

A Lesson in Accountability and Consequences

SCOTT HOEZEE

In one of his fine sermons, Frederick Buechner once imagined the world's reaction if one starry night, the stars above rearranged themselves to form the letters that spelled out the message from God: I exist. Well, that has never happened, of course; and it likely never will. Neither does it need to happen, because as Buechner went on to note, scripture tells us that for those with eyes to see, the message that God exists is already written in the stars; but certainly, there is something intriguing about the idea of getting a divine message directly from God, and exactly that happens in the story we read in the biblical book of Daniel Chapter 5. Today on *Groundwork*, we will learn from that story, so stay tuned.

DARRELL DELANEY

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Darrell Delaney.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Darrell, we are in the fourth of six programs on the book of Daniel. We have already covered the first four chapters; the early story about Daniel and his friends, who refused to be co-opted by the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, while they are in exile in Babylon. We saw how Daniel rose to prominence because he could interpret the weird dreams Nebuchadnezzar had...we read that in Chapters 2 and 4...and in the previous program, the well-known story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and the fiery furnace; and that now brings us to another really good story in this book, in Chapter 5.

DARRELL DELANEY

You have another interesting story where there is a situation where we have Daniel having to interpret. So, we have been talking about Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—Hananiah, Azariah and Mishael—and the story now pivots back to Daniel. So, the book is going to alternate between these friends.

It picks up in Chapter 5 and it says:

King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine with them. ²While 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. ³So 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. ⁴As they drank the wine, they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, we have noted in this series, Darrell, that the book of Daniel is a little episodic. It jumps around and it doesn't always give us the setup. So, through the first four chapters of Daniel, in Babylon, the king's name was Nebuchadnezzar, and now all of a sudden, we get Belshazzar, and it turns out Belshazzar is Nebuchadnezzar's son. So, we weren't told Nebuchadnezzar died, but obviously he did, because now his son is reigning in his place; and as his son Belshazzar is reigning, one day he decides to throw a big drinking party for friends and members of his royal court, and when somebody decides, hey, the party will be even better if they drank their wine from the super fancy, gold and silver goblets his father had snatched from Israel's temple in Jerusalem years back, before carting the people into exile and burning the temple, right? So, I think we see a problem coming here, Darrell.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes, there is a problem. So, in my grandmother's house, she has all the common dishes that everyone uses every day, but then she has in this special case, this special china, with special silverware; and if we as grandchildren went into her cupboard and brought out that bone china and that crystal glass and we decided to have our peanut butter and jelly sandwiches on it, she would have a problem with that, because that is set apart...that is special...it is for special occasions. So, this silverware, these goblets and these things, these were holy and set apart for Jerusalem, for the worship of the true and living God. That is not Belshazzar's goal, it is, Scott?

SCOTT HOEZEE

No; he just thinks it would be fun to drink out of them; and yes, it is even worse than Grandma's china. This is God's stemware, right? This is God's...this is the God who used to dwell in the Holy of Holies on the Mercy Seat on the Ark of the Covenant...this is his stuff; and now Belshazzar and his friends are drinking from it. Now, if this were a Steven Spielberg Indiana Jones movie, and somebody casually messed with one of God's sacred objects, you know, like the Ark of the Covenant or the Holy Grail, we know what would happen in a Spielberg movie: Somebody would take a slug of wine from one of God's golden goblets and immediately the flesh would melt off his face and...

DARRELL DELANEY

Close your eyes!

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; his bones would disintegrate within thirty seconds. The man who violated God's holy cup would be a small pile of dust on the floor; but this is the Bible, not an Indiana Jones movie. So, here is what *actually* happens:

