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Truths for Bitter Providences, Part 4

One of my favorite events recorded in the book of Samuel is the time when the Ark of the Covenant was captured by the Philistines, transported to one of their capitals cities, and placed before one of their chief gods, Dagon. This was to demonstrate the supposed “superiority” of the Philistine gods over the God of Israel. Yet what happened? The Lord single-handedly vanquished the Philistine nation; I call this The Ebenezer Coup!

The next morning the Philistine priests entered their sanctuary and found their god, Dagon, flat on its face paying homage to the Ark of the Covenant. Shocked, they set the idol upright and

went about their day. The next morning they arose to an even more incredible discovery. This time, Dagon was flat on its face before the Ark of the Covenant with its head and two hands severed (which in the ancient world was a sign of complete and utter domination)! This began the unleashing of a judgment on the Philistine nation that they had never known before:

1 Samuel 5:6, "Now the hand of the Lord was heavy on the Ashdodites, and He ravaged them and smote them with tumors, both Ashdod and its territories."

In response the Ashdodites convened a council of the Philistine Lords who basically said, "*Poor Ashdodites! You can't handle the weak God of the Israelites! We'll take the Ark!*" And then, one by one, God ravished the Philistine territories where the Ark was taken.

Hebrews 10:31, "It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

The Philistines learned this the hard way! God single-handedly vanquished their nation without the use of secondary means like soldiers, warfare, and political treaties! God did it all by Himself!

Now you would think that this display would have been enough for the people of God to understand once and for all that

- God was and is the only sovereign- the King of kings and Lord of lords!
- Any and all set-backs are only apparent!
- With the Lord there is no such thing as defeat!

Yet the sinful heart is that cold and that hard to believe- which no doubt is why when 500 years later the people of God found themselves defeated as a nation, in exile, that the Lord carried out another Ebenezer Coup! The Book of Daniel is the record of this coup. The primary theme revolves around the Sovereignty of God over all of Life!

God's people are in exile NOT because God was weak, BUT because His people were, such that they ran headlong into sin as a nation. Accordingly and as promised in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, God deigned to discipline His people with the exile.¹

Now it is important to note that there were many faithful Israelites who suffered at this time- not on account of their own sin, but on account of their sinful nation. Accordingly, Daniel was written both to exhort them, the faithful in Christ, unto faithfulness and devotion to the Lord (Daniel 1). To encourage them with Sweet and Sober Truths about God, His Kingdom, and His Plan (Daniel 2-12).

Thus far we have seen three such truths, all proclaimed by Nebuchadnezzar himself:

- "*Be Encouraged! Your God is Great and so Rules Kings and Nations, Daniel 2.*"
- "*Be Encouraged! Your God is Holy and therefore has a Plan that is Beyond our Ability to*

Understand, Daniel 3.”

- *“Be Encouraged! Your God Reigns and so Holds the Heart of the King in His Hands, Daniel 4.”*

We are going to consider a fourth word of consolation: Your God is jealous and so will not allow Himself to be mocked!

Daniel 5:1, “Belshazzar the king held a great feast for a thousand of his nobles, and he was drinking wine [clearly as a show to demonstrate how he thought man ought to live in his last hours] in the presence of the thousand.”

There has been much discussion regarding “Belshazzar” simply because he is not mentioned in Babylonian royalty records. Accordingly, many have wondered if Belshazzar could have been a title (like “Darius” in Persia) or a nick name (as in “Pul” for Tiglath-Pileser the Assyrian king). Yet the speculation is unfounded and clearly unneeded!

Belshazzar was the grandson of Nebuchadnezzar and son of Nabonidus, the last Babylonian king (556-539 BC).² At the beginning of his regency, Nabonidus sought to exalt the moon god, Sin, as the chief deity among the Babylonian pantheon, replacing Marduk. This offended the priests of Marduk who put great pressure on the king. Accordingly, Nabonidus abandoned Nineveh as his capital city and set up his royal residence in Teiman. To keep order, he left his son, Belshazzar, to serve as regent and so king in the capital city of Babylon which no doubt is why we read this concerning the position to which Belshazzar exalted Daniel:

Daniel 5:29, “Then Belshazzar gave orders, and they clothed Daniel with purple and *put* a necklace of gold around his neck, and issued a proclamation concerning him that he *now* had authority as the THIRD ruler in the kingdom.”

