are dependent creatures. That's the sermon Belshazzar was about to get.

He was completely helpless and despairing, when his mother entered the party. And she evidently hadn't been invited, or if she'd been invited she turned down the invitation. She had an idea of what kind of party it was going to be. But she heard of Belshazzar's distress and came to him with some good advice, and the advice is very simple. Call for Daniel.

Now, she's called the queen in verse 10, but I called her his mother because in verse 2, we're told that Belshazzar's wives and concubines were there at the banquet. So she's probably the queen, but also his mother, so the queen mother who was likely the daughter of Nebuchadnezzar and the wife of Nabonidus. She is obviously very familiar with the court of Nebuchadnezzar, which would indicate that she had spent her life in that court. She knew the events of that reign. She reminds her son of that.

She tells Belshazzar all about what happened and not to be alarmed, and says that "There is a man in the kingdom" who can explain it all. In verse 11, she describes Daniel's gifts and reviews the events of the past, how Daniel interpreted dreams and was able to explain enigmas and solve difficult problems. So she says, "Let Daniel now be summoned and he will declare the interpretation." Belshazzar was desperate. He's ready to listen to anyone.

What a blessing it is to have a man like Daniel around, whether it's in your government nationally or within your church, or just as a friend, to have someone who can solve difficult problems. Those are the kind of people one needs. They're a gift from God; the kind of people we should aspire to be so that we can be a help to others like that, and we will as we study the Word of God. But those are the kind of people we need. But you see the folly of Belshazzar.

This man who Nebuchadnezzar had raised up and given a position of authority in his kingdom, had by this time been marginalized, set out on the fringe, wasn't even a part of things. Belshazzar had no wise men around him. He was a fool and he lived like it. But now, he's ready to listen. So we read in verse 13 that "Daniel was brought in."

The king asked, "Are you that Daniel who is one of the exiles of Judah, whom my father the king brought from Judah?" He told him that he'd heard about his gifts and insight. And then he tells him the problem, that his own wise men were unable to interpret the writing on the wall. He makes the same offer to Daniel that he made to the

conjurers and the Chaldeans, a purple robe, a gold necklace and rule over a third of the kingdom. In verse 17, Daniel answers, "Keep your gifts for yourself or give your rewards to someone else; but I will read the inscription" and explain it to you.

Now, Daniel was, by this time, an old man. He was probably in his 80s. His response to the king here is not a response of pride or rudeness. He had respect for the king. But it was a statement intended to prevent any thought that he could be bought or that the truth had a price.

You read through the Bible, Old and New Testament alike, the prophets and the prophets make it very clear the gospel is free. They don't charge for the gospel. And so he was saying in effect, "I will tell you the meaning of this phenomenon but not for a bribe. He was a prophet – he was not a profiteer – and he would prophesy. But lots of prophets were also preachers and so was Daniel. And he gives the king a short sermon before he explains the phenomenon.

We read in verse 18: "O king, the Most High God granted sovereignty, grandeur, glory and majesty to Nebuchadnezzar your father. Because of the grandeur which He – " the God – "bestowed on him, all the peoples, nations and men of every language feared and trembled before him; whomever he wished he killed and whomever he wished he spared alive; and whomever he wished he elevated and whomever he wished he humbled." In other words, this was a powerful king. Nebuchadnezzar was the head of gold. He ruled the world and his word was law.

But all that Nebuchadnezzar was and all that Nebuchadnezzar had was given to him by the Most High God. That's what Daniel says. Notice that. It was granted to him; it was bestowed on him. And Nebuchadnezzar learned that in a hard and humiliating lesson.

And in verses 20 through 21, Daniel reminds Belshazzar of what had happened. Nebuchadnezzar became proud. "His heart was lifted up and he behaved arrogantly," so God dispossessed him of his throne and drove him away from man by giving him the mind of an animal.

He was the greatest man in the world at that time, and he became the lowest man in the world. He became like an ox.

"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 He sets over it whomever He wishes." Belshazzar must have recognized the parallel between his life and that of Nebuchadnezzar's, the arrogance of it. But if not, if he'd missed that, Daniel makes the application in verse 22. "Yet you, his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, even though you knew all this." Oh, and that makes his guilt all the greater.

