

September 1, 2024

Daniel
V: The Writing on the Wall
Daniel 5:1-31

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One of the most important parts of a Reformed worship service like ours is that every Sunday, we stand up and recite together the Apostles' Creed. Now, I still have to read it from the bulletin, but you all know it by heart. So, you know that one of the lines we say together is, "From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead."¹

From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. That language is old enough that we almost don't realize what it's saying. When I was a kid, I thought it meant that Jesus was going to give everyone a speeding ticket. But then, either Ken or Zane or Bill told me that, actually, quick means living. Jesus will come to judge the living and the dead. But is that good news? Because I know what it feels like to be judged. I do it to myself all the time. And I know the sinful condition of my heart. And so, when I imagine the judgment I deserve, it sounds an awful lot like the sentence we read this morning from the hand of God: "You have been weighed in the balances and found wanting."²

But as much as I'd like to ignore the topic of God's judgment, it's a fairly pervasive theme throughout the Bible. It's especially prominent in the time just before and during the writing of the New Testament. The apostle Paul writes to the church in Thessalonica, "As to the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters... the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When people say, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them... and there will be no escape."³

Sounds remarkably like our text from this morning. From Belshazzar's perspective, the judgment of God came as quite a surprise. He was having what sounds like a rather raucous party with all his buddies and his favorite concubines when he decided to cap off the evening with a toast to the gods of Babylon.⁴ Which is bad enough on its own, but nothing especially out of the ordinary for a Babylonian king. No, what ultimately seals his fate is his use of the vessels he selects to offer his toast to these idols. He calls for the golden vessels from the temple of God which Nebuchadnezzar, his "father," had destroyed.

These gold and silver vessels meant for sacred worship were brought out so that Belshazzar could defile them. On purpose. He made a mockery of them. It would be like using the US Constitution as tissue paper. Only infinitely worse, because what Belshazzar did was an

¹ The Apostles' Creed

² Daniel 5:27

³ 1 Thess. 5:1-3

⁴ Daniel 5:4

offense not only against the nation of Judah, but against the God of all creation. Belshazzar was broadcasting his belief that the God of Judah was weak and could be easily mocked.

But he was wrong, wasn't he... as he very soon found out. From above him, King Belshazzar saw a disembodied hand appear to write the words, *Mene, Mene, Tekel, and Parsin*. And as the hand was writing, the wicked smile disappeared from Belshazzar's face. His knees began to knock and the color drained from his face for fear of what he had seen. Like Nebuchadnezzar before him, King Belshazzar, in a panic, calls for his wise men and enchanters. And just like before, none could interpret the sign except for Daniel.

And this was Daniel's interpretation: "Mene, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; ²⁷ Tekel, you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting. Peres, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians."⁵

Now, unlike his father, Nebuchadnezzar, there is no indication of repentance within the heart of Belshazzar. So, that very night, Belshazzar the king was killed. The judgment was rendered. God's will was done.

But what do we make of this story, with its clear themes of God's judgment against sin? How does it inform our understanding of God. There's a false dichotomy that sometimes arises: is our God a God of love, or is he a God of judgment? What do we do with this story?

If we want to preserve our idea of what we think a loving God would do, then the easiest thing to do with this story is to dismiss it. If we don't want to deal with its implications, then we can just ignore it and move on. But that doesn't seem right. This is, after all, part of the canon of Scripture. It is God's word to us. The words through which God speaks to his people. So, rather than ignore it, perhaps what we're inclined to do is give in to that plain reading. Perhaps what we're to understand is that the God we think we meet here is the God who will do the same to us when we mess up. So, we live our lives in utter fear of judgment. Terrified that, at any moment, we could become the object of his wrath.

But that's no way to live. And it's not the life God wants for us. Jesus himself says in John's Gospel, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."⁶ So, if we can't ignore it, and we aren't meant to be consumed by it, then what are we to do?

Fleming Rutledge tells the story of her cousin who was getting married some years ago. And the priest doing the ceremony was her grandfather. And when they were reviewing the ceremony together, they came across the line in the old 1928 Episcopal Book of Common Prayer which said, "I require and charge you both, as ye will answer at the dreadful day of judgment when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed." And the grandfather said, "Well! You certainly don't want to use that! We'll just leave that part out." But then the bride-to-be exclaimed, "No, Grandpa! I love the dreadful day of judgment!"⁷

And perhaps that is the task for us. To understand God's judgment differently. To find in it not dread, but an expression of God's love for us. Well, with the text before us, where is God

⁵ Daniel 5:26-28

⁶ John 10:10

⁷ Loving the Dreadful Day of Judgment – Advent – Fleming Rutledge

expressing his love. As Bill's teacher, Betty Achtemeier said, where is the Gospel in the text? One of the first steps we learned in seminary about how to examine a text for preaching is to do what's called a self-exegesis or self-examination. What parts of myself do I bring to the text? Where do my sympathies lie? What kind of baggage am I carrying to the text?

