

Chapter 5 of Daniel gives a sobering example of “regime change.” Belshazzar, having offended God through his pride, is stripped of his kingdom and slain by the Medo-Persian invader Darius.

The sections of the statue of Chapter 2 told of four empires, each falling to be succeeded by another. It’s the tale of human history. A nation gains strength then eventually either decays from within or invites destruction by its arrogance. It seems that not even mighty empires can avoid the “bondage to corruption” of Romans 8:21.

God had not intended this fate for the nation He established for His name – Israel. He brought it out of Egyptian slavery, redeemed it from the power of Pharaoh at the Red Sea, and delivered it to a land capable of keeping it in prosperity forever. And what was God’s plan to preserve the nation of Israel?

One way to ensure continuity is to maintain an unbroken chain of teaching about God, passing from father to son (and mothers and daughters, too). An example may be found in the touching moment of the Passover meal when the son asks his father, “What do you mean by this service?” and the father tells him it is to remember when the Lord passed over His people and struck the Egyptians (Ex. 12:26). And there is this command in Deuteronomy 6, “*You shall teach [my words] diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.*”

And not only are the parents commanded to teach, the children are told to listen. “*Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God commanded you, that your days may be long, and that it may go well with you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you*” (Deut. 5:16). This commandment, the first one with a promise as noted in Ephesians, links the dutiful obedience of children to the longevity and happiness of the nation in the land it will receive.

There is a simple principle here: Each generation is to learn from the experience of the ones before. In particular, parents are to impress upon their children the greatness and goodness of God and the importance of His Word as they have been taught by their parents and through a lifetime of walking with God (and, yes, also making mistakes). The life of a people or a nation can depend on this.

Yet it is exactly this precept that Belshazzar violates. He knows of his forefather Nebuchadnezzar’s pride and arrogance, his seven years of insanity and deprivation, and his humbling that leads him to glorify God. But he takes no lesson, learns nothing, from this knowledge. He follows his own sinful inclinations and pays the awful price.

The children of Israel, of course, did no better. Their rebellious hearts cooled toward their Lord. They instituted a human royalty that led in the end to a depressing parade of wicked and idolatrous kings. And they lost their nationhood.

Is failure inevitable? Can a government ever last?

Yes – one can. “*Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore*” (Isa. 9:7). The Lord Jesus will bring in the everlasting Kingdom of God which will never falter or fail. And is it any coincidence that the eternal Son stands as our example of duty and obedience to His father? “*Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered*” (Heb. 5:8. Exactly what it means for Him to ‘learn’ obedience is another question).

May we learn God’s vital lessons from our forefathers and pass them to descendants willing to benefit from them.

Notes on Daniel 5

5:1 From historical documents, Belshazzar is thought to be Nebuchadnezzar's grandson, acting as co-regent in the absence of his father Nabonidus. That would explain why Daniel is named the third ruler in the kingdom, after Belshazzar and Nabonidus.

5:2 The temple vessels were first mentioned in 1:2. Nebuchadnezzar apparently had enough reverence to put them away in storage. Belshazzar brings them out to offer inebriated toasts to his pagan gods.

5:10 The queen may be the queen mother who would be old enough to remember Daniel's service to Nebuchadnezzar.

5:11 It appears that Daniel has been set aside, along with His God.

5:13 When Belshazzar says "my father," it could mean forefather or grandfather.

5:17 Daniel does not start his address to Belshazzar with the customary "O king, live forever!" He knows he is speaking to a condemned man.

5:22 Belshazzar cannot plead ignorance as an excuse; neither can any person. *"For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them"* (Rom. 1:19).

5:23 Daniel accuses Belshazzar of not honoring the God to whom he owes his very breath and being. It resembles Paul's gospel message to the Gentiles of Athens: *"In him we live and move and have our being"* (Acts 17:28).

5:25-28 The inscription is: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, and PARSIN (In Aramaic, *U* means *and*, as in UPARSIN or UPHARSIN).

MENE, repeated twice for emphasis, can mean *divided* or *mina*, a unit of money found elsewhere in both the Old and New Testament.

TEKEL can mean *weighed* or *shekel*, another unit of money.

PERES is the singular of Parsin. It means *divided* or a half-mina or half-shekel and sounds like the Aramaic word for *Persia*.

The full inscription then reads "Numbered, numbered, weighed, divided." It's interesting that each word can also signify a unit of money, as if this were a monetary transaction between Belshazzar and God. *For the wages of sin is death* (Rom. 6:23).

5:30 It may seem strange that Belshazzar and his lords would be feasting with an enemy at their gates. Secular history, however, tells us that the Persians had besieged the city for some time. The Babylonians considered it impregnable because of its high walls. But the Persian army had been secretly digging channels to divert the Euphrates river. In a single night, they opened the channels to change the course of the river, entered the city through the dry riverbed under the walls, and conquered the surprised Babylonians.

Darius the Mede is not found outside scripture. Inscriptions identify Cyrus as the victorious emperor. It may be that Darius is the Medean name for the Persian Cyrus, or Darius is another name for the general who led the campaign.