He had revelation. He possessed it for some 20, 30 years. He knew what had happened to Nebuchadnezzar, but he ignored it. He didn't learn the lesson. He didn't heed the lesson. He refused.

In fact, he not only rejected it, he took things a step further. He deliberately blasphemed the Most High God who had so easily humbled his predecessor, a man far greater than he was. Now, the evidence was right there in front of everyone, the gold goblets full of wine. And Daniel describes it as an indictment on the king. You brought out their sacred vessels so that "you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines could drink wine from them" in a drunken orgy, salute your idols and mock the Lord.

A complete folly of doing that is shown in the comment Daniel makes on the king's "gods of gold, silver, iron and wood." They don't see. They don't hear. They don't understand. What Daniel doesn't say, but what's clearly implied is they don't help.

They are nothing but inanimate elements. And that can be said of the gods of modern man. They differ only in form not substance, whether they are money or gold, some carefully crafted philosophy; there are plenty of those. They are the inventions of man's mind. They can't see or hear or know.

They can't help when a person really needs help. When the end suddenly, unexpectedly comes, they're no help. The gods of this age,

the things that men rely upon and put so much confidence in. And Belshazzar, who had some knowledge of the Lord – he knew what happened to Nebuchadnezzar. He knew the words.

He probably read the chapter that Nebuchadnezzar wrote, Daniel, chapter 4. He had an understanding, but he had exchanged his – that knowledge of God for these gods, these gods of stone, wood and metal. They are inert things. But Daniel tells the king, the Lord whom he had "not glorified," he's real. He's "the God in whose hand are your life-breath and your ways."

That's verse 23. Notice that. "But the God in whose hand are your life-breath and your ways, you have not glorified." Every breath of life that Belshazzar had, every breath that he drew was from God. Every time he took a breath it was God's will. The course of his life, Daniel says, is in God's hand.

Every moment of his existence was a gift from God, and Belshazzar mocked him. Now, that is insanity to mock the one who controls your health and destiny at every moment. That's what men do all the time every day. Paul explains it in Romans, chapter 1. He gives the gospel to us in verses 16 and 17, the hope of mankind, and then in verse 18 begins analyzing the human race.

And in verse 18, he writes of those "who suppress the truth in unrighteousness," and have clever ways of doing that, ways of explaining away God, explaining away his revelation. And when one does that, they explain away God's morality, God's principles of conduct. But instead of worshipping the Creator, they worship the creature, and it was reflected in the way they behaved. You worship God as an animal, you'll live like an animal. And that's what Paul explains and unveils in that great chapter.

That's a chapter on the unbeliever. Not a few unbelievers but the unbeliever. That's the way the unbeliever lives. But some in that chapter and some of mankind, go a step farther. They go further than others. They deny the truth, and then they lead others into the air and lead them into the darkness and encourage immorality.

And that's what Paul speaks of at the end of the chapter in Romans 1:32 where he says, "they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them." Now, that is the end in reprobation. That's the full extent of reprobation, and that was Belshazzar. He knowingly rejected the life that he had and he gave hearty approval to those who did the same. He led people into gross error, into immorality and blasphemy.

He not only did it, he encouraged it in others. He led the way. Now, God is longsuffering, but there is an end to his patience. As Paul told the Galatians, "God is not mocked. For whatever a man sows, this he will also reap." And Daniel now explains the reaping when he interprets the writing on the wall. It's given in verse 25.

The writing is MENĒ, MENĒ, TEKĒL, UPHARSIN. And then he explains it. MENĒ means numbered. It's written twice to emphasize that the days of Belshazzar's reign had been numbered. They'd been numbered carefully. He mentions it twice. And having numbered them, those days are now at an end.

TEKĒL means weighed. Belshazzar had been "weighed on the scales," Daniel says, "and found deficient." God had given Belshazzar his life; he had given Belshazzar his throne; he had given Belshazzar great opportunity; he'd given him wealth; he'd given him prestige. He gave him all of that and now, he weighed all of that against his own righteousness, and the scales tipped completely against Belshazzar. Belshazzar didn't measure up.

He had no weight, He had no worth, He wasted his life and he was found deficient. He had years of opportunity to repent, as Nebuchadnezzar had, but Belshazzar did not. He only grew more proud, and so he had been judged, he'd been condemned.

