

The Writing on the Wall

Daniel 5

Well friends, I have to say that when I picked the story of Daniel for our breakfast theatre presentation this year - I was expecting that these stories would be easy to preach on because they are so familiar to us and because they seem to be examples of resisting cultural pressure to compromise your beliefs and values.

So for example – our culture wants to feed us a steady diet of secular media, or spiritualistic media, or violent media – well like Daniel and his friends we don't have to “eat” that stuff, we can take a stand and have a different diet – only vegetables... so we can watch veggie-tales instead - or at least be more discerning about the media we consume...

Or another example - we realize that our society idolizes many things and there is an expectation that everyone will fall in line and bow down to what society believes is most important. However just like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego we're not going to give into the pressure to bow down to anything but

Jesus – no matter what might happen because we know God can save us from anything!

And it's true – we do need to be careful about what we consume in our media diet, and we can't give in to the social pressure to make good things into god things and worship them instead... and at first glance these are the kind of lessons the stories in the book of Daniel seem to teach us.

However, as I have been studying and researching these stories over the past couple weeks, I have found that they are far more complex and nuanced and their message is much more profound than what I had anticipated.

In fact, the challenge to fully understand the stories in the book of Daniel is very similar to the challenge which King Belshazzar's wise men faced as they attempted to understand the writing on the wall.

We saw in the drama presentation of Daniel 5 this morning that the wise men couldn't understand it- they couldn't read it.

But friends, when the bible says they couldn't read the writing – it doesn't mean they didn't recognize the letters or that it was a mysterious unknown language or something – it means they couldn't make sense of it. They were not able to produce any meaning or interpretation or application from it. So they could read it... but they couldn't "READ" it.

Much the same way that anyone here this morning, over the age of 30 might have trouble trying to make sense out of this: LOL10Q303

Sure you can read it – it's the letters L – O – L, 1 – 0 – Q, 3 – 0 – 3 but if you are over thirty chances are you won't be able to "READ" it

You might wonder if it's a postal code for a foreign country, or some sort of gov't ID number.

You might be very observant and recognize that there's a pattern in it... it starts with three letters and ends with three numbers but the middle section starts with a number and ends with a letter and so it reverses the pattern with the character in the middle able to be either a number or a letter... very cool, but what does it mean, what's the significance?

Unless you are in the know it's obscure and impossible to figure out.

And those in the know would be those under thirty who do a lot of texting, tweeting, and other types of social media. They would probably recognize this lettering and understand that it means: Laugh Out Loud, Thank-you (Ten-q) Mom. (3= a sideways m)

It was the same situation with the writing on the wall.

The wise men would have come in and seen something like this "נמתקלפרס" And right away they would have recognized

these symbols as Aramaic/Hebrew letters, because they were wise men - the PhD scholars and scientists of their day – of course they could read Aramaic and Hebrew.

But the problem lies in the fact that Hebrew and Aramaic don't have vowel letters – instead they use vowel markings – but that didn't come about until later on... so if we were to transliterate the letters on the wall into our alphabet and symbols it would look like this ***“mnhtqlprs”***

So essentially the wise men were trying to figure this combination of consonants which could take any number of vowels... and be broken up in to any number of words or all one word?

Like ***“Amenhoteqalpus”*** or ***“minihat qloopros”*** or ***“emin hotoq peers...”*** you get the picture

So you see friends unless you know how to “read” this, there's no way you'll be able “READ” this and figure out what it is supposed to mean.

Now I hope you are wondering – “How does Daniel read these nine letters and come up with the message that *“God has numbered the days of Belshazzar's reign and brought it to an end, that he has been weighed on the scales and found wanting, and his kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.”*

Well friends the easy answer is that the author of this riddle is Yahweh – and Yahweh tells Daniel what it means, and Daniel tells the King - it's that simple.

But friends – the God who made this incredibly intricate universe didn't simply scribble a bunch of nonsense on the wall and then tell Daniel it's supposed to mean something - there's a design and logic inherent in the way this riddle works out which is consistent with the message it communicates and the purpose for which it was sent.

And it's so extremely clever and witty on God's part, and so I want to show you how this works out.

So, by Divine knowledge Daniel is aware that these nine letters must be broken up into three groups of three letters each.

Then by shifting them from nouns to their passive participles verb format and then by changing the vocalizations you end up with three layers of meanings.

