

BIBLE STORIES BROUGHT TO LIFE

THE DANIEL SERIES · PART TWO

The Writing on the Wall

Weighed and Found Wanting

SCRIPTURE	WATCH FREE	FILM
Daniel 5:1-31	youtu.be/dwrmPL33TgM	About 10 minutes

Cover: a still from the film. Visuals in this series are AI-generated under the director's guidance.

A Companion Guide for Families, Groups & Students

Choose Your Track

One story, five ways in. Use one track or several. Each is complete on its own.

I **Family Study** — PAGE 3
For parents, grandparents, and kids at home. Watch together, hear the story, talk, play, and pray.
The story simply told · Questions for ages 4-7, 8-12, and teens · Activity · Memory verse · Prayer

II **Kids Ministry** — PAGE 5
For children's ministry teachers. A complete 45-60 minute lesson for grades K-5, with preschool notes.
Teacher prep · Story script · Game · Object lesson · Craft · Small groups · Take-home page for parents

III **Youth Ministry** — PAGE 9
For youth leaders. A 60-75 minute night for middle and high school students.
Hook · Leader talk · Discussion · Breakouts · Reflection · Weekly challenge · Hard questions

IV **Bible Study & Small Group** — PAGE 12
For adult small groups, classes, and Bible studies. A complete 45-60 minute session.
Leader prep · Opener · Watch · Discussion questions · Application · Prayer · Leader notes

V **Deep Dive** — PAGE 15
For teachers, preachers, and anyone who wants to dig deeper into the text.
History and culture · Structure · Commentary · Aramaic key words · Interpretive views · Christ · Further study

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Start by watching the film. Families can go straight to Track I and spread it over a few evenings. Children's and youth leaders will find ready-to-teach plans in Tracks II and III, including a take-home page for parents. Adult groups will find a complete session in Track IV, and Track V is for anyone preparing to teach or wanting to go deeper.

Above all, read the passage itself. The film and this guide are meant to send you back to Scripture, where God speaks.

WATCH THE FILM

youtu.be/dwrmPL33TgM
Free on YouTube · about 10 minutes

Scripture quotations are from the World English Bible (WEB), current edition as published at eBible.org (public domain); older WEB printings differ in a few words. Aramaic words are cited from the original text of Daniel. This guide is free to print, copy, and share for non-commercial ministry use. Bible Stories Brought to Life · youtube.com/@BSBTLFilms

TRACK ONE

Family Study

For parents, grandparents, and kids of every age. Watch together, read the story, talk, play, and pray.



"Belshazzar the king made a great feast to a thousand of his lords..." (Daniel 5:1, WEB). A still from the film.

The Story, Simply Told

Retold in simple words from Daniel 5. Words in quotation marks are paraphrased for children.

Many years after the fiery furnace, a new king ruled Babylon. His name was Belshazzar. One night he threw a huge party for a thousand of his important leaders.

While everyone was drinking wine, Belshazzar had an idea. He sent for the gold and silver cups that had been taken long ago from God's temple in Jerusalem. These cups were special. They belonged to God and were made for worshiping Him. But Belshazzar and his guests drank from them and praised idols of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone.

Suddenly, the fingers of a hand appeared and began to write on the wall of the palace, near the lamp. The king turned pale. His knees knocked together. He shouted for his wise men: whoever can read this writing will be dressed in purple, wear a gold chain, and become the third most powerful ruler in the kingdom! But none of them could read it.

Then the queen came in. She remembered a man named Daniel, who had served King Nebuchadnezzar years before, a man God had given great wisdom. So Daniel, now an old man, was brought in.

Daniel said, "Keep your gifts. But I will read the writing." First he reminded Belshazzar how God had humbled proud King Nebuchadnezzar until he honored God. "You knew all this," Daniel said, "but you have not humbled your heart." Then he read the words: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN. They meant that God had counted the days of Belshazzar's kingdom and brought it to an end, that the king had been weighed on God's scales and found too light, and that his kingdom would be given to the Medes and Persians.

That very night, Belshazzar was killed, and Darius the Mede received the kingdom.

Belshazzar knew the story. But knowing was not enough. He never humbled his heart.

Talk Together

AGES 4-7

1. Whose special cups did the king use at his party?
2. What appeared on the wall? How did the king feel?
3. Who explained the writing to the king?

AGES 8-12

1. Why was it wrong for the king to use God's cups to praise idols?
2. What does "weighed and found wanting" mean?
3. Pride means acting like we don't need God. What does being humble look like at school or at home?

TEENS

1. Belshazzar knew the truth about God but ignored it. Why is that so easy to do?
2. Daniel told a king the truth respectfully and turned down his reward. Where do you need that kind of courage?
3. Where would you like Jesus to help you grow in humility or honesty?

Try This Together

Secret Writing 10 MINUTES A parent writes **GOD GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE** in white crayon on white paper. Kids paint over it with watercolors to reveal the message. Talk about how Daniel, with wisdom from God, explained what the king's wise men could not.

The Hanger Scale 5 MINUTES Tie a paper cup securely to each end of a clothes hanger with string, and hold it low yourself. Put a small closed water bottle in one cup and a paper "crown" in the other. Ask: *Does God weigh our stuff, or our hearts?* Read 1 Samuel 16:7 together.