Why not the second ruler? That position was held by Belshazzar!

Eventually, after ten years, Nabonidus returned to Babylon. Yet when the days became perilous on account of the Persians, Nabonidus once again fled the capital leaving his son in charge (Nabonidus was quickly captured by the Persians). The Persians attacked Babylon and slowly took the city section by section. The siege/warfare lasted several months. When the Persian general, Cyrus, arrived on the scene in October of 539 BC (a couple of months into the fighting), the city held out seven more days before it was captured on October 12th at which time Belshazzar was killed.

In light of this, we conclude that our passage took place on October 11th, 539 BC- the last day of Babylonian sovereignty! That no doubt is why Belshazzar was enjoying the rather large party described in our passage. In the words of antiquity, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we may die” (cf. Isaiah 22:13; 1 Corinthians 15:32) Joyce Baldwin wrote this:

Belshazzar in this chapter presents a vivid picture of the fool, the practising [sic] atheist,

who at the end can only brazen it out with the help of alcohol which blots out the stark reality. (Baldwin, 2009, p. 139)

Now in the course of this party, Belshazzar “crossed way over the line”- displaying a reckless and flippant attitude toward the Lord!

Daniel 5:2-4, “When Belshazzar tasted the wine, he gave orders to bring the gold and silver vessels which Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken out of the temple which *was* in Jerusalem [that explains why Daniel thought it necessary to record this fact in Daniel 1:2], in order that the king and his nobles, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them [and so desecrate them]. Then they brought the gold vessels that had been taken out of the temple, the house of God which *was* in Jerusalem; and the king and his nobles, his wives, and his concubines drank from them. They drank the wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone.”

In his debauchery Belshazzar ordered that the vessels from Jerusalem’s temple be brought in to the party so that his guests could drink from them while honoring the gods of Babylon! Why? He did this to go out with a bang. By taking these vessels he associated himself with his grandfather, Nebuchadnezzar, essentially saying, “I am as he! Look at my power!” Yet in this act, the Lord’s sovereignty was directly scorned and His name purposely profaned!

Now brothers and sister, God is jealous for His name (Exodus 34:14)! He will not allow it to be defiled among any nation or people without repercussion! Think of it: Babylon here literally is in its last hours. God didn’t need to do a thing and it would have fallen on its current course! Yet on the last night of the last day of Belshazzar’s reign, God acted to preserve His honor! *What an important lesson for the people of God!* While they were in the exile, this is what God told His people:

Ezra 36:22-23, “Therefore, say to the house of Israel, ‘Thus says the Lord God, “It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for My holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you went. And I will vindicate the holiness of My great name which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in their midst. Then the nations will know that I am the Lord,” declares the Lord God, “when I prove Myself holy among you in their sight.””

That is what God is doing here! Truly, though Belshazzar was a “nobody,” nevertheless in his downfall he mocked the Lord at a time when God deigned to demonstrate His sovereignty over the nations; which brings us to a surpassing fear.

A Surpassing Fear

Daniel 5:5-6, “Suddenly the fingers of a man’s hand emerged and began writing opposite the lampstand on the plaster of the wall of the king’s palace [the detail reflected here indicates an eye-witness account which gives us another time-indicator for this book³], and

the king saw the back of the hand that did the writing. Then the king's face grew pale, and his thoughts alarmed him; and his hip joints went slack, and his knees began knocking together."

What an awesome event! In the midst of Belshazzar's mocking of God, a bodiless-hand suddenly appeared and wrote four words on the plaster of a wall in the banqueting room where they were reveling. Belshazzar immediately summoned his wise men to read and interpret the mysterious words (in fact, he would greatly reward the man who succeeded)! Yet like his grandfather before him, Belshazzar found that not one of the wise men of Babylon could decipher the words. The pericope ends with the once joyful party gripped in fear and dread!