⁵Suddenly 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. ⁶His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his legs became weak and his knees were knocking. ⁷The king summoned the enchanters, astrologers and diviners. Then he said to these wisemen of Babylon, "Whoever reads this writing and tells me what it means will be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed around his neck, and he will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom." ⁸Then all the king's wisemen came in, but they could not read the writing or tell the king what it meant. ⁹So King Belshazzar became even more terrified and his face grew more pale. His nobles were baffled.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, we don't see this stuff that you just talked about in Indiana Jones movies, but we do see a pretty interesting thing happening with a hand appearing and writing on the wall. I don't think that has ever happened in the history of scripture, or ever happened again, this situation where there are words written out on the wall; and it makes a very important point that there is something that God is doing to grab the attention of this king and everyone in the room, because not just he sees it, but everyone sees it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And are terrified...absolutely terrified; and probably, you know, you can sort of see the scene. I would imagine that as Belshazzar, you know, looks at this disembodied hand and finger carving into the plaster of the palace walls, I would imagine he kind of wiped his eyes...blinked a few times...whoa; I've had a little more wine than I thought. I am hallucinating here...I am seeing things here. So, he wipes his eyes, blinks, looks again. No; it is still there. He looks around the room; everybody is staring at the same thing. Cannot have a group hallucination, so everybody is seeing something that is actually happening; and you love the description: I mean, you know, knees knocking, right? I mean, that is sort of a standard way to convey terror. You know, if you are so scared that your legs are shaking...your knees are knocking against each other, you get white as a sheet, as the saying goes; and then when the nobles and the astrologers and the diviners, when they cannot read a thing, we are told he gets paler yet! This man is terrified.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; he is literally knocking in his boots at that moment. The writer is the one who hints that there is a problem because he says: These goblets, these glasses, these drinks, these are from the ones that came to be worshipping the true, living God. They came from Jerusalem; and so, we see that this isn't King Belshazzar's goal, to be the one who worships the true and living God. He is worshipping false gods, and he is defiling the true living God's sacred things.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; and it is interesting. The text says they not only drank from gold and silver goblets, while they did, they praised the gods of gold, silver, bronze and iron. In other words, they praised false gods. They used the goblet of Yahweh—the God of Israel—to raise a glass or make a toast to false gods; and so, what happens next? Well, the real God puts in an appearance, right? I mean, you just kind of have to love how the irony of this and how well-written this story is, Darrell. We just keep moving...boom, boom, boom, boom...and so we go from praising false gods and lifting the holy goblet of Yahweh to raise a toast to the god of bronze and the god of iron; and now, all of a sudden, a hand shows up that says: Uh, uh; they aren't gods; I am. So, we don't get skin melting off of anybody's face, but the crime of using God's stuff is not going to go unnoticed or unpunished; and in fact, we will get to that in just a moment, so stay tuned.

Segment 2

DARRELL DELANEY

I am Darrell Delaney, with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We are in Daniel Chapter 5, and we saw just a minute ago in this story of the handwriting on the wall, that none of the king's highly touted magicians and wise guys and astrologers...they are the same ones who couldn't interpret Belshazzar's father's weird dreams in Chapters 2 and 4, and now again in Daniel 5 these same types of people are brought in to interpret what is going on with the hand and what it is writing; but instead, we read in Daniel 5:9 his nobles were baffled. And if all the color hadn't already drained from Belshazzar's face, it drains all the way gone when that happens.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, whatever party vibe they had before...whatever excitement...

SCOTT HOEZEE

The party's over.

DARRELL DELANEY

It is all over. This is the party crasher, this writing on the wall, and the fact that his astrologers could not interpret it; but thankfully for him, he had a wife who kind of understood some things and remembered something. So, let's read in verse 10, where she says:

The queen, hearing the voices of the king and his nobles, came into the banquet hall. "May the king live forever!" she said. "Don't be alarmed! Don't look so pale! ¹¹There is a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods in him. In the time of your father, he was found to have insight and intelligence and wisdom like that of the gods. Your father, King Nebuchadnezzar, appointed him chief of the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners. ¹²He did this because Daniel, whom the king called Belteshazzar, was found to have a keen mind and knowledge and understanding, and also the ability to interpret dreams, explain riddles and solve difficult problems. Call for Daniel, and he will tell you what the writing means."

SCOTT HOEZEE

Wise woman, who remembers something that, for whatever the reason, Belshazzar was not remembering. Belshazzar, the king now in this chapter, didn't tumble to calling Daniel himself. He certainly should have known the stories to which his wife alludes here. So finally, Belshazzar is going to call the one with the

Babylonian name of Belteshazzar. We know him by his Hebrew name, Daniel; which is a good thing, because Belshazzar...Belteshazzar...I don't want to keep saying those back and forth; so we will just keep calling Daniel with his Hebrew name of Daniel. So, Daniel is going to arrive here in the fifth chapter. So, we are going to pick up the action here at verse 18, and we will streamline it a little bit through verse 23: "Your Majesty, the Most High God gave your father Nebuchadnezzar sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendor. ²⁰But when his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory. ²¹He was driven away from people and given the mind of an animal; he lived with the wild donkeys and ate grass like the ox; and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, until he acknowledged that the Most High God is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and sets over them anyone he wishes. ²²But you, Belshazzar, his son, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this. ²³Instead, 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 honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways.