UPHARSIN means divided. "Your kingdom," Daniel says, "has been divided and given over to the Medes and Persians." Babylon had fallen. Babylon was finished. God had given it to the Persians. One writer, **Dr.** Campbell, put Daniel's interpretation on the writing on the

wall this way. "Belshazzar, your number is up. You did not measure up. Your kingdom is broken up."

Once again, our lesson of the Book of Daniel is God is sovereign. As Daniel prayed back in chapter 2, verse 21, "He changes the times and the epochs; He removes kings and establishes kings." He is sovereign over world governments today as he was then. He determines the length of a person's reign on the throne or their term in office.

He numbers their days. Belshazzar's days had been numbered and were done. They were finished. That was the interpretation Daniel gave it. That took a great deal of courage.

We've seen this in Daniel from the time we're introduced to him in chapter 1 to here in chapter 5. We'll see it again next week in chapter 6. He was a courageous man. He did the right thing regardless of the circumstances. And here he's standing before a king who's half crazy and in terror of his life.

No telling what he will do, how he'll respond to bad news. And nevertheless, Daniel calmly gives him the message. That's like we're to do with the gospel. People don't want to hear it and they may become insulting about it. But we've got the gospel and our mission is simply to give it. And that's what Daniel does.

It took courage to do that. But he did it calmly; evidently without any worry for himself. And Belshazzar accepted it. He gave Daniel the gifts that he promised him. Daniel received them, verse 29. "Then Belshazzar gave orders, and they clothed Daniel with purple and put a necklace of gold around his neck, and issued a proclamation concerning him that he now had authority as the third ruler in the kingdom."

It meant nothing to Daniel. He was going to enjoy that for about what? An hour or so. He knew it was meaningless. And it was; it didn't last very long.

We read in the next verses, verse 30 and 31, "That same night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was slain. Darius the Mede received the

kingdom at about the age of sixty-two." Received the kingdom. He'd conquered it. Cyrus the Great obtained a great empire.

But the history behind the history is God gave it to him. This is the work of God. Now, the Greek historians, Herodotus and Xenophon, give us the details of how this actually happened in history, how Babylon fell, how the Persians diverted the Euphrates River that went through the city. And the Persian soldiers used the riverbed to enter the city and capture it. The city is actually so large that word of its fall didn't reach the palace until it was a fait accompli, before it was completely over.

According to Xenophon, the invaders entered the palace during the feast, overpowered the king and the attendants and executed Belshazzar. Well, let me draw some lessons, three of them, from the text in the few minutes we have left. The first one is the one I just mentioned, the one we've seen as we've been going through the first five chapters of the Book of Daniel, the theme of the book. And that is God is sovereign. He's patient.

And as you look at life, you wonder, "Is God in control? Where's God?" I'm sure that was the thought of some of the Israelites as they went from the days of Nebuchadnezzar to Nabonidus and Belshazzar. "Where's God in all of this?" God's on his throne.

He's in complete control. That's, as I say, the theme. And knowing that, believing that – not just knowing it. Everybody will give lip service at least to the sovereignty of God. But knowing it, and even people who understand the sovereignty of God and believe it, often don't really believe it, don't really live in it.

But those who do – and I count myself here sometimes – who really understand the sovereignty of God, they have wisdom. It gives wisdom. It gives hope. It shapes character. Exhibit A, Daniel.

He stands before the king; he's completely confident, unflappable. The empire is about to fall. Daniel's position in it is going to fall with it. His future, from the human standpoint, was precarious, but he's not worried. Why isn't he worried?

He knows who's behind the hand that's writing on the wall. He knows who has written history from beginning to end. He knows the Lord God, and he rested in that. So, as I say, knowing the sovereignty of God, truly understand the way the Bible explains it, produces hope and it shapes character. Our world is really no different from the world Daniel lived in.

It is different in some ways, obviously. We have technology they didn't have. We've enhanced in many different areas of knowledge and science they didn't have. But it's essentially the same world. It is as temporal today as it was then.