Talk about an amazing turn of events! Again recall the context: Cyrus is encamped in part of the city. Babylon is soon to fall. The king and all the nobility present soon would be dead, imprisoned, tortured, or in exile. And yet that which shook Belshazzar to the core was NOT an earthly king, conflict, or threat, BUT the presence of God in his midst! When no holy man, wise man, or counselor could read the hand-writing on the wall, the text reads thus:

Daniel 5:9, "Then King Belshazzar was greatly alarmed, his face grew *even* paler, and his nobles were perplexed."

Family of God, this is huge! When the temporal is intersected by the Eternal, the weight of the world is as light as a feather in comparison to the awesome responsibility that presses upon the soul! In the words of A. W. Tozer:

The man who comes to a right belief about God is relieved of ten thousand temporal problems, for he sees at once that these have to do with matters which at the most cannot concern him for very long; but even if the multiple burdens of time may be lifted from him, the one mighty single burden of eternity begins to press down upon him with a weight more crushing than all the woes of the world piled one upon another. That mighty burden is his obligation to God. (Tozer, 1992, pp. 10-11)

Belshazzar learned that the hard way here! On a night when the king was burdened by the fall of his empire such that he and his nobles hid in wine bottles, God demonstrated both to them and, more importantly, to His people that there are graver things in life than death! That brings us to a spirit-filled servant.

A Spirit-Filled Servant

Daniel 5:10-12, "The queen entered the banquet hall because of the words of the king and his nobles; the queen spoke and said, 'O king, live forever! [It is amazing how short 'forever' is!] Do not let your thoughts alarm you or your face be pale. There is a man in your kingdom in whom is a spirit of the holy gods; and in the days of your father, illumination, insight, and wisdom like the wisdom of the gods were found in him. And King

Nebuchadnezzar, your father, your father the king, appointed him chief of the magicians, conjurers, Chaldeans, *and* diviners. *This was* because an extraordinary spirit, knowledge and insight, interpretation of dreams, explanation of enigmas, and solving of difficult problems were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Belshazzar [Daniel's resume was referenced here by the queen because by this time, he would have been viewed as a worthless old man; in 539 BC he would have been in his 80s]. Let Daniel now be summoned, and he will declare the interpretation."

During the disturbance, the queen mother (perhaps the daughter of Nebuchadnezzar, but most certainly the wife of Nabonidus) came into the room.⁴ She reminded Belshazzar⁵ — and there is disgust in her statement as Belshazzar clearly was not the kind of king his grandfather was — that there was a man of wisdom to whom he could turn; Daniel!

So Daniel was brought in before the king. It is interesting to note that there is a condescending attitude here by Belshazzar toward Daniel. For example, Belshazzar first identifies him as one of the captives: "Are you Daniel, one of the exiles my father the king brought from Judah?" (v. 13). Such an address was given to remind Daniel of his place before Belshazzar: *Belshazzar is king; Daniel is his captive!* The king then mocked Daniel with such language like, "I have heard..." (v. 14)- clearly he didn't believe what was being said about this old man.

Ironically, Daniel also demonstrates a lack of respect for this "irreverent brat." Gone is the language of honor used when Daniel spoke with Nebuchadnezzar. Instead Daniel's speech is abrupt and to the point:

Daniel 5:17, "Then Daniel answered and said before the king, 'Keep your gifts for yourself, or give your rewards to someone else; however, I will read the inscription to the king and make the interpretation known to him.'"

What a great response! Christian, there is no treasure on this earth that can compare to what we have in Christ this day (cf. Ephesians 1:3). I am reminded of Spurgeon's words:

A child counts himself rich when he has a great many marbles, and toys, and rocks, for these suit his childish age and imagination. Just so, a worldly man counts himself rich when he has a great store of gold and silver, or lands and houses. But a child of God counts himself rich when he has God for his portion, Christ his Redeemer, and the Spirit for his Guide, Sanctifier, and Comforter. (Spurgeon, 1883) (available here: <https://archive.org/stream/illustrationsmed00spur#page/2/mode/2up>)

This no doubt is why Daniel could say, "Keep your money!" Daniel was on a nobler mission than worldly wealth or pleasure. His was the honor and glory of God! And so he answered Belshazzar, but NOT for the king's sake, BUT the sake of the King of kings!

Now after declining the king's gifts, Daniel did three things:

- He declared the sovereignty and absolute authority of God over all nations (Daniel 5:18-21)⁶,
- He rebuked Belshazzar for his arrogance and pride (Daniel 5:22-24), and
- He interpreted the message (Daniel 5:25-28)!

