

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Godliness in an ungodly age - Daniel chapter 5

Today we continue with our series entitled '21st Century challenges from Daniel.' In previous weeks the talks have had the headings of 'Faithfulness to God', covering Daniel 1, 'God's plan of the ages' for chapter 2, 'God or idolatry' from chapter 3, and 'Lowliness or self-assertiveness', dealing with chapter 4. This week our talk is under the heading of 'Godliness in an ungodly age' and our considerations will be based on Daniel 5.

In about 600 BC, the mightiest empire in the world was Babylon, which was roughly where Iraq is now. The leader of the empire of Babylon was King Nebuchadnezzar. The king twice attacked Jerusalem, taking away various treasures and holy vessels from the temple there and also a substantial number of captives. Among these captives was Daniel who was a prince in his own country. The holy vessels from the temple in Jerusalem were put into the temples of the false gods of Babylon and the lives of the Jewish captives were greatly changed as pressure was put on them to conform to the attitudes and false religions of the land in which they were held prisoner. They were in a country to which they did not belong and they were being pressurised to live as those in that country did rather than be true to the God of Israel.

This is the background to our chapter today, Daniel 5, where the events recorded probably took place round about 550 BC. The story of the chapter has dramatic, miraculous and sad elements. It has long been one of my favourite Bible stories and the excitement of it readily can be conveyed to children and young people. However, as with all Bible stories, it has messages for us today. Let us be clear that this story is not a fable and it is not just for children. The events really did happen and God today wants to speak through those events to all of us.

Let me first of all summarise the events of the chapter and then see what we can learn from these about our subject today, 'Godliness in an ungodly age'. I want to start by reading Daniel 5:1-6, reading from the Authorised Version of the Bible. "Belshazzar the king made a great feast to a thousand of his lords, and drank wine before the thousand. Belshazzar, while he tasted the wine, commanded to bring the golden and silver vessels which his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple which was in Jerusalem; that the king, and his princes, his wives, and his concubines, might drink therein. Then they brought the golden vessels that were taken out of the temple of the house of God which was at Jerusalem; and the king, and his princes, his wives, and his concubines, drank in them. They drank wine, and praised the gods of gold, and of silver, of brass, of iron, of wood, and of stone. In the same hour came forth fingers of a man's hand, and wrote over against the candlestick upon the plaister of the wall of the king's palace: and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote. Then the king's countenance was changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his loins were loosed, and his knees smote one against another."

The chapter goes on to tell that the king couldn't understand the words written on the wall by the fingers of the hand. He called in his wise men to help in the interpretation of the words, offering a reward to the successful interpreter. None of these wise men could help. The king was not best pleased and in fact was quite alarmed. Seeing this, the queen recommended Daniel, using the following words recorded in verses 11 and 12: "There is a man in thy kingdom, in whom is the spirit of the holy gods; and in the days of thy father light and understanding and wisdom, like the wisdom of the gods, was found in him; whom the king Nebuchadnezzar thy father, the king, I say, thy father, made master of the magicians, astrologers, Chaldeans, and soothsayers; forasmuch as an excellent spirit, and knowledge, and understanding, interpreting of dreams, and shewing of hard sentences, and dissolving of doubts, were found in the same Daniel, whom the king named Belteshazzar: now let Daniel be called, and he will shew the interpretation."

Daniel was brought to the king and first of all said that he did not want the king's reward. Then, as recorded in verses 18-21, Daniel summarised God's dealings with King Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar's grandfather; incidentally, the Old Testament uses the word father, as it does in this chapter, in the sense of forefather. That summary of God's dealings with Nebuchadnezzar is important and we will return to it later.

Daniel then bravely goes on directly to confront Belshazzar as to his own pride and disregard for the things of God in the words of verses 22 and 23: "And thou his son, O Belshazzar, hast not humbled thine heart, though thou knewest all this; but hast lifted up thyself against the Lord of heaven; and they have brought the vessels of his house before thee, and thou, and thy lords, thy wives, and thy concubines, have drunk wine in them; and thou hast praised the gods

of silver, and gold, of brass, iron, wood, and stone, which see not, nor hear, nor know: and the God in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, hast thou not glorified:"

Daniel finally pronounces the words written on the wall by the fingers of the hand together with the meanings of those words. The words were Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin. The meanings were: Mene - "God hath numbered thy kingdom, and finished it"; Tekel - "Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting"; Peres, which is the singular form of Upharsin - "Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians."

Solemnly, the chapter ends with the record that that very night King Belshazzar was killed. That was the end of the dominance of the empire of Babylon. The dominance was then taken over by the empire of the Medes and Persians.