Now the first layer of meaning in these words in their nouns forms, listed in vs. 25, relates to units of money or weights for determining monetary value.

And when you used weights you needed a scale – and so Daniel repeats the first word of the three –to make four words: that can be divided into two and sort of represents a balance – a weigh scale.

And so we read the famous phrase “mene mene tekem parsin” which would be “mina, mina, shekel and a half, and you’re all going – “oooh of course a mina and a shekel, it’s so obvious now, I should have seen that – right?” ☺

Because you all know that of these three units the Mina is the heaviest unit of currency, and it takes fifty shekels to make up a Mina - which weighs about 1.25 lbs.

So the first layer of meaning invokes the an image of a pair of scales where you would have two Minas, 100 shekels, on one side... and only a shekel and a half on the other side.

2.5lbs opposing less than 1 ounce, so the one side drastically outweighs the other.

Now, in the next layer of meaning Daniel takes these nouns and changes them into passive participles – so that they become verbs which are adjectives and that means they relate back to those nouns and describe an action that is being done to those nouns.

These participle forms are what we read in verses 26-28 and they mean that the units of money and measurements are being “numbered, weighed, and divided.”

That makes sense – that is what you do with weights and currency and measurements, you count, and you weigh or assess the measurement, and divide it accordingly.

And then we get the third layer of meaning – which brings these images and actions together and applies them as consequences to King Belshazzar and this is the pronouncement of judgment that we read in verses 26-28.

And this comes about if you change the vocalization of the words.

So ‘Mene’ becomes ‘Menah’, ‘Tekel’ becomes ‘Tiqqal’, and ‘Peres’ becomes ‘Paras’ – and the different meaning of these new words describe the consequences of this evaluation and assessing of King Belshazzar by Yahweh on his divine scales.

Menah – He has paid out, Tiqqal – you are too light, Paras – Persia!

Now I think this can be seen as a reference to Belshazzar’s action of taking Yahweh’s gold out of the royal treasury, so in effect Yahweh has “paid out” something of worth and value to Belshazzar.

But Belshazzar is too light – he is not worthy, he has no godly substance about him – he uses these golden goblets to worship idols instead of the God they belong to.

So he has grievously offended the Greatest of Gods and the consequence will be that Persia – who happens to have the city of Babylon under siege at that very moment, will take over the Babylonian Empire.

So – this is how Daniel moves from these nine letters written on the wall, in the soot of the nearby lampstand – to the interpretation which he gives to the King. Isn’t God clever in this!

And here's some more background information that make God's indictment and judgment of Belshazzar even more ingenious, ironic even...

The city of Babylon was built on the Euphrates River and its walls were truly impenetrable. All the gates were shut up tight, there was lots of food stored up, and Belshazzar was prepared to simply wait out the siege – and thus we find him hosting a great feast for all his nobles.

But the Persians were able to divert the waters of the Euphrates River a few miles upstream enough to lower the water level and almost dry up the river and this exposed the aqueduct openings in the base of the walls of the city.

And so... on the night of Oct 12, 539 BC under the stars of the constellation of Libra - the Scales, while Belshazzar was feasting unawares, the Persian army entered the city and unknowingly executed God's judgment on him.

A major clash between two empires... an impenetrable capital city under siege... a monumental military engineering operation... a feast for a thousand nobles and guests... an impulsive decision to use Yahweh's goblets to toast idols... the position of the stars in the night sky... and the fact that Israel's exile was supposed to end after seventy years...

These are all woven together; they all come together; they all work together so ingeniously to communicate and accomplish the purposes and plans of the Almighty Yahweh.

So, are you starting to get a sense of what I'm talking about when I say that these stories in the book of Daniel are far more nuanced and complex than what we might first expect...

I hope so friends, because while there is such a thing as simple truth, the truth is that the plans and purposes of God are far from simplistic.

And if we read these stories in Daniel in a simplistic manner we'll miss the truth they contain. We'll miss the layers of meaning that make this truth deeper and more profound.

But friends, the good news is that we don't have to miss the nuances and deeper meanings in these stories because we also have – to use the Queen mother's phrase from this story, "the spirit of the holy gods" in us - just as Daniel did.