DARRELL DELANEY

You have got to love this guy, Scott, because, I mean, how does he even know this? It is not people who are bringing him notes or e-mails or briefing him on what happened. He knows what happened, but then, when you call in Daniel, Daniel is going to make sure that you do get what you ask for, but you are going to have to hear what he has to say first: You gave me the floor. I am going to tell you a little bit of what is going on; and he actually schools Belshazzar in the things that have happened before, and how he has followed in his father's footsteps, unfortunately.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; this is a great example of someone speaking truth to power, and it happens a lot in the Bible, you know. I mean, all through history, men and women...people like Belshazzar or his father Nebuchadnezzar or Pharaoh in Egypt...people set themselves up to be, you know, masters of the universe; top of the heap; king of the hill; a person greater than whom none can be conceived, right? But then somebody...maybe a Moses, an Elijah, an Esther, an Isaiah, a Micah, and here a Daniel...somebody comes to speak truth to power, to set the record straight and say: Who really is who in the universe?

DARRELL DELANEY

So, just because you think you are in control, Belshazzar, let me remind you that there is a God in heaven who is higher than you who actually gave your father the ability to be in power, because he is sovereign; he is controlling everything. He has given you the authority that you have, and you and your father have misused it. That line that says: Oh, God is giving King Nebuchadnezzar the ability to have the power? That is very interesting. It might hurt my head if I think a little bit too hard about it, because this guy is not honoring God, but God gave him the ability to be successful and powerful.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, yes; I mean, if you're an Israelite in exile in Babylon and you hate and you loathe Nebuchadnezzar because of what he did to your people and your temple and your city in Jerusalem, it may not go over real great to hear Daniel say: Well, God is the one who gave Nebuchadnezzar all his power and glory. It is like, really? Why would God do that? And you are right; that is a theological can of worms that gives you a headache. So, we won't linger over it, but it is just another reminder of something that is a real key theme in the book of Daniel, and that is that God is sovereign. God is in charge. He holds you and all your ways in his hand, Daniel tells the king.

But now let's get back to the story at hand, if you will forgive the really bad pun. So, Daniel now says to Belshazzar:

²⁴"Therefore he (God) sent the hand that wrote the inscription. ²⁵This is the inscription that was written: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN. ²⁶Here 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." ²⁹Then at Belshazzar's command,

Daniel was clothed in purple, a gold chain was placed around his neck, and he was proclaimed the third highest ruler in the kingdom. ³⁰That very night (King) Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain, ³¹and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom, at the age of sixty-two.

DARRELL DELANEY

Wow, Scott; it is crazy because when Belshazzar finds out this information, it is literally his last day being king. The judgment has been passed, and God has made his decision, because this person's heart was not going to ever repent or even be in a place where they could acknowledge the true and living God. There are consequences for defaming God's name.

SCOTT HOEZEE

There are, and he is dead. It is amazing that he did still clothe Daniel in purple and put a chain around his neck and promote him to the third highest in the land. You would think he would be furious at what Daniel said. Did Belshazzar think that maybe if he was nice to Daniel, you know, God would let him live? Well, if he thought that, he was wrong. He dies that very night. Just a footnote here, by the way: Belshazzar is said to be replaced here by someone named Darius or Darius the Mede, but no one has ever been able to figure out who that is because nobody by that name ever ruled Babylon. There was somebody who ruled briefly after Belshazzar died and before Babylon fell and was taken over by the Persians, and by the man who ultimately will release Israel from their captivity, and that is King Cyrus of Persia; but Darius the Mede...nobody is quite sure who that is. Not a real important point for our program here; but the point is, God has said: Belshazzar, you are done. He dies that night. Babylon is done. It is going to be given to the Persians, and that will happen in just a few short years. So indeed, quite a story here. What does it mean, though...this ancient, curious story...what does it mean for us today? Well, we will think about that in just a moment; so, stay tuned.

Segment 3

DARRELL DELANEY

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Darrell Delaney.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and we have been considering yet another one of the wonderful three or four great stories that make up the first part of the Old Testament book of Daniel; and you know, Darrell, that image of the writing on the wall, that has taken on a life of its own, even for people who have no idea that it in the book of Daniel, right? But even to this day, every time it is clear that a presidency or a corporation or something is headed down the downward slope to failure, somebody will say: Well, pretty clear, the handwriting is on the wall. When the writing is on the wall, it is never a good thing.

Darrell Delaney;

Even though we have never experienced literal writing on the wall, we have this story to help teach us things; and so, we are trying to figure out what practically can we get from this story to help us learn.