MEMORY VERSE

"God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

JAMES 4:6, WEB

Younger children: learn "...gives grace to the humble."

A FAMILY PRAYER

Dear God, every breath we take is a gift from You. Forgive us when we act proud, as if we don't need You. Help us to be humble, to say sorry quickly, and to give You thanks. Thank You for Jesus, who humbled Himself for us, so that we can be forgiven and made right with You. In His name we pray, amen.

TRACK TWO

Kids Ministry

A complete 45-60 minute lesson for elementary classes (about grades K-5), with notes for preschool and a take-home page for parents.

THE BIG IDEA

God sees my heart, and He gives grace to the humble.

LESSON PLAN

	45 MIN	60 MIN
Welcome and opening game	8	10
Bible story (told or film)	10	12
Object lesson	5	6
Craft	10	15
Small groups	7	10
Memory verse	3	4
Prayer and goodbye	2	3

THE STORY IN PLAIN WORDS

Years after the fiery furnace, King Belshazzar threw a huge party. He used the gold and silver cups taken from God's temple in Jerusalem, and he and his guests praised idols instead of God. Suddenly a hand appeared and wrote on the wall. No one could read it until Daniel, now an old man, explained it. God had weighed the king's heart and found it too light, because the king knew how God had humbled Nebuchadnezzar but would not humble himself. That night his kingdom ended.

READ BEFORE CLASS

Daniel 5, the whole chapter, and Daniel 4:34-37 (the earlier king who humbled himself). If you will show the film, watch it all the way through first.

What Kids May Ask

The drinking. The Bible says the king and his guests drank wine at the party (5:1-4). With younger kids, say *the king was having a big, wild party and showing off.* With older kids you can add: *They drank wine and praised idols, using God's special cups.* The Bible doesn't say how much they drank, and there's no need to say more.

"Was the hand scary?" It was surprising, and the king was very afraid (5:6). The Bible doesn't tell us how Daniel felt, but he trusted God and told the truth. Say: *God was in control, and He was giving the king a message.*

"What happened to the king?" The Bible says he was killed that night (5:30). Say it once, simply: *That night the king died, and his kingdom was given to someone else.* Don't add details. With preschoolers, say *that night his kingdom ended.*

"Why were the cups such a big deal?" They were special cups made for worshiping God. The king used them to praise idols instead of honoring God. Treating holy things like toys showed what was in his heart.

"Does God weigh me?" Reassure kids: God sees our hearts, and He loves to give grace to anyone who comes to Him humbly. Jesus makes us right with God. This story is a warning about pride, not a reason to be afraid.

Telling the Story

YOU'LL NEED a paper crown, a plastic cup wrapped in foil, a large sheet of paper taped to the wall, and a marker. *SAY lines are a dramatized paraphrase for children; READ lines quote the WEB.*

DO Put on the crown and raise the foil cup.

SAY I am King Belshazzar! I'm having the biggest party in Babylon, with a thousand guests! Bring me the gold cups from God's temple. We'll use them to cheer for our idols!

DO Take off the crown. Speak in your own voice.

SAY Those cups were made for worshiping God. Using them that way was like saying, "I don't need God." And right then...

DO Slowly write MENE MENE TEKEL UPHARSIN on the paper on the wall.

SAY ...fingers of a hand appeared and wrote on the wall! The king's face turned pale and his knees knocked together. None of his wise men could read it. Then the queen remembered Daniel, a man who loved God.

SAY Daniel told the king the truth. Long ago, God had humbled proud King Nebuchadnezzar until he praised God. Belshazzar knew that story, but he stayed proud. The words meant that God had weighed the king, like on a scale, and he was too light. His time as king was over.

READ Daniel 5:22 aloud: "You, his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this..."

ASK What did the king do that showed he was acting proud? What does it mean to be humble?

USING THE FILM INSTEAD. The film runs about 10 minutes. For grades 3-5, show 0:50 to 8:12, the full story. For grades K-2, show 2:18 to 7:18 (from the hand on the wall through Daniel's reading). These times come from the video's YouTube chapter list. Always preview: the section from 7:18 ("In That Night") shows the king's death without violence on screen, but the narration says he "was slain." Some kids may find that unsettling.

Opening Game: Mystery Message

Before class, write **GOD SEES MY HEART** on cards, one letter per card. Make one set for each team and mix up each set. Teams, each with a helper, race to unscramble their letters. For K-2, use **GOD SEES ME** with a picture clue on each card. Every team finishes.

Wrap up: *Today a king gets a mystery message from God, written on a wall, and only one man can read it.*

Object Lesson: Big but Light

YOU'LL NEED a sturdy clothes hanger, string, two paper cups or small open boxes, a big pile of cotton balls or crumpled paper, and one small closed water bottle.

Tie a cup or small open box securely to each end of the hanger so it balances like a scale. An adult holds it, kept low, the whole time. Ask: *Which looks bigger: this huge pile of cotton balls or this one water bottle?* Put them in and let kids watch the cotton side rise. **Say:** *Belshazzar looked big: a crown, a palace, a thousand guests. But when God weighed his heart, it was too light. God doesn't measure how big we look. He looks at our hearts* (1 Samuel 16:7).