Let's look at the message God gave Belshazzar, a sober warning:

Daniel 5:18, 22-23a, "O king [notice Daniel doesn't say, "live forever" like he would with Cyrus in Daniel 6:21; again, he had very little respect for this "king"], the Most High God granted sovereignty, grandeur, glory, and majesty to Nebuchadnezzar your father... [at this point, Daniel recounts what we saw last week in chapter 4 in which Nebuchadnezzar paid severely for his pride- skip down to v. 22 and the point...] Yet you, his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, even though you knew all this, but you have exalted yourself against the Lord of heaven..."

Let us never forget: God takes quite seriously His honor and glory! Of all sinners and sin, it is against the proud that God has set Himself.

James 4:6, "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

This is repeated multiple times throughout Scripture (cf. Psalms 138:6; Proverbs 3:34; Matthew 23:12; 1 Peter 5:5). Do you understand the significance of this? Of all people's on this earth, there is a class of people whom God actively and directly opposes... the proud! In fact, chief on the list of things which the Lord hates is pride:

Proverbs 6:16-17a: "There are six things which the Lord hates, yes, seven which are an abomination to Him: Haughty eyes..."

God hates pride in any form! With this, we read of the greatest indictment that could ever be leveled against a man:

Daniel 5:23b, "...the God in whose hand are your life-breath and your ways, you have not glorified"

Why was that? Because Belshazzar was too busy glorifying himself! What an incredible and sober warning! Years later when Herod was sucking in the praises of the masses, God demonstrated yet again the contempt He has for proud people: Herod was eaten by maggots and died!

This was the fourth message God would have His people understand as they descend into the Valley of the Shadow of Death! We must not be moved by any person, poverty, or providence! Rather, that which must move us is the weighty character of God Almighty! That is what is behind the expression, "...you have not glorified." Recall, the word for "glory" in the Bible is "weight" or "substance." When the third commandment says, "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain..." (Exodus 20:7), the exhortation is that we NOT take God's character

lightly! If we were to state it in the positive, we'd quote the words of Paul in Romans:

Romans 11:35b, "...To Him be the glory forever. Amen."

God is not like the idols of this creation. He is of substance! He acts! He upholds His word! He is Holy... Good... Sovereign... Magnificent! *And the people in the valley of the shadow of death must ever and always remember that!* With this, notice the judgment that God rendered to Belshazzar on account of his pride.

A Severe Judgment

Daniel 5:25, "Now this is the inscription that was written out: 'MENÊ, MENÊ, TEKÊL, UPHARSIN.'"

Ironically, the inscription would have been understandable to those present (the words are Hebrew which is close to Aramaic). So the problem wasn't in reading the words, but in understanding their significance and so the message! Toward that end, let me give you their word-definitions:

- mene: מְנָא (*mĕnĕ*); the word is used in Hebrew to denote a monetary sum- it is where we get the word "mina."
- tekel: תִּקְלָל (*tĕqal*); this is a Hebrew word used for the act of weighing something. It is derived from the Hebrew תִּקְלָל (*tĕqĕl*) which translates elsewhere as "shekel."
- upharsin: פְּרָס (*pĕras*); here used with the conjunction, "and" (וְ [waw] which here is the "u" in "upharsin") it means to "break in two" or "divide." It too was a monetary word used to refer to a half-shekel.

Combined as it is in this passage, the translation literally is, "A mina, a shekel, and a half shekel." As this makes little sense, Daniel interpreted the message using their verbal forms, "Number, weigh, and divide!" And so he continued:

Daniel 5:26-28, "This is the interpretation of the message: 'MENÊ'- God has numbered your kingdom and put an end to it. 'TEKÊL'- you have been weighed on the scales and found deficient. 'PERÊS'- your kingdom has been divided and given over to the Medes and Persians."

Could there have been an escape for Belshazzar prior to this night? We don't know. But one thing is certain: if there had been one, it was removed that moment on account Belshazzar's pride! That very night, he would stand before an earthly king Cyrus who would be the tool literally to introduce Belshazzar to the King of kings!

