

BIBLE CHARACTERS

by

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CHAPTER 5

THE HANDWRITING ON THE WALL.

"Belshazzar the king made a great feast to a thousand of his lords, and drank wine before the thousand" (Daniel 5.1)

And now, for twenty long years or more, we lose sight of Daniel. He may possibly have been for a portion of the interval living in retirement; but at the end of it he still appears to be holding some appointment at the Babylonish court; although most likely occupying a less prominent position than of yore. Nebuchadnezzar had died; and there was now ruling in Babylon, or it may be acting in some such position as Regent, a young man whose name was Belshazzar. This youthful ruler made a great feast to a thousand of his lords, and drank wine before the thousand. Of this prince we only get a single glimpse. This scene of the feast is the first and last view we have of him; and it is enough. How long that banqueting lasted we do not know; but in the East feasts often extend over many days. Amongst the Jews seven days was not an unusual time for the duration of a feast, and occasionally the time was extended to twice seven days, i.e., fourteen days. It was a great feast. The king caroused with his satraps and princes, his lords, and the mighty men of Babylon, together with his wives and concubines, drinking and rioting, and praising the gods of gold, and of silver, of brass, of iron, of wood, and of stone. That is pretty much what men are doing today, if they are bowing their knee to the GOD of this world. Cyrus, the great Persian general, is outside the gates, besieging the city, just as Nebuchadnezzar had besieged Jerusalem. And this Belshazzar fancies himself secure behind the lofty and massive walls that encompass Babylon.

The revelers wax daring and wanton. They had forgotten the power of the GOD of the Hebrews, as shown in the days of Nebuchadnezzar. Heated with wine and lifted up with pride, they laid their sacrilegious hands on the golden vessels which had been brought out of the temple of the house of GOD which was at Jerusalem; and out of those sacred cups they drank. And as they drank to their idols, one can readily believe that they scoffed at the GOD of Israel. I could almost picture the scene before me now, and can imagine I hear them blaspheming His holy name. Now they make merry; now they are in the midst of their boisterous revelry. But lo! stop! What is the matter? The king is struck by something that he sees! His countenance has changed. He has turned deadly pale! The wine cup has fallen from his grasp! His knees smite together. He trembles from head to foot. I should not wonder if his lords and nobles did not laugh in their

sleeve at him, thinking he was drunk. But, there, along the wall, standing out in living light, are seen letters of strange and unintelligible shape. In the same hour came forth fingers of a mans hand, and wrote over against the candlestick upon the plaster of the wall of the king's palace; and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote.

Above the golden candlestick, on a bare space of the wall, Belshazzar beholds that mysterious handwriting. He distinctly discerns the tracing of those terrible words. Was that writing on the palace wall the work of the same hand that had traced the tables of stone at Sinai? Or did some angel messenger execute the Divine commission? The words, fingers of a mans hand, seem to imply the latter.

The king cries aloud, and commands that the astrologers, the Chaldeans, and the soothsayers, should be brought forward. They come trooping in; and he says to them: Whosoever shall read this writing, and show me the interpretation thereof, shall be clothed with scarlet (or purple), and have a chain of gold about his neck, and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom. One after another tries to spell out that writing; but they fail to understand it. They are skilled in Chaldean learning; but this inscription baffles them. They cannot make out the meaning, any more than an unrenewed man can make out the Bible. They do not understand GOD's writing: they cannot comprehend it. A man must be born of the Spirit before he can understand GOD's Book or GOD's writing. No uncircumcised eyes could decipher those words of fire.

The queen hears of the state of affairs, and comes in to encourage and advise. She salutes the king with the words, O king, live forever! let not thy thoughts trouble thee, nor let thy countenance be changed; and then she goes on to tell him that there is one man in the kingdom who will be able to read the writing, and tell out its meaning. She proceeds to say that in the days of Nebuchadnezzar, light, and understanding, and wisdom, like the wisdom of the gods, was found in him; and advises that Daniel shall be summoned.

For some - perhaps several - years he may have been comparatively little known: may have dropped out of notice, as we say. But now, for the third time, he stands before a Babylonian ruler to interpret and to reveal, when the powers of its magicians and astrologers have utterly failed. Daniel comes in; and his eye lights up as he sees the letters upon the wall. He can read the meaning of the words. The king puts forth his offer of rewards; but Daniel is unmoved: Let thy gifts be to thyself, and give thy rewards to another: yet I will read the writing unto the king, and make known to him the interpretation.

But before he reads the words upon the wall he gives the king a bit of his mind. Perhaps he had been long praying for an opportunity of warning him; and now he has it, he will not let it slip, although all those mighty lords are there. So he reminds the king of the lessons he ought to have learned from the visitation that fell upon the mighty Nebuchadnezzar: of how that monarch had been humbled, brought down, and deposed from his kingly throne, because his heart was lifted up, and his mind hardened in pride; until at length he came to repentance, and realized that the Most High GOD ruleth in the kingdom of men. And thou his son, O Belshazzar, hast not humbled thine heart, though thou knewest all this; but hast lifted up thyself against the Lord of Heaven.

Then looking up at the mystic words standing forth in their lambent light, he reads:

MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN

MENE: GOD hath numbered thy kingdom, and finished it.

TEKEL: Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting.

UPHARSIN Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians.

How the word of doom must have rung through the palace that night! There was an awful warning. Sinner, it is for you. What if GOD should put you in the balance, and you without CHRIST! What would become of your soul? Take warning by Belshazzar's fate.

The destruction did not tarry. The king thought he was perfectly secure: he considered that the walls of Babylon were impregnable. But in that night, at the very hour when Daniel was declaring the doom of the king, Cyrus, the conquering Persian, was turning the Euphrates from its regular course and channel, and was bringing his army within those gigantic walls: the guard around the palace is beaten back; the Persian soldiers force their way to the banqueting-hall; and Belshazzar's blood flows mingling with the outpoured wine upon the palace floor.

It was Belshazzar's last night. One short chapter gives us all we know of that young monarch. His life was short. The wicked do not live out half their days. An impious young man, he had neglected or forgotten the holy Daniel: he had set aside his fathers counselor and friend: he had turned away from the best adviser and most faithful servant that Nebuchadnezzar had ever had - one who probably had done more than anyone else to build up and consolidate his kingdom. And this is his end.

O sinners, take warning: Death and hell are right upon you - death and hell, I say. And they are just as close, it may be, as was the sword of the slayer to those midnight revelers.

~ end of chapter 5 ~
