

## Daniel 5 - Who's Got the Power? <sup>1</sup>

**Before the Lesson:** Make copies of the handout, “Excerpts from *Money, Sex, and Power* by Richard Foster”

**Fellowship question:** (Use *one* of these to break the ice, to begin some discussion, and to lead into the study):

- A. On a scale of 1 (no interest) to 10 (I need to know everything!), how much interest do you have in the British Royal Family?
- B. What is your superpower?

### Information

Today's lesson for Daniel focuses on power - the power of the ruler, the power of money, the power of God, and the power of - you!

- Read Daniel 5.

[Use the following quotes to guide class members through the story.]

“Belshazzar thought that Jeremiah's prophecy that the exile would last 70 years was not fulfilled and that therefore he could relax. On this basis he is deliberately disdaining the God of Israel.”<sup>2</sup>

#### *Babylonian banquet*

“Banquets in antiquity, especially royal banquets, were not simply festive occasions. They were occasions for extravagant display that were as much symbolic as material...Lavish banquets positioned the king as a powerful benefactor and bound his subordinates more closely to him. To eat the king's food was to take the king's gift literally into one's own body and with that act to acknowledge a social bond and a social debt.”<sup>3</sup>

“We are not getting Belshazzar's testimony but a narrator's story about him. And the story begins with a scene that can be read as one of ostentation, decadence, carousing, coarseness, wantonness, and self-indulgence, a scene that might have been designed to illustrate the warnings in Proverbs about power, sex, and drink (e.g., Prov 23:29-35). From self-indulgence

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<sup>2</sup> John Goldingay, *Daniel: Revised Edition*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 2019), 287.

<sup>3</sup> Carol A. Newsome with Brennan W. Breed, *Daniel: A Commentary* The Old Testament Library (Louisville: The Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 165.

issue sacrilege and blasphemy. What is wrong with the banquet is not the event itself but where it leads.”<sup>4</sup>

### *Temple vessels*

“Part of the contrast between Belshazzar and Nebuchadnezzar is to be seen in their different treatment of temple vessels...Nebuchadnezzar treated them respectfully, placing them in the temple of his god. Though he sees himself exerting power over them, Nebuchadnezzar does not subject them to dishonor. Belshazzar, however, treats them like royal tableware, a blasphemous gesture.”<sup>5</sup>

To the exiled Jews, the temple vessels “became a symbol of continuity. Like the people themselves, they were taken into exile, then returned to Jerusalem by the command of Cyrus (Ezra 1:7-11). Isaiah 52:11 depicts the exiles as purifying themselves in order to carry the sacred vessels back to Jerusalem.”<sup>6</sup>

“Why did the king elect to toast his gods with the sacred vessels taken from the Temple in Jerusalem? Perhaps it was merely the wild whim of a mad monarch...Or was it the naked use of power for its own sake...Perhaps Belshazzar sought to unmask the God of Israel as a phony...Perhaps he was trying to bring Yahweh under his control and thus win the battle of sovereignties.”<sup>7</sup>

“We are not told why Belshazzar sent for these particular vessels. Perhaps they were assumed to be the most valuable he possessed. Theologically, they certainly were...To offer libations to [other gods] in this way is to slight the deity of God. Belshazzar’s blasphemy consisted in taking what belonged to the true and living God and using it for his own corrupt and decadent purposes in a context of contempt for God’s assumed powerlessness.”<sup>8</sup>

### *The message - The writing was on the wall*

“That the message is delivered not orally but as written text adds to its mystery and power. Few people in the ancient world were literate, yet kings publicly displayed monumental texts recording their accomplishments. The written text was itself a sign of power.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Goldingay, 294f.

<sup>5</sup> Newsome with Breed, 166.

<sup>6</sup> Newsome with Breed, 167.

<sup>7</sup> W. Sibley Towner, *Daniel*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1984), 72.

<sup>8</sup> Goldingay, 295.

<sup>9</sup> Newsome with Breed, 168.