Craft: The Hand on the Wall

Kids trace their own hand on the paper "wall" and write **God gives grace to the humble** inside it. Older kids can write the words in white crayon and paint over them with watercolor to reveal a hidden message.

SUPPLIES (PER CHILD)

- Brown or tan construction paper
- A crayon or marker
- Rounded-tip scissors (grades 3-5, supervised)
- A glue stick
- Optional for grades 3-5: a white crayon and watercolors

Small Groups

GRADES K-2

1. What do you think the king's big party was like?
2. How do you think the king felt when he saw the hand writing on the wall?
3. Who explained the writing to the king?
4. What are some ways you can be humble, like saying sorry or letting someone else go first?

GRADES 3-5

1. Why was it wrong to use God's cups to praise idols?
2. Daniel said the king "knew all this" (5:22). Why is knowing about God not the same as listening to Him?
3. What does pride look like at school or at home?
4. Daniel turned down the king's gifts. Why do you think he did?
5. How does Jesus help us when we've been proud?

Memory Verse Practice

MEMORY VERSE

"God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

JAMES 4:6, WEB

Scale motions: on "proud," raise one hand high; on "humble," lower the other hand and bow your head. Say it slow, then fast, then in a whisper. K-2: learn "...gives grace to the humble."

Prayer

Invite kids to close their eyes and quietly tell God one time this week they acted proud. Then pray: *God, You see our hearts. We're sorry for the times we act like we don't need You. Thank You for giving grace to the humble, and for Jesus, who forgives us. Amen.*

CLASSROOM TIPS

- **Attention signal:** say "Weigh in!" and kids hold out both hands like a balance and go quiet.
- Mix ages on each game team so younger kids aren't left out.
- Scale items: only a small closed water bottle and crumpled paper. No coins, rocks, or small objects (choking hazards).
- **Safeguarding.** If a child or teen tells you about abuse, neglect, self-harm, harmful drinking or drug use at home, or anything else that makes you worried for their safety: stay calm, listen, and thank them for telling you. Don't promise to keep it secret, don't question them for details or investigate, and don't confront anyone involved. Write down what they said as soon as you can, and report it the same day to your church's designated safeguarding lead, following your church's safeguarding policy and any mandatory-reporting law that applies to you. If anyone is in immediate danger, stay with them and call emergency services. Telling a church safeguarding lead does not replace any report the law requires you to make directly to child-protection authorities or police.

FOR PRESCHOOL (AGES 3-5)

- Plan for 20-25 minutes: story, the scale, hand tracing, and prayer.
- Tell it as a *big party* and a *message from God*. Leave out the wine and the king's death.
- Questions: *What did the hand do? Who did God help to read it?*
- Practice "...gives grace to the humble" with the scale motions.

TAKE-HOME PAGE · FOR PARENTS

Today in Kids Ministry

The Writing on the Wall

DANIEL 5

WHAT WE LEARNED

At a proud king's party, a hand wrote a message on the wall. Daniel explained it: God had weighed King Belshazzar's heart and found it too light, because he knew about God but would not humble himself. **Big idea:** *God sees my heart, and He gives grace to the humble.*

TALK ON THE WAY HOME

1. What do you remember most about the writing on the wall?
2. What does being humble look like in our family?
3. When is it hard for you to say "I was wrong"?

MEMORY VERSE

"God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

JAMES 4:6, WEB

TRY THIS AT HOME

Make a hanger scale: tie a paper cup or small open box securely to each end of a clothes hanger, and hold it low. Put a pile of something light (cotton balls or crumpled paper) in one and a small closed water bottle in the other. Ask: *Does God weigh how big we look, or what's in our hearts?* Read 1 Samuel 16:7 together.

Watch the film together

Scan, or visit youtu.be/dwrmPL33TgM. Free on YouTube, about 10 minutes. Parents, please preview it first: the film shows the king's death, without graphic violence.

GO DEEPER AS A FAMILY

The **Family Study** track of this companion guide, on page 3, has the story in simple words, questions for ages 4-7, 8-12, and teens, a family activity, and a prayer.

PRAY TOGETHER

God, You see our hearts. Help us to be humble, to say sorry quickly, and to thank You every day. In Jesus' name, amen.

KIDS: DRAW THE HAND WRITING ON THE WALL

Bible Stories Brought to Life · Scripture from the World English Bible (public domain) · Free to copy for church and family use

TRACK THREE

YOUTH MINISTRY

A 60-75 minute youth night for middle and high school students: a hook, a talk, discussion, breakouts, and a challenge for the week.

THE BIG IDEA

Knowing about God is not the same as humbling your heart before Him, and God weighs the heart, not the highlight reel.

NIGHT PLAN

	60 MIN	75 MIN
Arrival and hook	9	11
Watch the film	10	10
Leader talk	15	18
Large-group discussion	8	10
Small-group breakouts	12	16
Reflection	4	6
Challenge and prayer	2	4

THE HOOK: GUESS THE WEIGHT

Bring a kitchen or luggage scale and five objects. Include things that *look* heavy but aren't (a big pillow, an inflated beach ball) and things that are heavier than they look (a hardback book, a full water bottle). Students rank the objects by weight, then you weigh each one. Ask: *What surprised you when we checked the real weights?*

Low-prep option: *Highlight vs. Real.* Students share one thing that looks great online but is very different in real life, like the perfect meal photo, the vacation, or the game-day pic.

