

*God, the Graffiti Artist*  
Excerpted summary of Chapter 5 ~ Book of Daniel<sup>1</sup>

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If a friend said to you, “My days are numbered at work,” or “I can see the handwriting on the wall; my boyfriend is going to dump me,” would you know that your friends were citing Scripture? Daniel, Chapter 5, to be precise? Mayor Villaragosa just this past Friday explained on the radio about negotiations that a settlement had been reached between parties, and he told the interviewer, when asked how they came to agreement, “the writing was on the wall.”

We are more familiar with Daniel in the Lion’s Den or in the very hot furnace, along with Shadrack, Meshach, and Abednego. Some of us or our children enjoyed acting in the children’s play, *Cool in the Furnace*.

According to this fascinating story, Belshazzar, the Babylonian leader, saw God’s hand writing. Let’s review what’s going on in this text. In the midst of a great feast, Belshazzar drinks from the *cups* that a famous Babylonian leader, King Nebuchadnezzar, had stolen from the Jewish temple.<sup>2</sup> Usually when Babylonian leaders conquered a nation, they took statues of the people’s *Gods*. But the Jews had no statues of Yahweh, because Jews didn’t make images of God. Since Nebuchadnezzar had no God-statues to steal, he took the cups. Drinking from those chalices symbolically emphasized the fact that the Jews—and their religion—were being held captive. Often in the Bible, descriptions of leaders having huge feasts are intended to portray leaders who were living in excess, who were enjoying their power *over* others. Belshazzar was doing just that when he experienced this frightening hand writing vision.

Belshazzar is terrified. His face turns pale; his knees shake! I can see why! It’s scary stuff to see God’s hands writing!

The court magicians weren’t able to understand the vision. Enter—Queen Mother, who makes a recommendation: “Get Daniel!” Daniel? Daniel Who? He was a prisoner of war, a Jew being held by the Babylonian leaders ever since they had conquered the Jews—and took those vessels. The Queen Mother tells of Daniel’s ability to interpret dreams and to solve Sudoku puzzles. Oops, no, to solve riddles and to answer problems.

Picture this: Daniel, the hostage Jew, stands before Babylonian Empirical power. He is so confident, that before he explains the vision, he makes a side comment. Daniel speaks “truth to power.” He tells Belshazzar that the Babylonian Kings have usurped the job of God. The national leaders have killed whomever they chose. In fact, like some leaders of almost every age, they believed they *really had the power* to choose whom to kill or not. Daniel argues, “That is God’s prerogative, alone.” In other words, let people live their normal life span.

After this preface, Daniel reads and interprets the writing on the wall. There are just three words, and all three (“weighs,” “numbered,” and “divided”) are monetary terms used when exchanging coins. That’s not accidental. Money-language is the language that rulers of empires use. Notice: God speaks Belshazzar’s language to get his attention—the language of money and power.

Daniel interprets for Belshazzar: “God **weighs** your choices and finds you to be a light-weight on the scales of justice. Consequently, your days are **numbered**. And, your empire, which you obtained by conquering others, will be **divided** amongst others who will, in turn, conquer you.”

According to the narrative, that was a very busy night. The very night that Daniel explained to the Babylonian leader that his vision predicted that his empire would be divided, the Persians conquered the Babylonians.

My tendency as a preacher is to jump to any guidance we might get from a passage that could help us *as individuals*. But this is a bold passage that is clearly addressed to a nation, to the national leaders. Daniel interprets God as communicating to the Babylonian leaders that there will be dire consequences for the way they have been treating other nations and their peoples. There are consequences for imperialistic behavior—thinking they can rule the whole world instead of trying to get along with other countries.

I am struck with how this message is relevant for all time. A number of nations today, ourselves included, need to consistently try to figure out how God wants us to relate to other countries. It’s especially difficult when you have a lot of wealth and power. Countries have constantly to **weigh** justice in an attempt to be neighborly and to be powerful in a way that also respects all other nations. While we keep this prophetic challenge to **nations** in mind, perhaps we can **also** reflect as individuals.