“The narrator does not give the reader any privileged information about the nature or the content of the writing... The only hint the reader receives is the choice of the verb *nepaq* to describe the appearance of the hand, since that verb was used twice in a different conjugation in vv. 2-3 to refer to the ‘bringing out’ of the temple vessels. The wordplay is a signal that the mysterious hand is a direct response to Belshazzar’s blasphemy.”<sup>10</sup>

“On the surface [the three words] refer to three weights, a mina (about a pound), a sheqel (about 20 pounds), and a half. Elsewhere, a ‘half’ is a half-mina, though this meaning seems to be determined by the context, and the context here suggests a half-sheqel.”<sup>11</sup>

“In modern terms [they] might read ‘a half dollar, a penny, and two bits.’”<sup>12</sup>

“The solution contained in the text is based upon folk etymologies of the three words, each turning on a pun. The three nouns in verse 25 are treated as three passive verbs by Daniel in verses 26-28. MENE is related to the verb *m-n-h*, ‘numbered’; TEKEL is related to the verb *t-q-l*, ‘weighted’; and PERES is construed as the verb *p-r-s*, ‘divided.’”<sup>13</sup>

“Daniel uses a technique of double reading, [a pun]... Daniel cites each word in its nominal form but then interprets it as a verb... This play on words [may be rendered], ‘You have been weighed before him and have been found light in every way.’”<sup>14</sup>

“There is perhaps some humor in the description of Belshazzar’s reaction to the portent, if it refers to his losing control of his bodily functions, but it is a deadly comprehensive description of the physical manifestations of terror; the appropriate response to divine judgment (cf. Isa 21:3; 45:1, Ezek 21:6-7, Nah 2:10; Ps 69:23/24).”<sup>15</sup>

“The question of why Daniel has not already been summoned if he is so gifted has been explained historically (he must now be eighty-five), psychologically (Belshazzar knows the kind of message he will get from him), and rhetorically (the successful interpreter appears after the others have failed). Belshazzar’s apparent lack of knowledge of him recalls the Pharaoh who did not know or acknowledge Joseph.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Newsome with Breed, 169.

<sup>11</sup> Goldingay, 291f.

<sup>12</sup> Towner, 75.

<sup>13</sup> Towner, 76.

<sup>14</sup> Newsome with Breed, 177.

<sup>15</sup> Goldingay, 288f.

<sup>16</sup> Goldingay, 290.

### *The power of money/influence*

“Why does Daniel go through the motions of refusing rewards that he has accepted before (2:48) and will accept later (v. 29)? ...The abruptness of Daniel’s words (there is no salutation) suggests they are more confrontational...More likely he is sidestepping any pressure to modify the portent’s message, pressure that derives from the assumption that financial considerations determine the content of a seer’s message (see Num 22:18 and num 22-24 generally, Amos 7:12; Micah 3:5, 11). There is no sidestepping once the hard message has been given. Further, as refusal at this point indicates his independence, acceptance later will enable his eminence to be revealed.”<sup>17</sup>

### *A court contest - Interpretation and Confrontation*

“Once again the regular staff prove hopelessly incompetent...In chapter 2, outwardly the contest was between Daniel and the other courtier-sages; inwardly it was between the respective sources of power to interpret events...In chapter 5, the contest between Daniel and the courtiers is a non-contest because all the power to give an interpretation is derived from God alone. Here Daniel does not identify the source of interpretive power, but the king does, using the language of chapter 4, ‘the spirit of the holy gods is in you’ (v.14).”<sup>18</sup>

“The prophet issues no demand for repentance and offers no prospect of averting disaster. Yet this omission does not mean that God is not offering his grace to Belshazzar; anymore than Nathan was to David or Jonah was to Nineveh; Daniel is still fulfilling ‘the pastoral office of the church.’ David and the people of Nineveh did repent, and they found mitigation or cancellation of the threatened punishment. This path would be open to Belshazzar. It will not be taken.”<sup>19</sup>

“Daniel makes Belshazzar the subject of a series of strong verbs: ‘You knew, you ignored, you exalted yourself, you desecrated, you committed adultery, you disregarded’ (vv. 22-23). Daniel emphasizes Belshazzar’s responsibility for his attitudes and actions. His willful blindness makes him brazenly proud...in the very presence of the one who is actually the Lord of the heavens.”<sup>20</sup>

### *Does God use violence through others to affect God’s will?*

“Belshazzar’s story suggests that revolutionary or military violence is a means through which God works in history...Elsewhere in the OT the fall of Babylon is not merely the end of an era

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<sup>17</sup> Goldingay, 291.