LEADER TALK

1 **THE FLEX.** Belshazzar threw a party for "a thousand of his lords" (5:1). It was a show of power, wealth, and image. Then he called for the sacred cups from God's temple, not to honor God but as props for his own glory (5:2-4). Ask: *What do we use to make ourselves look big?* Followers, brands, grades, sports, even faith itself, when we wear it like a costume.

2 **"...THOUGH YOU KNEW ALL THIS..."** Read 5:22. The most sobering line in the chapter isn't the writing on the wall. It's Daniel's verdict. Belshazzar knew how God had humbled Nebuchadnezzar, and he ignored it. Many of us have heard the Bible stories for years. Familiarity can make us numb. Information is not transformation.

3 **WEIGHED.** "…you are weighed in the balances, and are found wanting." (5:27) The crowd weighs your image. God weighs your heart: "man looks at the outward appearance, but Yahweh looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). That's a warning, and it's also freedom. You don't have to perform for Him.

4 **PRIDE HAS CONSEQUENCES.** "Pride goes before destruction, and an arrogant spirit before a fall." (Proverbs 16:18) Pride says *I don't need anyone, including God.* It shows up in how we treat parents, teachers, teammates, and people online. Choices pile up, and so do consequences.

5 **TWO KINGS, TWO ENDINGS.** Nebuchadnezzar was proud too, but he humbled himself and was restored (4:34-37). Belshazzar refused. The difference wasn't how bad they were; it was whether they humbled their hearts. “God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” (James 4:6)

6 **THE ONE WHO STANDS IN OUR PLACE.** On our own, every one of us comes up short (Romans 3:23). The good news of the gospel, not a prediction in Daniel 5, is that Jesus stood in our place: “For him who knew no sin he made to be sin on our behalf, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Corinthians 5:21) Humility simply means coming to Him with empty hands.

DISCUSSION

MIDDLE SCHOOL

1. What did Belshazzar do that showed he didn't respect God?
2. The Bible doesn't say whether anyone challenged the king. What makes it hard to speak up when someone powerful does wrong?
3. What does pride look like in middle school? What does humility look like?
4. What's one way someone has shown you humility?

HIGH SCHOOL

1. Why is it possible to know a lot about God and still not be changed?
2. Where does our culture reward the “highlight reel” over character?
3. Daniel turned down the king's gifts (5:17) and told him a hard truth respectfully. When is telling the truth worth the cost?
4. What's the difference between feeling bad about being caught and real humility?

BREAKOUT GROUPS

1 Which choices this week showed humility? Where would you like God's help to respond differently next time?

2 Which is harder for you: admitting you're wrong, asking for help, or letting someone else get the credit?

3 What story about God do you *know* but haven't really let change you?

4 What's one humble step you'll take this week?

REFLECTION: TWO OPTIONS

Phones down. Hand each student an index card with a line down the middle, labeled *Image* and *Heart*. On the left, they write what they work hardest to look like. On the right, they write what they want God to find. Have them keep the card.

Phones out (no social media). Have students open their notes app and make two short lists, *Image* (what I work hardest to look like) and *Heart* (what I want God to find). Then they write one honest sentence to God, starting with *Search me…* (see Psalm 139:23-24).

THIS WEEK'S CHALLENGE

ONE HUMBLE STEP A DAY.

Each day this week: own a mistake, ask for help, or make sure someone else gets the credit. Next time your small group meets, share which one was hardest, if you want to. Anyone may pass.

LEADER NOTES ON HARD QUESTIONS

"WAS IT FAIR THAT HE DIED THAT SAME NIGHT?" The text stresses that Belshazzar knew what had happened to Nebuchadnezzar (5:22), and he chose to mock God openly. It doesn't tell us how many chances he had to repent. Scripture shows God as patient, "not wishing that anyone should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). Scripture often shows God's patience before His judgment. Remind students that this is a story about a king and an empire facing judgment, not a picture of how God treats a teenager who messes up.

"WHY DOES GOD LET PROUD OR EVIL PEOPLE GET AWAY WITH IT?" Sometimes it looks that way for a long time. Daniel 5 says they don't get away with it forever. God's patience is meant to lead people to repentance (Romans 2:4), and His justice is certain.

"IS DRINKING A SIN?" Christians hold different views on alcohol, and you should follow your church's teaching. All agree that Scripture warns against drunkenness: "Don't be drunken with wine, in which is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit…" (Ephesians 5:18). Laws about minors and alcohol differ by place; follow local law and your church's policies, and never pressure students to talk about their own or their family's drinking. Keep the focus of the night on pride.

"DID THIS REALLY HAPPEN?" Belshazzar was once unknown outside the Bible. Babylonian texts later showed that he was Nabonidus' son and ruled in Babylon in his father's place, which fits his offer of "third ruler" (5:16). Babylon fell to Cyrus' forces in 539 BC. The writing on the wall itself is not recorded outside Scripture. See the Deep Dive, page 15, for the details and sources.