Everything's passing away now just as it did then. Kingdoms rise and kingdoms fall today just as they did then. The point being this world is nothing in which to put your hope. Our hope doesn't lie here, certainly not in the gods of this age. And just as they had gods and that was a world full of idols and gods, we have them as well.

In some places there are actually images of gold that are literal idols. But in others, they're gold that we have in our account or our vaults. They are money; they're positions we have on the market. They're positions of power. It's science, it's medicine, it's all kinds of things.

Whatever a person puts his trust in or whatever a person loves, that is his god. Calvin has a famous statement in the *Institutes*, which has roughly been translated, "The heart of man is an idol factory." It makes idols out of everything. That's man, that's fallen man. That's the natural man.

But those gods are not real. They are mere objects of just foolish speculations, or at best temporal truths and things. And thinking does not make it so. Thinking does not make it different. There is one God and there is one reality, and the only way we know what that reality is is by reading it in the Word of God.

The Bible interprets life for us, and without it we have no idea what reality is. You can only know what's real. You can only have genuine sanity in this world by reading the Word of God. It is our

standard for truth and life. And regardless of what one says, this book is true, this God is real, and what it explains is reality.

Men can deny that, and they do. They live the way they want. They redefine life in their terms; they praise themselves; they serve themselves; they care for themselves above all else. But in the end they do what Belshazzar did, and that is they run into a wall, a wall with writing on it. It happened to the king. He had an encounter with the one true God, the living God.

His god didn't help him. He suddenly met reality and he met his end. Now, that's the first lesson. God is sovereign and he has revealed what's real to us. Believe it or not, nevertheless it is so.

The second lesson is that sin has a limit. God lets human beings go so far and then his patience runs out. God's very patient. He's longsuffering. But his patience ends, and when it does judgment comes.

People presume upon his patience; they give no thought to him. But he's the one who gives life and breath to every being. We are in his hands. How foolish to ignore him, to reject him, to flaunt unbelief. "It is him with who we have to do," the author of Hebrews tells us.

We must all meet him. We may not hear footsteps in the hall. We may not have a warning ahead of time. But the reality is everyone will meet him. That's the third lesson.

The third lesson is death comes to all of us and often comes at inconvenient times. It came to Belshazzar in the middle of a party when he was at the height of pleasure and the height of confidence. He expected to see the sun rise. He expected to enjoy another day of power and pleasure. He had plans for the future.

The future didn't come. The sun didn't rise on him. And none of us is guaranteed another day. Not one of us is guaranteed another hour. So James tells us to be wise, gives us great counsel there.

He says, make provision for that. Don't be presumptuous about your life. We are "just a vapor." That's true of those of you who are

my age and older, and those of you who are 50 years younger.
Children, teenagers, adults, grandparents, your life's a vapor.

Know that we just suddenly vanish away. We don't have control over that. Don't ignore death. We need to be prepared. We need to be ready to meet the God in whose hand our life breath is and with whom we have to do.

Well, the only way to do that is to repent, to turn from self-satisfaction, self-sufficiency, recognize that we are sinners found wanting on God's scales. All of us **is** wanting on God's scales. "For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." That's true of every one of us, and recognizing that, turn to him. And we do that by believing in Jesus Christ, God's Son and man's Savior.

He died for sinners. And all who believe in him are received by God. The God who weighs us is the God who saves us, and he receives all who turn, all who come. He wipes away our sins; he cleanses us of all guilt; he makes us sons and daughters in his family and gives us eternal life. If you've not believed in Christ, trust in him and enter into the kingdom that is eternal.

Kingdoms rise and fall. Babylon was a great empire. It's gone, dust. Persia came and went. Greece came and went. Rome rose and fell.

And so it is down through history. But this kingdom is forever, and you can be in it through faith in Christ, through faith alone in Christ alone. So trust in him. And those of you who have, rest in him. God's sovereign; he's in control, and everything's working to our good. Let's praise him for that.

[Prayer] Father, we give you thanks for all that we have in Christ. We are reminded here that life is short, life is brief. It's a vapor. It can away in a moment. In the most confident of moments we can be gone.

Belshazzar is a reminder of that, how short and uncertain life is. And yet, in Christ, we are absolutely secure and safe for all eternity.

We thank you for him, thank you for his death for us. And it's in His name we pray. Amen.