<sup>18</sup> W. Sibley Towner, *Daniel*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1984), 69.

<sup>19</sup> Goldingay, 298.

<sup>20</sup> Goldingay, 299.

but one realization of the day of Yahweh....Certainly the sovereign power of God in the event is alone of interest in this story. When people act with violence, the story encourages us to believe that God can effect his purpose through them and that we can trust him to fulfill his just purpose in events one way or another.”<sup>21</sup>

“Worldly power is real, but it is subservient to the will of God.”<sup>22</sup>

“The moment when God says ‘You fool’ (Luke 12:20) is one that all have to fear, but it is a moment that leaders especially have to fear. They may seem to be the embodiment of order, destiny, power, and divinity. Yet death comes to them, too, an incontrovertible proof of their pretension to power and significance.”<sup>23</sup>

“Psalm 2 talks about God laughing when nations and governments assert themselves against him and his purpose. He knows they always end up falling into the pit they dug. Hearing God’s laughter is important for the Belshazzars of the world; it is a way God may get through to them.”<sup>24</sup>

“God will maintain his sovereignty over all human sovereignties and will effect the redemption of this world, preserve its beauty and goodness, release it from its bondage to sin and decay and death in spite of the arrogant users of power who revel in their debauchery and challenge God to do his worst.”<sup>25</sup>

### **Transformational Exercise**

- Distribute handout Excerpts from *Money, Sex, and Power* by Richard Foster.

Take a look at this list of quotes. Which one would you like to comment on?

Close in a prayer something like this: *God of power, God on High, God Almighty. We give you titles to describe the power you have - King, Shepherd, Lord. We are not gods, but we often long for your power. How soon would destroy our world and our souls with our power. Instead, we pray we will lay our egos aside so there is room for your power to flow through us. May your kingdom come and your will be done. Amen.*

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<sup>21</sup> Goldingay, 300, 301.

<sup>22</sup> Goldingay, 301.

<sup>23</sup> Goldingay, 301.

<sup>24</sup> Goldingay, 302.

<sup>25</sup> Towner, 78.

Excerpts from *Money, Sex, and Power* by Richard Foster

On Power

*Power touches us all. We cannot get away from it even if we wanted to. All human relationships involve the use of power. Therefore, rather than seek to run from it or to deny that we use it, we would do well to discover the Christian meaning of power and learn how to use it for the good of others. All who follow Christ are called to the 'ministry of power'. (213)*

*Power is a genuine paradox to believers. We love it and we hate it. We despise its evil and appreciate its good. We would like to do without it, but we know it is part and parcel of human life. (228)*

On Destructive Power

*Power can be an extremely destructive thing in any context, but in the service of religion it is downright diabolical. Religious power can destroy in a way that no other power can. Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely; and this is especially true in religion. Those who are a law unto themselves and at the same time take on a mantle of piety are particularly corruptible. When we are convinced that what we are doing is identical with the kingdom of God, anyone who opposes us **must** be wrong. When we are convinced that we always use our power to good ends, we believe we can never do wrong... Those who are accountable to no one are especially susceptible to the corrupting influence of power. (178)*

On Humility

*Humility is power under control. Nothing is more dangerous than power in the service of arrogance. Power under the discipline of humility is teachable... Believe me this is no small matter. Many have been destroyed in their walk with God simply because their exercise of power was not controlled by humility. Power without humility is anything but a blessing. (202)*

On Vulnerability

*The power that comes from above is not filled with bravado and bombast. It lacks the symbols of human authority; indeed its symbols are a manger and a cross... The power from above leads from weakness. It is in contradiction to the society of the strong and the capable. (204)*

On Submission

*Submission is power because it places us in a position in which we can receive from others. We are impoverished people indeed if our world is narrowed down to ourselves. But when, with humility of heart, we submit to others, vast new resources are opened to us. When we submit to others, we have access to their wisdom, their counsel, their rebuke, their encouragement. (206)*