SCOTT HOEZEE

One of the things is, we said that, you know, Belshazzar called for the holy vessels—the holy goblets from God's temple in Jerusalem—and used them to have a party. He thought he could drink out of those goblets with no consequences accruing to him. He was going to get away with it because there is nobody higher than me in the universe, Belshazzar figured, right? What it reminds me of is sort of cause and effect; actions have consequences. Something we read about in Galatians 6. The Apostle Paul wrote in Galatians 6:7:

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. ⁸Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. ⁹ Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. ¹⁰ Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

God is not mocked; we reap what we sow.

DARRELL DELANEY

And this has remained true throughout all of time, because God is who he says he is and he can do what he says he can do, but he helps us to understand that there are consequences for our actions. We are held accountable for the things that we do. I cannot just treat someone mean, and expect that I don't receive some situation that is going to be difficult for me; and if I give grace and mercy to someone, then I will receive grace and mercy, even if it is not from that person. The Lord will make sure that I reap what I sow, and I cannot tell when that will happen, but I know that because God is faithful, it will happen in my life.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And just to be clear, just the theological point here, right? Nobody was clearer than the Apostle Paul, that we don't get saved by our good works...

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

In fact, nowhere is that more clear than the first part of Galatians, because Paul had gotten wind of the fact that the Galatians had come to believe they were contributing to their salvation by keeping the law. Paul heard that and saw purple, and opens Galatians by screaming at them to remember the true gospel, that it is all grace, grace, grace, grace. So, now here in Chapter 6, when he says, you know, don't give up doing good things...or in Chapter 5, he says: Be sure you keep in step with the Spirit; bear the fruit of the Spirit. He is not undercutting grace, but he is saying when you get the grace of God, you have changed; and you need to want to do good to all people; treat people well; love everybody. If you sow the wind, you are going to reap the whirlwind, but if you spend your life mocking people, don't be surprised if they mock you. If you do things that endanger your own health, God does not have to prevent the diseases you are all but inviting into your body. So, live right and you will reap a harvest of good things in righteousness; and indeed, that is a key lesson. Something Belshazzar did not know.

DARRELL DELANEY

And speaking of what Belshazzar did not know, he was taking the goblets and the stemware that was devoted to God, and he was putting credit to the idols that he worshipped; and so, if we think about how the scripture tells us that we are the temple of God in the New Testament, that we are not supposed to offer our bodies and our members to these things that are evil or defiling to God. We are now the stemware; we are now the instruments; we are now the vessels that God wants to use and get the glory out of. So, we also need to be careful how we live. Paul makes that clear in Romans, and plenty of other places.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And 1 Corinthians 3, right? Paul writes: ¹⁰By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. ¹¹For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹²If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, ¹³their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. ¹⁴If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. ¹⁵If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames.

Sounds like our previous program; but Paul is saying Jesus is the foundation and we are called to build on that; to build as well as we can, even if we don't build great...okay, you will survive by grace, but try to build on the foundation of Jesus and live every minute of your life like you believe that is what you are doing.

DARRELL DELANEY

I cannot ignore, too, in that scripture you just read that it said if you build on any other foundation using gold and silver and costly stones, this is exactly what Belshazzar was worshipping. He was worshipping the god of

the gold and silver and costly stones; and that was burned up...that will be burned up at the end of time, because it is not the thing that is the foundation. Christ is the firm foundation; and we have songs...and worship songs...and things that help us to remind us of that; and we need to understand, too, not only are we saved by grace through faith, but the things that we do out of service to God, not only do they sow seeds, but it is gratitude that we use to do those things.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; you know, we opened the program with the idea: What would happen if God wrote a message in the stars to say: I exist. If that were to happen, would it lead to universal conversion; or, you know, would atheism...agnosticism...instantly go extinct? Probably not, actually; at least, those things have never gone extinct despite all the other witnesses and evidence and testimony...

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

To the existence of God; but one of the things that we know is that, Darrell, if we have faith...if we believe in God...if we love God as our Father, and if we know Jesus, that is a great blessing, because look around us, right? The spirit of Belshazzar is alive and well: people who cannot see past their own noses, who cannot see God; and if we *can* see God, what a great gift that is.

DARRELL DELANEY

It is a beautiful gift to also be known *by* God. This is the God who longs to have a relationship with us; who longs to have a connection with us; and has built us for worship with him and in him and through him; and as believers who are ambassadors for Christ, we pray that we do not fall into the temptation of becoming what Belshazzar became, which is prideful and arrogant; but we can be grateful and show gratitude to God and know that he is the one who brings us glory, thanks to his sovereignty. Thanks be to God.

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Darrell Delaney with Scott Hoezee, and we hope you will join us again next time as we study Daniel in the lions' den, another well-known story we find in Daniel Chapter 6.

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SCOTT HOEZEE

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