The Holy Spirit has been poured out upon the church at Pentecost, so that among the many things Christ sent Him to do in our lives, He might "*lead us into all truth*" (John 16:13) - especially the more nuanced and complex truth that needs to be worked out of a story like this one.

And as we dig into the details and study the facts in this story; through its complexity and ingenuity the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to what the scriptures reveal to us about Yahweh... about the events and happenings in our world...

and about how God orchestrates them together in an a way that is clever and ingenious almost beyond our comprehension, in order to achieve his purposes and plans.

It's the real life example to Paul's statement in Romans 8:28.

A story which illustrates how "*God works through **all things***" – clashes between world empires, diverting the flow of a river, the position of the stars in the sky and so on... "*for the good of those who love him and have been called according to his purpose.*"

And friends this story reveals three layers about God and his plans and purposes that we need to discover as well.

The first layer of meaning is that Yahweh is Holy.

This is a story about a mortal king, a human who is time bound, finite, limited, created... who takes that which is set apart to serve the Creator of all things; who is immortal, uncreated, all powerful, all knowing, who created time itself –

and this puny mortal takes what is God's and uses it to proclaim that statues of gold and silver and wood are in fact gods – creators, providers, sustainers, protectors...

He's proclaiming that the creation is the creator; that these good things are in fact god things – and friends this tramples all over the Holiness of Yahweh and Yahweh won't stand for it – He is Holy, that is who God is... we need to know that and respect that.

The second layer is that we should learn from what others have experienced in their relationship with Yahweh.

Daniel rebukes Belshazzar because he knew what Yahweh had done to teach Nebuchadnezzar that the Most High God is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and sets over them anyone he wishes, and yet Belshazzar refused to acknowledge this for himself and worshiped idols.

And Daniel and his Jewish people were living in Babylon because they too were being humbled... they too were

experiencing the consequences of their covenant unfaithfulness and idol worship.

And Friends we have these stories of God's people, the stories of Daniel and many other stories available to us in the scriptures so that we can learn from them...

"These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come." (1 Corinthians 10:11)

And here's the third layer friends – what we ultimately need to learn from these stories is not simply that we should be more obedient, or honest, or truthful, or faithful, or trusting... as true as those things might be.

The ultimate message of these stories is that in spite of the disobedience, lies, and idolatry which our sinful nature produces, Yahweh's grace and mercy come through anyways.

Consider how through Israel's unfaithfulness and subsequent exile in Babylon, God used Daniel and his friends to reveal himself to King Nebuchadnezzar...

and so the King commanded that this God be praised by a people and among an empire who had never really known Him before – that is grace and mercy in spite of human failing...

Yes there are warnings - but at their deepest and most profound levels of meaning they are warnings about what happens to those who refuse to grab on to the mercy and grace that Yahweh extends to us.

And friends the ultimate message of the bible's stories about Yahweh's grace and mercy comes to its ultimate expression in the story of Jesus Christ.

And so friends my prayer and hope for each of you, and for the people who live around us in this community – based on this story in Daniel this morning – is this...

That we wouldn't just read God's writing and walk away confused and puzzled – but that we would be able to “READ” God's writing... and get the deepest meaning and message that the stories of the bible have for us.

And that our friends and family and neighbors wouldn't just hear what we say the bible is about, but that they would “HEAR” that deepest meaning and message as we speak about the forgiveness and mercy of Jesus Christ.

So we could begin to see God's hand for ourselves... and catch a glimpse of how the hand of God is at work guiding all things in our lives and working good out of them.

Things like motorbike accident, audits, health troubles, snowstorms, car troubles, and also the blessings and successes that we have been given –

And friends, if that's difficult, if it seems like simplistic thinking – remember the intricate complexity of the stories in Daniel, remember that at first glance we can't always see or

understand what the hand of God is working in our life... but with time, persistence and the help of the Holy Spirit – one day we will look back on our lives and see some of that ingenuity at work...

And one day friends – when our Lord returns we will be able to look back, not only on our lives, but the lives of other and the events that went on in the world around us, all of world history in fact and in complete amazement we will see how the Almighty God has truly worked through all things to bring about the New Heavens and New Earth...

One day friends – one day all things will be made new – that's a simple promise, but God's plan to bring that day about is anything but simple – its complex and confusing, clever and dumbfounding – but its real and its happening and we're a part of it – you can bank on it friends... because as they say "The writing is on the wall!" Amen.