**We can ask ourselves: *How is our behavior connected to consequences of our behavior? I think this is the main theme of this passage. Cause and effect of behavior.***

When I imagine Belshazzar turning pale as he sees the hand writing, I visualize a student who is about to open up his or her report card, and feeling a bit faint. He or she should have a good guess what the writing is going to be on the card. It’s not likely to be a surprise, for it’s based on *past performance*. Belshazzar *knew* that he and previous Babylonian kings had been unjust and domineering to other peoples. Did he think God would be writing on the wall, “Congratulations?” Not quite.

I visualize two extreme responses for the student.

One extreme response is that the student, when opening the report card, prays, “Make it all A’s.” “Make it all A’s.” “I haven’t done any homework, and I missed three tests, but please, God, make A’s be on this piece of paper.”

The other extreme response is that of a student who has done a rather responsible job, working hard all semester, opening the report card, seeing a “C+” and praying to God that she will not go to hell when she dies. That is, she is very afraid, not only of her parents, but also of eternal consequences, for her less-than-perfect performance.

Notice: **Both students pray!** This is a theological issue! One prays for *reality to be altered*—for F’s magically to turn into A’s. The other prays to be *spared some imagined horrible fate*, even though her behavior wasn’t terrible.

I’ve tried to consider what would be parallel for those of us who are so fortunate not to receive report cards any more. It dawned on me that in some way, doctor visits might qualify.

We are told to do certain exercises, to eat or not eat certain things, to follow certain practices or refrain from certain behaviors. We nod, thank the doctor, go home and either change our ways or not. When we return to the doctor months later, we face

with anticipation, sometimes dread, the results of recent tests to find out whether our “numbers” are better.

I confess that I have been like the student who prayed at the last minute, “Make them all A’s.” I have prayed the night before a cholesterol test that my numbers had gone down, even though I kept eating butter and cheese. I’m sure I’m not alone.

We, like Belshazzar, sometimes want to be spared the consequences of our actions; **we want the effect of our causes to be wiped away without our wiping away our causes.** *Not only that, we often ask God to do that favor for us. We sometimes call it prayer.* We do this on the national level as well as individuals.

Sometimes it works! Or, it seems to work!

Cause and effect is so complex and intricate.

Many times, we are spared the consequences of our stupid behavior, so we may even begin to believe that God will or can interrupt the effects of our causes. That is, we sort of use God as a cheat sheet, not as a **Wise Counselor**.

On the other hand, like the girl who is afraid of hell when she sees a C+, some of us are almost immobilized by guilt over any minor infraction. We’re afraid of dire consequences. We accidentally run one red light, and we are afraid of the consequence for six months—sure, we’ll get a ticket in the mail some day. We have one chocolate éclair and worry for two months about its effect upon our numbers. That is, we are anxious about the effects to such a degree that it is difficult to enjoy living. We have a hard time thinking of **God as Wise Counselor**. Rather, our God is really a **Severe Punisher**.

There is a great deal to “weigh” when we try hard to follow our spiritual journey as *responsible* and *grace-filled* people who do consider our behavior and its consequences.

My view of God’s role is this: God wants to guide us. Often we have umpteen chances to change our ways, to genuinely regret being unkind or foolish, and to behave differently! God wants to provide *people* who can help us *interpret* what to do, whether those are prophets, leaders of other countries, our very own children, or doctors. God offers grace and forgiveness. Yet, God doesn’t, (I believe, cannot), keep all consequences from happening. We have (as individuals and as a nation) to take responsibility for healthy, compassionate living.

Had the Babylonian kings stopped their grabbing for power and money long enough to look at themselves, they might have been spared their outcome. *There was a period of time when they could have changed their behaviors and altered their likely future.*

**I think that’s the most important message of this whole narrative. If these leaders had looked in the mirror, they may not have had to read the writing on their palace wall. They may have read the writing on the walls of their very own hearts and consciences. That’s where God writes, even today--our hearts, minds, consciences.**

If I look often in the mirror and listen with radical honesty to my own heart and mind, asking myself how I’m doing as a human being in relation to my family and neighbors, then there may be chances to make corrective measures. We’re not expected to be perfect, just to keep honestly appraising ourselves and actively to make mid-course adjustments, with a lot of help from each other.