SAFEGUARDING. If a child or teen tells you about abuse, neglect, self-harm, harmful drinking or drug use at home, or anything else that makes you worried for their safety: stay calm, listen, and thank them for telling you. Don't promise to keep it secret, don't question them for details or investigate, and don't confront anyone involved. Write down what they said as soon as you can, and report it the same day to your church's designated safeguarding lead, following your church's safeguarding policy and any mandatory-reporting law that applies to you. If anyone is in immediate danger, stay with them and call emergency services. Telling a church safeguarding lead does not replace any report the law requires you to make directly to child-protection authorities or police.

PRAYER

Give students a moment of silence to pray Psalm 139:23: "Search me, God, and know my heart." Then close: *Lord, You see past every image we build. Forgive our pride. Thank You that Jesus was found faithful in our place. Make us humble, honest, and grateful. Amen.*

TRACK FOUR

Bible Study & Small Group

A complete session for small groups, classes, and Bible studies, with leader preparation and notes. Plan on 45 to 60 minutes.

Leader Preparation

THE BIG IDEA

God weighs every heart. Belshazzar knew the truth about God but refused to humble himself. Yet God gives grace to the humble, and while we have breath, there is time to turn to Him.

> *"You, his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this, ... and you have not glorified the God in whose hand your breath is, and whose are all your ways."*
>
> DANIEL 5:22-23, WEB

BACKGROUND

- **Setting.** Babylon's last night as an imperial capital, which historians date to October 539 BC.
- **The king.** Babylonian records show Belshazzar ruling in Babylon for his father, King Nabonidus. That likely explains why he could offer only the *third* place in the kingdom (5:7, 16, 29).
- **The cups.** The vessels had been taken from God's temple in Jerusalem (Daniel 1:2; 5:2-3).
- **Daniel.** He had been in Babylon about 66 years, so he was likely in his eighties *(an estimate; the Bible gives no age)*.
- **The story he knew.** Daniel 4: God humbled Nebuchadnezzar and restored him.

SESSION PLAN

	45 MIN	60 MIN
Welcome and opener	5	8
Watch the film	11	11
Read Daniel 5:17-31	5	5
Discussion (choose 4-5)	16	24
Application and prayer	8	12

BEFORE YOU MEET

Read Daniel 4 and 5. Chapter 5 depends on chapter 4. Watch the film; the king's death is not shown on screen. Read the leader notes on page 14.

The Session

1 **Open.** Have you ever known exactly what you *should* do and still not done it? What got in the way?

2 **Watch.** Play *The Writing on the Wall* (youtu.be/dwrmPL33TgM, about 10 minutes). Ask the group to notice what Belshazzar already knew about God.

3 **Read.** Read Daniel 5:17-31 aloud together.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What image or moment from the film stayed with you?
2. Belshazzar used holy things for a party and praised idols with them (5:2-4). What does this teach us about approaching God with reverence today?
3. The king had power, wealth, and wise men, yet none of it could help him (5:6-9). Why not?
4. Daniel turned down the gifts but still told the truth (5:17). What can we learn from the way he spoke to a powerful man?
5. Daniel said, "you knew all this" (5:22). Why is knowing about God not the same as humbling ourselves before Him?
6. "...the God in whose hand your breath is..." (5:23). How would living with that truth change an ordinary day?
7. Read 5:27, Proverbs 21:2, and 1 Samuel 16:7. What do these passages show about what God sees in people?
8. Nebuchadnezzar humbled himself and was restored (4:34-37). Belshazzar did not. What does this tell us about God's heart toward the humble (James 4:6)?

APPLICATION

- **Be honest.** Is there pride you already know about, as Belshazzar did, that you have not laid down?
- **Turn today.** Don't wait for a hand on the wall. Take one step of humility this week: confess, apologize, give thanks, or ask for help.
- **Remember the breath.** Each morning this week, before you check your phone, thank God for the breath in your lungs (5:23).

PRAYER

Begin with a minute of silence so each person can bring any pride before God. Then thank Him that He gives grace to the humble, and that in Jesus no one who turns to Him is turned away (John 6:37).

Leader Notes on the Questions

Q2, THE VESSELS. Their history spans the whole exile. Nebuchadnezzar took them (Daniel 1:2; 2 Chronicles 36:7), Belshazzar profaned them, and later Cyrus sent them back to Jerusalem (Ezra 1:7-11). God kept track of His temple's cups through it all.

Q3, WHY THE KING WAS HELPLESS. Belshazzar's "wise men" were Babylon's experts in signs and omens, but the writing came from the God they did not know. Compare Daniel 2:27-28, where Daniel says only "a God in heaven who reveals secrets" can do this.

Q5, KNOWING AND HUMBLING. This is the heart of the chapter. Belshazzar's sin wasn't ignorance (5:22). Compare James 2:19 and Luke 12:47-48. Greater knowledge brings greater responsibility.

Q8, THE CONTRAST. Daniel 4 ends with a proud king lifting his eyes to heaven and being restored (4:34-37). Daniel 5 ends with a proud king who would not and was slain. The point isn't that God is harsh, but that God opposes the proud and gives grace to the humble.