When I first read this text, my instinct was to focus only on the sentence of condemnation against King Belshazzar. And, I'll admit, I didn't want to preach this text. You can ask April. The sentence he receives frightens me. It's alarming to me. But here's where the self-examination comes in. Maybe I'm so far removed from the situation of the exiled people of Judah that I don't understand what it means to be living under the thumb of an oppressive regime. But it's right there in the text. You can hear the disgust in Daniel's voice when he rebukes the king. He says, "Let your gifts be for yourself, and give your rewards to another."⁸

Daniel wants no part of what the king is offering, because he knows that the way of the king is death, and the way of God is life. To a people living in exile from their homeland, the judgment of God against the oppressive powers of evil, which Belshazzar represented, is nothing less than the expression of God's divine and unstoppable love. God does not abide evil. And that's very good news. God is Lord of all, and evil will never prevail. What this story tells the exiled and oppressed people of God is that God will be their salvation, and nothing, not even the mighty Babylonian king, will stand in His way. It's a message of judgment, to be sure, but it is primarily a message of love for his people and hope for their salvation. And that's exactly what Daniel and the exiled Jews in Babylon needed to hear. It's exactly what you and I need to hear.

I recently stumbled upon the story of a man named Richard Beck. Beck had started a Bible study out at a prison for the inmates who lived there. He says,

"When I first went out to the prison, one of my very first studies was going to be about the lament psalms... I made this decision because I felt that the prisoners would relate to lament, given their hard and dark circumstances. If anyone should feel God-abandoned, I assumed, surely it would be the incarcerated! Let me, then, help give voice to their lament. I thought this was a winning plan.

It didn't go so well.

About midway through my lesson on the lament psalms, really leaning into their despair, the men in the study started to grow restless and frustrated. Seeing this, I stopped.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Well," they responded, "We get it. We know. Prison is a really dark place. We don't need to be reminded of that."

"Okay," I said, "Then if lament isn't what you need to hear, what do you need?"

"Hope," they shared. "We need some hope."⁹

And that's exactly what the exiled people of Judah needed. They needed hope. And that's exactly what God gave to them. Because that very night, the evil Babylonian empire was conquered, and the kingdom was given to the Medes and the Persians. And not long after the events of the book

⁸ Daniel 5:17

⁹ [Reading the Bible with the Damned \(substack.com\)](http://ReadingtheBiblewiththeDamned(substack.com))

of Daniel had taken place, the Persian King Cyrus would decree that all the people of Judah could return to their home in Jerusalem to rebuild the temple the Babylonians had destroyed. This, too, was the will of God. Salvation for the people in exile.

But what does this text mean for us? It was good news for the people of Judah so long ago. But 2500 years have passed since then. What about us? Well, a bit later in the text, Daniel receives a vision of God's ultimate salvation. What we earlier called the dreadful day of judgment, Daniel sees quite clearly. He says,

“I saw in the night visions,
and behold, with the clouds of heaven
there came one like a son of man,
and he came to the Ancient of Days
and was presented before him.
¹⁴ And to him was given dominion
and glory and a kingdom,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him;
his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
which shall not pass away,
and his kingdom one
that shall not be destroyed.¹⁰

For the powers of evil, this would sound like terrible news. But for the people of God, it is the Gospel of our salvation. What Daniel saw was that God's ultimate hope would be found in the coming of his only Son. Jesus Christ, our savior.

We talked about the Apostles' Creed. It's the first in our book of confessions. One of our other confessions, the Heidelberg Catechism, takes each one of the lines of the Apostles' Creed and explains it. And here's what it says about the so-called 'dreadful day of judgment.' Question 52:

Question: How does Christ's return “to judge the living and the dead” comfort you? –
How does God's judgment comfort you?

Answer: In all distress and persecution, with uplifted head, I confidently await the very judge who has already offered himself to the judgment of God in my place and removed the whole curse from me.

If Belshazzar's sin was to desecrate the objects of the holy temple, then our sin is greater. For this Son of man, the true temple of God, we desecrated by nailing him to the tree. But my friends, what was the judgment rendered for our sin? It was not death, but life. It was not condemnation, but grace. Jesus says, “I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly.” Jesus says, “Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do. You see, you and I have already received God's judgment. And his judgment is mercy. His judgment is grace. And the sentence he renders to us is life everlasting. Thanks be to God.

¹⁰ Daniel 7:13-14