

I was born into a family with two committed, Christian, parents; for as long as I can remember, both Jesus and the church have been central features in my life. When it came to attending church, we were an “every Sunday” kind of family. In fact, my church had a morning and evening service and so we always went to both. My church had a mid-week kids program called Boys Brigade that we attended every Wednesday, and as we got older Youth Group became a regular fixture.

Malcolm Gladwell, in his book *Outliers*, suggests that it takes roughly ten thousand hours of practice to achieve mastery in a field. When it came to church attendance, by the time I was in my late teens, I was more than half way to this magic number. Based on all the time I spent in church, you would think that my two brothers and I were well on our way to being really holy—sadly, it would have been more apt to call us holy terrors.

Our church building was built over top of a creek and we would regularly pick up kids and threaten to drop them into the creek if they didn't go along with our schemes. My younger brother used to roll pennies underneath the pews, from the back of the sanctuary to the front, during the sermon. One time he took exception to a Sunday School teacher and threatened to punch him out. When no one was around the three of us would sneak into the medical room, grab the spare wheelchair and race up and down the church aisles. We even hid in the balcony once and dropped the church's volley ball net on an unsuspecting bystander.

When we were young, my parents would strategically place us boys in between them, so that we would cause less trouble during the service. Child—Parent—Child—Parent—Child. It worked pretty

well too, especially for the two of us that ended up on either side of my dad. My dad is not a big man, but he spent his entire career as a tradesman and he had hands that could bend iron. Whenever we would start to act up in the service, he would reach out with his hand, grab us right above the knee and begin to apply pressure that brought immediate compliance

It got so that we knew how well or how poorly we had behaved at church based on the after service decision-making of our parents. If after the morning service our parents suggested going out for lunch with friends, we knew we were free and clear, but if they said we were going straight home, well, the writing was on the wall, we knew we were in trouble.

Are you familiar with this saying, “*the writing's on the wall*”? It communicates the inevitability of a particular outcome. For example, anyone can see that the writing's on the wall, dropping oil prices are sure to affect the Canadian economy. If you've ever wondered where this phrase comes from, wonder no more—it comes from story we're about to read this morning.

Last week we looked at Daniel 4 and this week we turn our attention to Daniel 5—in these two chapters we have a tale of two kings. King Nebuchadnezzar was restored by God but King Belshazzar was removed by God. We're going to look at what precipitated this removal but first I want to provide a little historical and literary context.

Daniel 1-4 coincides with the reign of Nebuchadnezzar—he ruled from 605-562 B.C. In Daniel 5, we have a new king by the name of Belshazzar who now sits on Babylon's throne.

The Biblical author goes from Nebuchadnezzar to Belshazzar by way of “telescoping”—it appears as though kingship has passed directly from Nebuchadnezzar to Belshazzar. In actual fact, 23 years have passed since the death of Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar is king #5. So the question is, why does the narrator tell the story in the way that they do?

It’s really quite simple. All historians and story-tellers highlight certain details and edit others out in order to make a point. In Daniel 5, our narrator passes over 23 years of history in verse 1, takes the next 28 verses to describe a banquet, and the final two verses to describe the fall of the Babylonian Empire. Our narrator wants to do more than tell us *what* happened, they want us to know *why* it happened—in so doing, they are making a statement about God’s activity in human history.

So what does our narrator want us to know?

- **First, God is in control**—empires rise and fall according to His purposes.
- **Second, God is faithful to preserve His people.** God enabled Daniel and His friends to live faithfully in a foreign land—Daniel has seen 5 kings come and go and yet he is still standing.
- **Third, God is faithful to His promises (vs. 31).** When Judah was carried off into exile, she was told that it would not last forever. Babylon is defeated and the Persian Empire rises—under Persian rule, Israeli exiles would be allowed to return to Jerusalem.
- **And fourth, holiness matters.**

If you haven’t already done so, let me encourage you to open your Bible—paper or electronic—to Daniel 5; I’ll begin reading in verse 1.

“King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine with them. 2 While Belshazzar was drinking his 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. 3 So they brought in the gold 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.

4 As they drank the wine, they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone. 5 Suddenly the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall, near the lampstand in the royal palace. The king watched the hand as it wrote. 6 His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his legs became weak and his knees were knocking.”

With our modern eyes and ears, it’s difficult to understand what’s going on—we have a sense that Belshazzar has done something wrong, but we’re not sure what. Allow me to offer a few comments.

The word “holy” encompasses a range of meanings that include concepts like “clean,” “pure,” and “righteous”.¹ But included in this range of meanings is the idea of being “set apart” or “consecrated”. In the Old Testament, a person or an object that had been set apart for

¹ To be “righteous” is to be rightly-related to God, to self, to others, and to creation.