IF SOMEONE ASKS, "DID BELSHAZZAR HAVE A CHANCE TO REPENT?" The text doesn't say whether he could have been spared that night, and it's wise not to speculate. What the text does stress is that he had known the truth for a long time (5:22). For us, Scripture says "now is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:2).

SENSITIVE CONTENT. The chapter includes drinking and a death. For mixed-age groups, keep the focus on pride and humility.

TRACK FIVE

Deep Dive

A closer study of Daniel 5 for teachers, preachers, and anyone who wants to dig in: history, language, structure, interpretation, and Christ.

How to read this section. Statements of fact are drawn from the biblical text or from well-established historical sources. Where scholars disagree, the major views held by orthodox Christian interpreters are set side by side and labeled. Scripture is quoted from the World English Bible (WEB). Aramaic words are given in Hebrew script with a simple transliteration.

1. Historical and Cultural Background

BABYLON'S LAST KING, AND HIS SON

After Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 BC, Babylon had three short-lived kings before Nabonidus took the throne in 556 BC. Nabonidus was not Nebuchadnezzar's son. For long periods he lived far from Babylon at the oasis of Tema (Tayma) in Arabia. For his seventh, ninth, tenth, and eleventh years, the Nabonidus Chronicle records that the king was in Tayma "while the prince, his officers, (and) his army (were) in Akkad," and that the New Year (Akitu) festival did not take place.[1]

That prince was Belshazzar (Akkadian *Bēl-šar-uṣur*, "Bel, protect the king"). For centuries he was unknown outside the Bible, and nineteenth-century critics doubted he had existed. Then cuneiform texts turned up. A cylinder from Ur records Nabonidus praying for "Belshazzar, the eldest son, my offspring." A text known as the Verse Account says Nabonidus "entrusted the kingship" to him. Legal documents from the period even record oaths sworn by both Nabonidus and Belshazzar.[2] This fits Daniel 5 closely. Belshazzar functioned as king in Babylon, yet he was second to his father, which may explain why the honor he offered was to be "the third ruler in the kingdom" (5:7, 16, 29): the two highest places were already filled. *(A widely held explanation.)*

"NEBUCHADNEZZAR HIS FATHER"

Daniel 5 repeatedly calls Nebuchadnezzar Belshazzar's "father" (5:2, 11, 13, 18). Babylonian sources make Nabonidus his father. In Semitic usage, "father" (Aramaic *'ab*) can mean ancestor or predecessor as well as parent. Some suggest a family connection through Belshazzar's mother, but that is unproven. *(The relationship is a matter of interpretation; the text's point is that Belshazzar stood in Nebuchadnezzar's line as king and knew his story.)*

WHERE DANIEL 5 FALLS IN TIME

Daniel 7 and 8 are dated to "the first year" and "the third year" of Belshazzar (7:1; 8:1), so those visions come before the events of chapter 5, even though they appear later in the book. Daniel had been taken to Babylon around 605 BC (1:1), so by 539 BC he had been in exile about 66 years. If he was a teenager when taken, he was in his eighties. *(This is an estimate; the Bible gives no age.)*

THE FALL OF BABYLON

The Nabonidus Chronicle reports that Cyrus defeated the Babylonian army at Opis, that Sippar "was captured without a battle," and that on the sixteenth day of the month Tashritu (in October 539 BC) "Ugbaru, governor of Gutium, and the army of Cyrus, without battle... entered Babylon." Cyrus himself entered the city about two weeks later.[1] Two Greek historians writing later, Herodotus (*Histories* 1.191) and Xenophon (*Cyropaedia* 7.5), say the Persians lowered the Euphrates and entered along the riverbed while the city was celebrating a festival. Their accounts are later and differ in details. They fit Daniel's picture of a feast on the night the kingdom fell, but they don't independently confirm Belshazzar's banquet or the writing on the wall. Babylonian sources do not record Belshazzar's death. Daniel 5:30 is our only explicit statement of it.

THE LANGUAGE OF THE CHAPTER

Like Daniel 3, this chapter belongs to the Aramaic section of the book (2:4b-7:28). Aramaic was the international language of the empire, and fittingly, the writing on the wall itself is in Aramaic.

2. Literary Structure

DANIEL 5 WITHIN DANIEL 2-7

In the mirror pattern of the Aramaic chapters (see Adrien Lenglet's 1972 study),[3] Daniel 5 is paired with Daniel 4:

A	DANIEL 2	Four kingdoms, and the kingdom of God
B	DANIEL 3	Faithful servants delivered from the furnace
C	DANIEL 4	A proud king humbled, and restored
C′	DANIEL 5	**A proud king weighed, and judged**
B′	DANIEL 6	A faithful servant delivered from the lions
A′	DANIEL 7	Four kingdoms, and the kingdom of God

The pairing is the key to the chapter. Daniel himself sets the two kings side by side (5:18-23). Both are proud and both are confronted, but one humbles himself and is restored, and the other doesn't and is removed.