Now humbled by the divine message, Belshazzar insisted on honoring Daniel as he had

promised in verse 7.

Daniel 5:29, “Then Belshazzar gave orders, and they clothed Daniel with purple and *put* a necklace of gold around his neck, and issued a proclamation concerning him that he *now* had authority as the third *ruler* in the kingdom.”

This is a most amazing and encouraging passage for all in the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Do you realize that the last act of the last king of Babylon was to pay homage to the people of God on account of their Lord? What an incredible and encouraging message for those in the Diaspora. Truly, God reigns! In His majesty, His and our enemies eventually will be overcome, and we with God shall enjoy the spoils!

The passage closes with what under normal circumstances would have been the worst news possible for the people of God:

Daniel 5:30-31, “That same night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was slain. So Darius the Mede received the kingdom at about the age of sixty-two.”

How is this the worst news possible? While Belshazzar was no saint... while the Babylon reign involved the death of many innocent people (cf. Daniel 5:19)... the rise of a foreign kingdom would have involved the death and further humiliation of many, many of God’s people! But again, this brings us to the point: how can we fear any person, power, or thing in this life when we have a God as awesome as ours? Who...

- Rules over heaven and earth!
- Ordains the good and the bad things of life.
- Controls the heart of the king.
- Is zealous for His name and so His people and so will most certainly work all things for good- both for Him and His people!

The Glory of God Realized and Proclaimed

What is the “food” with which God intended to feed the faith of His exiled people here? It is very simple: in Christ we win! No matter how bleak may be our future or difficult the path, because God is zealous for His Name — a name to which He has joined us — in the end we will win!

You say, “How so?” Listen to the promise God made to His people on account of his Holy jealousy:

Ezra 36:22-24, “Therefore, say to the house of Israel, ‘Thus says the Lord God, “It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for My holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you went. And I will vindicate the holiness of My great

name which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in their midst. Then the nations will know that I am the Lord,' declares the Lord God, 'when I prove Myself holy among you in their sight. For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands, and bring you into your own land.'""

Because God is Jealous for His name and His glory, He has planned a day in the near future when He will return to this earth, judge the nations, and reclaim this world as His dominion! At that time, we His people will co-reign with Him over all of creation! In light of this, the hope and passion of God's servants throughout Redemptive History has always been this glorious coming. Simeon lived for the coming of God's glory:

Luke 2:25a, "And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel..."

Paul's greatest passion in life was this:

Philippians 3:10-11, "...[he] m[ight] know Him [Christ], and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that [he might] attain to the resurrection from the dead."

We read this about Abraham:

Hebrews 11:10, "...looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God."

In fact, it was every genuine servant of God:

Hebrews 11:14b-16a, "For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. And indeed if they had been thinking of that *country* from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better *country*, that is a heavenly one..."

In light of this we understand that the short sojourn of Israel under Babylonian rule was but a type of exile in which God's people remain today and which, like the Babylonian exile, will end in a moment, in a twinkling of an eye! Accordingly, our call in the words of Paul is to, "fight the good fight... to finish the course... and so keep the faith"! (2 Timothy 4:7) Why?

2 Timothy 4:8, "In the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing."

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End Notes

¹ In other words, God never intended the nation of Israel to remain; from the beginning it was going to fall.

² Verses 2 and 22 reference Nebuchadnezzar as his father simply because there is no word in the Hebrew for grandfather or grandson. And so referencing your grandfather four generations back, in the Hebrew he would be called your father and you his son/daughter.

³ “The circumstantial detail suggests the testimony of an eyewitness, in this case the king himself. The excavation of the palace has uncovered beyond three impressive courtyards a large room (52m by 17m) which has become known as the Throne Room. ‘Inside the throne room, and facing the doorway, a recessed niche in the wall probably indicates where the king’s throne stood.’ One wall was ‘adorned with a design in blue enamelled [sic] bricks’, but the others were covered with white plaster.” (Baldwin, J. G. (1978). *Daniel: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC, vol. 23, p. 134)

⁴ Recall, Belshazzar’s wives already were there, v. 3.

⁵ Most likely her son.

⁶ That means that Cyrus himself also was as nothing as well!

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About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on August 10, 2014. Greg is the minister of Bethel Presbyterian Church