God's service, was spoken of as being "holy". Let me offer the following illustration.

illus: when I grew up, my dad had a tool cabinet in his workshop that was filled with tools, but Craftsman screwdrivers and wrenches were among his favourite. Why? Because they had a lifetime guarantee. And so, he could use his screwdriver as a chisel or a hole punch; he could use his wrench as a pry bar—when the tool bent or broke, he would return it and get another one for free. Now you can use a screwdriver as a chisel, but do you know what a screwdriver is best at? Driving screws. A screwdriver has been designed—set apart if you like—for an intended purpose; to use it any other way compromises its reason for being (integrity).

Belshazzar called for goblets so that he and his guests could drink wine—a simple enough request. But the narrator wants us to know that these aren't just any goblets—these goblets were holy—they were set apart for the worship of God. Belshazzar used these goblets in a way that defiled their reason for being—he used them to toast idols of gold, silver, and bronze. In response to this sacrilege, a heavenly hand appeared and wrote on the wall.

The king called for his wise men to come and make sense of the writing, but no one could tell him what it meant. Finally the queen—likely the queen mother—reminded Belshazzar that there was one wise man (Daniel) in the kingdom who could interpret the sign.

Now remember, Daniel was a young man when he began to serve Nebuchadnezzar—he served him for nearly 40 years, and 23 years had passed by since Nebuchadnezzar's death. By the time of Belshazzar's leadership, Daniel was in his late 70's or 80's—perhaps

he had fallen out of favour, been forgotten, or been retired. Whatever the case, the king called for Daniel and as Daniel has done in the past, he spoke the mind of God.

Verse 18 "Your Majesty, the Most High God gave your father Nebuchadnezzar sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendour. 19 Because of the high position he gave him, all the nations and peoples of every language dreaded and feared him. Those the king wanted to put to death, he put to death; those he wanted to spare, he spared; those he wanted to promote, he promoted; and those he wanted to humble, he humbled.

20 But when his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory. 21 He was driven away from people...until he acknowledged that the Most High God is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth...

"But you, Belshazzar, his son, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this. Instead, you have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven. You had the goblets from his temple brought to 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, which cannot see or hear or understand. But you did not honour the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways.

24 Therefore he sent the hand that wrote the inscription.

25 "This is the inscription that was written: mene, mene, tekel, parsin

26 "Here is what these words mean: **Mene:** *God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end. 27 Tekel:* *You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting. 28 Peres:* *Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians."*

Verse 30, “*That very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain, and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom, at the age of sixty-two.*”

Daniel began by giving the king a lesson from recent history. Verses 18-19, tell us that God **gave** Nebuchadnezzar sovereignty, greatness, glory, and splendour. God **gave** Nebuchadnezzar the nations and peoples of every language.

But power went to Nebuchadnezzar’s head and made him proud—he killed who he wanted to kill, he spared who he wanted to spare, and he promoted those he wanted to promote. He humbled others but he refused to humble himself. And so, vs. 20-21, God **took** his throne, his glory, and his sanity. But once Nebuchadnezzar acknowledged God’s Kingship, God **gave** him back his sanity and his throne.

We have here a tale of two kings—Nebuchadnezzar was restored and Belshazzar would be removed. Verse 23 functions as God’s summary statement against Belshazzar: “*you have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven.*” Belshazzar’s sins fall into three interrelated categories: pride, idolatry, and sacrilege.

Pride: Pride expresses itself by elevating self and reducing God. Nebuchadnezzar repented of his pride and was restored but Belshazzar refused to repent, and so, he would be removed.

Idolatry: Almost anyone or anything can serve as a counterfeit god in our lives. An idol is anything that has become more important to

us than God. An idol is anyone or anything that we trust to provide us with what only God can give.² *Idolatry isn’t just bad, it’s bad for us.* To embrace idolatry is to embrace a lie about who God is, who we are, and the true nature of reality. All of us become like the things we worship. Belshazzar worshipped useless, powerless, lifeless, idols and he became just like them.

Sacrilege: Belshazzar defiled what had been set apart for God, using it for his own purposes.

Last week I talked in depth about destructive power of pride, this morning I want to talk for a few moments about how sacrilege plays itself out in our current West Coast culture. Like the issue of idolatry, sacrilege is a little harder to diagnose than it was in Daniel’s day.

For starters, we have no modern day equivalent to Israel’s temple. The temple was set apart for the worship of God; it had special rooms, furniture, food, and tools that were strictly forbidden to anyone but the appointed priest at the appointed time. This physical set-apart-nature of the temple powerfully communicated that there was a massive gap between a holy God and sinful people. In the Old Testament, there was a great divide between the sacred and the everyday, but in our world, the divide is no longer so clear.

When Jesus died, the Temple curtain that guarded the Most Holy Place, was torn from top to bottom. In this symbolic act, God was making a statement—the death of Jesus was the dawn of a new era. On the cross, Jesus dealt with human sin so completely, that humanity was set free to approach a holy God.

² Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, Introduction, xviii.

In some senses, with the tearing of the curtain, God's holiness was no longer confined to a V.I.P room, it's been let out and can manifest itself everywhere. God used to make His presence known in a particular place but now we can meet God anywhere—by the ocean, in a church, at your school, in your neighbourhood, or in the board room.