THE SHAPE OF CHAPTER 5

5:1-4	The feast and the sacrilege
5:5-9	The hand, the writing, and the helpless wise men
5:10-12	The queen remembers Daniel
5:13-16	The king's offer
5:17-24	Daniel's sermon: the story Belshazzar knew
5:25-28	The writing read and interpreted
5:29-31	Daniel honored; that night the king is slain

3. Commentary

5:1-4, THE FEAST AND THE SACRILEGE. A banquet for a thousand lords was a display of royal confidence. The phrase "while he tasted the wine" (5:2) places the order during the feast's wine-drinking; the text does not say whether he was intoxicated. The gold and silver vessels from the Jerusalem temple (1:2) had been placed in "the treasure house of his god" (1:2), probably as trophies of victory. Bringing them out to drink from while praising "the gods of gold, and of silver, of bronze, of iron, of wood, and of stone" (5:4) was an act of contempt toward Israel's God, probably meant to say that Babylon's gods had defeated Him. *(An interpretation; the text doesn't record the revelers' reasoning.)* Daniel later names it plainly: "...have lifted up yourself against the Lord of heaven..." (5:23).

5:5-9, THE HAND AND THE WRITING. "In the same hour" the fingers of a man's hand write on the plaster "near the lamp stand" (5:5). The king's reaction is described physically: his face changed, his thoughts troubled him, "the joints of his thighs were loosened," and his knees struck one against another (5:6). He summons enchanters, Chaldeans, and soothsayers and offers purple (the royal color), a gold chain, and the third place in the kingdom (5:7). But "they could not read the writing" (5:8). Babylon's wisdom fails, as it did in Daniel 2 and 4.

5:10-12, THE QUEEN. The queen enters the banquet hall from outside, which suggests she is not one of the wives already present (5:2-3). Many commentators conclude she was the queen mother. *(Her identity is not given.)* She speaks with authority and remembers what the king has forgotten or ignored. She describes Daniel as one "in whom is the spirit of the holy gods" (5:11), the same phrase Nebuchadnezzar used (4:8-9), and she recalls his promotion under Nebuchadnezzar.

5:13-16, THE KING'S OFFER. Belshazzar speaks of Daniel by reputation: "I have heard of you..." (5:14, 16). His question, "Are you that Daniel of the children of the captivity of Judah...?" (5:13), may carry a note of condescension. *(An interpretation.)* He repeats the offer of purple, gold, and power.

5:17-24, DANIEL'S SERMON. Daniel declines the gifts (5:17), not out of rudeness but to make clear he cannot be bought. Afterward Belshazzar orders the honors given anyway (5:29), when they can no longer affect Daniel's message. Before he reads the writing, he preaches. He reminds Belshazzar that "the Most High God" gave Nebuchadnezzar his kingdom (5:18), that Nebuchadnezzar's pride brought him down "until he knew that the Most High God rules in the kingdom of men" (5:21), and then he makes the charge: "You, his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this..." (5:22). The indictment has three parts: he exalted himself against the Lord of heaven, he profaned God's vessels, and he praised lifeless idols while not glorifying "the God in whose hand your breath is, and whose are all your ways" (5:23).

5:25-28, THE WRITING READ. "MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN" (5:25). Daniel interprets three words as verbs describing what God has done (5:26-28). *Mene*: God has counted (or numbered) your kingdom and brought it to an end. *Tekel*: you are weighed in the balances and found wanting. *Peres*: your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians. In 5:28 Daniel uses the singular *pĕrēs*, and it echoes *pārās*, "Persia." On what the words meant on their own, see section 5.

5:29-31, THAT NIGHT. Belshazzar keeps his word, and Daniel is clothed in purple and proclaimed third ruler (5:29). The text adds no comment, only the next sentence: "In that night Belshazzar the Chaldean King was slain." (5:30) The kingdom that had seemed eternal falls in a single night, and "Darius the Mede received the kingdom..." (5:31). The honors Daniel received lasted only hours, but Daniel himself would prosper under the new regime (6:1-3, 28).

4. Key Words

WORD	TRANSLITERATION	MEANING AND USE
כְּתָבָא	*kĕtābā'*	"the writing" (5:7-8, 15-17, 24-25)
מְנֵא	*mĕnē'*	Related to the verb *mĕnâ*, "to count, number." Also a known word for the weight called a *mina*.
תְּקֵל	*tĕqēl*	Related to the verb *tĕqal*, "to weigh." Also the Aramaic form of *shekel*, a smaller weight.
פְּרֵס / וּפַרְסִין	*pĕrēs / ûparsîn*	Related to *pĕras*, "to divide." Also a word for a half-weight (probably a half-mina). *ûparsîn* = "and" + plural. A wordplay on *pārās*, "Persia" (5:28).
מֹאזְנָיָא	*mō'zanyā'*	"the balances, scales" (5:27)
חַסִיר	*ḥassîr*	"lacking, deficient," "found wanting" (5:27)
נִשְׁמְתָךְ	*nišmĕtāk*	"your breath" (5:23). Compare Hebrew *nĕšāmâ*, the breath of life God breathed into Adam (Genesis 2:7).
הַשְׁפֵּלְתְּ	*hašpēlt*	"you have humbled" (from *šĕpal*, "to be low"). In 5:22 it is negated: "you have not humbled your heart." The same root describes God humbling Nebuchadnezzar (4:37; 5:19).