Some things we truly can change. We can listen to each other more carefully, speak up more clearly, stand up for others, do all sorts of things differently—thereby affecting the future of ourselves and others.<sup>3</sup> We can “see the writing on the wall” and act to break the cause and effect sequence so that better relationships occur.

With all this reflection about our behaviors as having consequences, it is also true that sometimes “handwriting on walls” simply tells us what’s coming up, what’s going to happen. It’s going to happen no matter what we do. An example is aging. It happens to us all! Our behavior can’t keep it from occurring. Our only choice is how to live with the changes we know are coming. There’s a spiritual art to *seeing something coming* and *accepting it gracefully*.

We could probably find examples from the basketball games during March Madness, but since it’s finally baseball season again, I’ll use a baseball story to illustrate this final point. John, our daughter, and I went to a Philly vs. San Diego Padres Baseball game one time when we were in Philadelphia. It was the bottom of the ninth inning, so the San Diego Padres were in the field. The last Philadelphia batter was up, and he hit a ball far into right field. There was a Philadelphia runner on base, and this big hit into right field guaranteed the base runner would get home, and consequently, the San Diego Padres would lose. The San Diego Padre right fielder saw the ball go deep into the field and *did not chase the ball*. I was disturbed. I was screaming, “Go chase the ball...the game’s not over. Go after the ball.” Alexandra and John (who is a Padre fan) sided with the Padre fielder. It was pointless. In fact, John said, “The writing’s on the wall.” The fielder was wise to recognize that fact and accept it gracefully. I had to admit, it would have been foolish for him to give a quick prayer, asking God to make a strong wind alter the ball’s direction. That game was over. . .

Some things **we truly can change; outcomes are not yet determined for sure.** Other times, it is clear what will happen and we cannot control the outcome. All we can do is to accept the consequence as gracefully as possible. The San Diego Padre right fielder accepted with grace the outcome he could not affect. Yet, being filled with hope, that player *could* look forward to a different outcome for tomorrow’s game. The Daniel story is about behaviors, consequences, change, acceptance, and hope.

To paraphrase a famous prayer: May we have the wisdom and courage to change what we should and can, the grace to accept what is, and the hope to alter the future for the good of all.

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Excerpts Paraphrased from Chapter 5 of the Book of Daniel

(When the reading reaches the point when the King sees a human handwriting on the wall of the palace, someone places three separate poster boards on the wall. One word is on each poster: “Numbered,” “Weighs and “Divided.”)

Narrator: One evening, King Belshazzar gave a great banquet and drank a lot of wine. He ordered his servants to bring in the gold and silver cups his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple in Jerusalem. Suddenly a human hand was seen writing on the plaster wall of the palace. The hand was just behind the lamp stand, and the king could see it writing. He was so frightened that his face turned pale, his knees started shaking, and his legs became weak.

King: The one who can read this writing and tell me what it means will become the third most powerful one in my kingdom.

Narrator: No one could read the writing or tell what it meant. The king’s face turned white as a ghost with fear.

Queen: Your Majesty, I hope you live forever! Don’t be afraid. There is a man who has been given special powers by the holy gods. Your father saw his intelligence and consulted with him. His name was Daniel. Send for Daniel and he will tell you what the writing means.

Daniel: Your Majesty, I will read the writing and tell you what it means. First, I must tell you that your father had the power of life or death over everyone, and he could honor or ruin anyone he chose. But when he became proud and stubborn, his glorious kingdom was taken from him. King Belshazzar, you knew all this, but you still refused to honor the Lord. Instead, you turned against him and drank from the vessels that were stolen from the temple. You refused to worship the God who gives you breath and controls everything you do. That’s why he sent the hand to write the message on the wall.

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The words written mean “numbered,” “weighed,” and “divided.” God has *numbered* the days of your kingdom. God *weighs* you on the balance scales of justice and found that you fall short of what it takes to be king. So God has *divided* your kingdom for others to rule.

Narrator: King Belshazzar gave a command for Daniel to be made the third most powerful person in the kingdom. That same night, the king was killed.

<sup>2</sup> The Bible says that Nebuchadnezzar was this man’s father, but it is now agreed upon that his father was a different King, Nabonidus.

<sup>3</sup> George Bush talks about his quitting his excessive drinking when he was 44 years old.