This understanding significantly broadens the concept of holiness, and, the concept of sacrilege. Today, sacrilege has less to do with sacred, religious, articles—like defacing a church, a cross, or a bible. Every time we misuse something that belongs to God—when we compromise the intended purpose of something created by God—we are walking the path of sacrilege.

Let me offer another illustration. What would happen if we used a china plate as a frisbee, a silk scarf as an oil rag, or the Mona Lisa as a dart board? Their integrity would be compromised and their beauty desecrated—in short, they would be ruined. Every time we misuse something that belongs to God—when we compromise the intended purpose of something created by God—we are walking the path of sacrilege.

When take something like worship—something sacred, something that belongs to God—and we make it about ourselves, about our needs, our preferences, we walk in the way of Belshazzar.

When we take something like sex—something sacred, something that belongs to God—and we recreate whatever boundaries suit us, we misuse our own bodies. We have been created in the image of God, our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit—when we use our bodies to abuse alcohol, drugs, or food, we compromise the integrity and

beauty of what God has made. When we destroy someone with our words—words spoken in anger, judgment, or pride— we destroy someone who is sacred and precious to God; this too is sacrilege.

The “holy” can be found everywhere since God dwells among us. When we set apart our minds, our desires, our bodies, our present, our future, we walk in right relatedness to God and others.

I want to draw one final thought from Daniel 5. In verse 26-27 we are given an interpretation of the writing on the wall. The word “**mene**” means “*God has numbered your days;*” the word “**tekem**” means “*your life has been weighed upon God's scales and has been found wanting.*”

All week I've been pondering these two words and here is my question—is this not God's judgement against all of humanity?

Have we not all been weighed according to God's holy standards and been found wanting? Romans 3:10 says, “*There is no one righteous, not even one;* every person who has ever lived has set themselves up against the Lord of heaven. Romans 3:23 says, “*For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard.*” In the New Testament, “sin” is often defined as missing the mark; when we live apart from God's design, we all fall short of God's glorious standard. Romans 6:23 says, “*The [penalty] of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*”

Perhaps you've wondered why God the Son took on our flesh and blood and was born as a baby. The first human beings set themselves up against the Lord of heaven, they chose to go their own way, and the path they chose led to death—every human since has followed in

their footsteps. And so God sent His Son, and Jesus went over the same ground that every human does—birth, life, death—but instead of going His own way, Jesus lived in perfect obedience to God the Father.

Because Jesus shared in our humanity, because He succeeded where humanity had failed, Jesus was deemed worthy. Jesus' life was weighed upon God's scales and He was **not** found wanting. In life, He lived for God; in His death, He died for us.

Some look at the death of Jesus and call it a tragedy, but Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John would disagree; they describe the death of Jesus in a very precise way.

Jesus' death was voluntary. He could have avoided Jerusalem, avoided His arrest, or called down an angel army to rescue Him—He did none of these things. He willingly laid down His life for our sake.

Jesus death was sacrificial. In Mark 10:45 we hear Jesus say that He didn't come to earth to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many. Jesus' death wasn't an unfortunate tragedy, it was an **intentional, voluntary, sacrificial act**—He died so that humanity could live.

Every act of pride, idolatry, and sacrilege was laid on Him at the cross; every offence against God, against self and others was laid on Jesus at the cross. When Jesus died, He entered into our evil, our sin, our death—He died because of us, instead of us, and for us.

The penalty for sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ, our Lord. When His perfect sacrifice is applied to us,

we receive forgiveness, we experience rescue, we are given a fresh start with God.

Perhaps today is the day that you admit that not only have you missed the mark of God's holy standard, but that you couldn't hit the mark if you have 10 more lifetimes. Perhaps today is the day that you ask God for the mercy He longs to show you. Perhaps today is the day that you invite Jesus to lead your life. Romans 10:9 says, "*If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.*" Perhaps today is the day.

All of you have been created for a purpose—to know God's love and to love Him in return—you have been set apart for God. Nebuchadnezzar discovered this truth and was wise enough to turn to God. It's not too late for any of us to turn to God—make today the day.

Pray (Salvation)

The Lord's Supper

"The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." 25 In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." 26 For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

This morning we celebrate what God has done for us. Jesus was weighed upon God's scales and He was **not** found wanting—His perfect standing with God is applied to us when we are united to Him.

As you come to receive the bread and the cup this morning—symbols of His broken body and shed blood—come rejoicing in what Jesus has done for you. Receive His gifts of mercy and grace—for the first time, or for the 1000th time. His love never fails; His love is for you.

I'd like to invite those who will be serving communion to come and find your place—we have three stations up front and one in the balcony. As you come, you can tear off a piece of bread, dip it in the cup, and then eat with glad hearts.

Worship

Prayer for Healing

Benediction: *“you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”* May your light shine to the praise of His glory. Amen.