5. Interpretive Questions

WHAT DID MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN MEAN?

In 1886 the French scholar Charles Clermont-Ganneau proposed that the words are names of weights: a *mina*, a *shekel*, and *parsin*, half-weights.[4] Aramaic documents found since then have confirmed that these were common weight terms, and this background is now widely accepted.[5] On this reading, the wise men may have been able to sound out the words but could not see what a list of weights meant. Daniel, by God's wisdom, reads them as verbs from the same roots: counted, weighed, divided.

- **Why is *mene* written twice?** Some take the first *mene* as a verb ("it has been counted") introducing the list. Others see emphasis or the certainty of the decree (compare the doubling in Genesis 41:32). The text does not explain it.
- **Do the weights stand for particular kings?** Some interpreters, ancient and modern, have matched the weights to Babylon's kings. These proposals are speculative.

WHY COULDN'T THE WISE MEN READ IT?

The text says only that they "could not read the writing" or interpret it (5:8). Suggestions include: the words were written in consonants only and could be read several ways, the script was unfamiliar, or God withheld understanding from them. *(All are interpretations.)* The narrative's point is clear either way. Daniel succeeds where Babylon's experts fail, and the book credits such wisdom to God (compare 2:27-28).

WHO WAS DARIUS THE MEDE? (5:31)

No "Darius the Mede" appears by that name in surviving extra-biblical sources, and conservative scholars have proposed several identifications:

- **Gubaru,** a governor under Cyrus (argued by John C. Whitcomb, *Darius the Mede*, 1959). Whitcomb distinguished him from Ugbaru, the general the Nabonidus Chronicle says entered Babylon. How the name forms and individuals relate is still debated.
- **Cyrus himself,** reading Daniel 6:28 as "Darius, that is, Cyrus the Persian" (argued by D. J. Wiseman, 1965).
- **Cyaxares II,** a Median ruler who appears in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* (his existence is debated).

> Many critical scholars instead regard Darius the Mede as a literary figure. The text itself simply records that he "received the kingdom" (5:31), echoing the sovereignty theme: God gives kingdoms to whomever He will (5:21).

6. Cross-References

- **Daniel 4**: the companion chapter. Read it first.
- **Proverbs 16:18**: "Pride goes before destruction, and an arrogant spirit before a fall." (WEB)
- **Proverbs 21:2; 1 Samuel 16:7**: God weighs hearts, not appearances.
- **Psalm 62:9**: in the balances, all people are "lighter than a breath."
- **Isaiah 21:9**: "Fallen, fallen is Babylon; and all the engraved images of her gods are broken to the ground." (WEB)
- **Jeremiah 51:39, 57**: God's word against Babylon pictures her princes and wise men made drunk at a feast, falling into "a perpetual sleep".
- **Ezra 1:7-11**: Cyrus returns the temple vessels to Jerusalem.
- **Luke 12:16-21**: "tonight your soul is required of you."
- **Luke 18:9-14**: the proud Pharisee and the humble tax collector.
- **Revelation 18:10**: the fall of "Babylon, the strong city!" in "one hour."

7. How Daniel 5 Points to Christ

Weighed and found wanting, all of us. Belshazzar's verdict invites a wider Christian reflection: "...all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God..." (Romans 3:23, WEB). *(A theological application; Daniel 5 itself pronounces judgment on one king.)* Daniel 5 pushes us to ask how anyone could pass such a weighing.

The King who humbled Himself. Belshazzar exalted himself against the Lord of heaven. Jesus, "existing in the form of God," emptied Himself and "humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, yes, the death of the cross" (Philippians 2:6-8, WEB). In Him the scales are answered: "him who knew no sin he made to be sin on our behalf, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21, WEB).

Two feasts, two cups. (A theological reflection, not a claim that the text predicts it.) Belshazzar lifted the temple's cups in pride and drank to idols. On the night He was betrayed, Jesus took a cup and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you." (Luke 22:20, WEB) One feast ended in judgment that very night. The other offers mercy to everyone who humbly receives it.

The God in whose hand our breath is. Daniel's words to Belshazzar are a warning and an invitation. The same God who numbers kingdoms holds every breath. While we have breath, the call stands: "Behold, now is the acceptable time. Behold, now is the day of salvation." (2 Corinthians 6:2, WEB)

8. For Further Study

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NOTES

1. Nabonidus Chronicle (ABC 7), col. ii, lines 5, 10, 19, 23, and col. iii, lines 12-18. Translation from Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*, as published at Livius.org.
2. These documents are summarized in Millard, "Daniel and Belshazzar in History," *BAR* 11:3 (1985). Nabonidus's regnal dates are 556-539 BC (some sources give 555).
3. Lenglet, *Biblica* 53 (1972): 169-90; see also J. Paul Tanner, "The Literary Structure of the Book of Daniel," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 160 (2003).
4. Ch. Clermont-Ganneau, *Journal asiatique*, 8th series, vol. 8 (1886), as summarized in the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, "Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin."
5. Some scholars identify *peres* as a half-shekel instead of a half-mina. If *peres* means half a mina, it is heavier than a shekel; if half a shekel, lighter. The precise weight is debated.

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