As I said earlier, the heading for the talk today is 'Godliness in an ungodly age.' I would like to spend a short time considering what godliness is. In Paul's letters in the New Testament, he only uses the word godliness when writing to two individuals, Timothy and Titus, and particularly in 1 Timothy. I take it from this that godliness is an individual matter. Doctrine is another word used fairly frequently in 1 Timothy. Doctrine means teaching, that is teaching the substance of something. Paul, the apostle, had sent Timothy to Ephesus to ensure that the church there was being reminded of good and sound doctrine. Paul said to Timothy: "Great is the mystery of godliness" (1 Timothy 3:16) and then goes on in the remainder of that verse to write about Christ being "...manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory." From all of this, it seems to me that an individual's godliness stems from an inward appreciation of everything to do with Christ, which then demonstrates itself by a life which is pleasing to Christ and which is consistent with the doctrine of Scripture.

Mr. WE Vine in his *Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* explains godliness as "piety which, characterised by a Godward attitude, does that which is well-pleasing to Him." It is a practical word, an outward demonstration of what a Christian inwardly is enjoying of Christ.

With that brief consideration of godliness, we return to Daniel 5 and our heading 'Godliness in an ungodly age.' If ungodliness is the opposite to godliness, there can be little doubt that Babylon, where Daniel was held captive, was an ungodly country. Let's just note five examples from chapter 5 to illustrate the ungodliness of that society. First of all, verses 1-3 tell of the holy vessels from the temple in Jerusalem being used as ordinary drinking vessels at the king's feast. These holy vessels of Old Testament times had been made for God's holy purposes as instructed by God. We note that the society in which Daniel lived took no account, no notice, of what God instructed.

Second, verse 4 tells us that as they drank wine at the feast from the holy vessels, they "praised the gods of gold, and of silver, of brass, of iron, of wood, and of stone." With no consideration of the only true God, the God of heaven, they praised and gave idol status to material things.

Third, when faced with a problem in not being able to interpret the writing on the wall, they did not immediately seek God's help, but turned to those representing the wisdom of the world, the astrologers, the Chaldeans, the soothsayers, the wise men of Babylon of verse 7. Divine wisdom was way down on their scale of importance and it was only in extremity of circumstances that the queen brought to the attention of the king, Daniel, the servant of "the most high God," the phrase used in verse 18.

Fourth, they ignored the lessons which God had taught King Nebuchadnezzar, another king of Babylon who was full of pride and self-importance, who considered himself to be above everyone, including the most high God. Verses 18-21 of our chapter describe Nebuchadnezzar's view of himself and then the dramatic actions God took to bring Nebuchadnezzar down. Daniel told Belshazzar that, despite knowing all this, he had not humbled his own heart - see verse 22.

Fifth, Belshazzar thought that anything and everything could be bought with the reward of enhanced status. He offered this to the wise men of Babylon in verse 7 and to Daniel in verse 16, if any could interpret the writing on the wall. In that society, status before men mattered much more than a person's standing before God.

Now, those examples have been taken from this chapter which describes a society more than 2,500 years ago. Yet what strikes me is that we could be describing society today! The first example I took from verses Daniel 5:1-3 tells us that the people then, including those in authority, took no notice of what God instructed. God's instructions to us today are set out in His word, the Bible. Is the Bible generally followed in our world today? I think not. For example, God's instructions as to the Lord's Day, marriage, obeying parents and Jesus Christ being the only way to God are widely ignored. Even those who say that they accept the Bible sometimes pick and choose which parts they will accept, and this at times by those who purport to be Christian leaders. In the eyes of some, science is all that matters and the essential place of faith as taught in the Bible is out of date, whereas God says about His word that it "liveth and abideth for ever" - 1 Peter 1:23. In other words, the Bible is always relevant and applicable, whatever the world thinks today.

The second example, from verse 4, showed that the people and the leaders of Babylon made idols of material things, giving no consideration to the only true God. And what of today? My clear impression is of a world where material wealth is a god for many. The people in today's headlines tend to be those with wealth. Rich people in the entertainment and business fields are sometimes turned into idols. The dream of many is to win the lottery. The Bible says of those who became Christians in the city of Thessalonica that they "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God; and to wait for his Son from heaven" - 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10.

Example three was taken from verse 7 where, when faced with a problem, the leader in Babylon did not first turn to God but turned to those representing the wisdom of the world. Those people couldn't help. The Bible says that worldly wisdom "descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual (or natural), [even] devilish" - James 3:15. It seems that many will not acknowledge that, even with the best intentions and endeavours, man's wisdom just can't resolve many problems, particularly those which stem from sin. Only the God of heaven is capable of dealing with these things.

In example four, from verses 18-22, we noted that Belshazzar and his people ignored the lessons which God had taught Nebuchadnezzar in the past. In Britain, we have a great Christian heritage and God has blessed this country in many ways. Some people who lived through World War II have told me that churches then were packed as people sought God's help in a time of extreme circumstances. Now the lessons of our past and the lessons from the Bible are being ignored. In many schools lessons from the Bible are watered down, if allowed at all. Complacently and dangerously, just like Belshazzar, we ignore what God has shown us.

Finally, the fifth example taken from verses 7 and 16 showed that in Babylon status before men mattered more than standing before God. Today also, pride sometimes drives people to want to equal or better the wealth, possessions and power of others, the "keeping up with the Jones's" syndrome. God says that the status of everyone in His sight is that "all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" - Romans 3:23. I can't have God's eternal salvation until I recognise that I am a worthless sinner and desperately need that salvation.

I suggest, therefore, that there are many similarities between Babylon and the world today. I suggest that both were or are godless societies. Let me read what the Bible says in 2 Timothy 3:1-5 and see whether we can identify the world today from what God says: "This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, traitors, heady, high-minded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof ..."

Our talk today is entitled 'Godliness in an ungodly age.' The challenge to Daniel was to demonstrate godliness when around him society demonstrated that it was ungodly. That is also the challenge to me in an ungodly world today. Let's see if we can gain some help from Daniel's example.

We have seen from the previous talks on the earlier chapters of this book that Daniel lived close to God. In his heart he was determined to live for God - see 1:8. He acknowledged God's goodness and praised Him - see 2:19-23. And we will see in the next talk from chapter 6 that Daniel was a man of prayer. Daniel had a close inward personal relationship with God and therefore outwardly was able to display godliness in his life, whatever the circumstances around him. In the same way, if I want to live a godly life in this ungodly age, I have to spend time regularly in communion with Christ, learning and appreciating more about Him and His ways. From that deep, personal relationship will flow a display of godliness in my life.

Then, I notice that Daniel's testimony for God was consistent. He had taken a stand for God, he understood the nature of God and he did not waver from consistently demonstrating the qualities appropriate to a follower of God. He was not up and down depending on how he felt. As he had been in Nebuchadnezzar's day, so he was in the time of Belshazzar, so that the queen could point to Daniel's longstanding godly qualities in verses 10-12 of our chapter. Daniel's manner of life matched his words. I wonder if this is true of me? Is my manner of life always consistent in a display of godliness, where actions are in line with my stated belief in the Bible and what it says?

I also notice that Daniel was separate from the wise men of the kingdom of Babylon. They were given the first opportunity to interpret the words on the wall. Daniel was called in on his own later. The ways and beliefs of those worldly wise men would not have helped Daniel live for God. Similarly, there is a challenge for me as a Christian to be separate from those things in the world today which would adversely affect my wish to live a godly life. When I was younger, I was often told that I should be in the world and not of it. Daniel was like that.

Daniel also wasn't interested in the reward which Belshazzar offered for an interpretation of the words. Worldly wealth and status didn't interest Daniel, though he had been brought up as a prince in Jerusalem. He declined the king's

reward - see verse 17. Here is a challenge for me today! If my heart is set on achieving wealth and status in this world, this must cause a conflict with living for God. Daniel was single minded about this.

Daniel had also taken note of God's dealings in the past and, unlike Belshazzar, hadn't ignored the lessons to be taken from these. I wonder whether I not only know my Bible and the record in it of what God expects, but also whether I then allow that knowledge to affect the way in which I live. The standards of the world change, and usually in my experience not for the better. God's standards never change and those who would live godly lives need to follow those standards, whatever the changes that occur in the world around.

Lastly, I note Daniel's bravery in speaking out for God. He was very straight in speaking to Belshazzar in the way that he did as recorded in verses 22-23. He literally risked his life with that powerful king. The challenge to me is to stand up and speak up clearly for God in an ungodly world.

Nowhere in the book of Daniel does it suggest that displaying godliness is easy. Standing up for God is often displayed in the Bible as a battle. Those who emerge victorious are those who stay close to Christ.

While it is outside the scope of the heading for my talk, I feel that I can't finish without drawing attention to the solemn end to this chapter. Belshazzar had ignored and disobeyed God. God weighed Belshazzar in the balances and found him wanting. God judged Belshazzar and verse 30 records that that very night Belshazzar was slain. Galatians 6:7 states that: "... God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." Belshazzar found that to be true when it was too late. I do hope that no listener to this broadcast today ignores the truth of these things.

May each of us know what it is to be right with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. In that way, may we know the power to live for Him in this ungodly world.

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