

# *A Word for the Winners*

## WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

4<sup>th</sup> in a six-part series

April 23 & 24, 2016

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*Daniel 5:13–30 (CEB)*

[Amidst a drunken feast hosted by the king, a hand appears and writes a cryptic message on the wall. When the king's advisors prove unable to read the message, the king sends for Daniel.]

<sup>13</sup> So Daniel was brought before the king. The king said to him, “So you are Daniel, the Daniel from the exiles that my father the king brought from Judah? <sup>14</sup> I have heard that the breath of the gods is in you and that you possess illumination, insight, and extraordinary wisdom. <sup>15</sup> Now, the sages and the dream interpreters were brought before me to read this writing and interpret it for me, but they couldn’t explain its meaning. <sup>16</sup> But I’ve heard that you can explain meanings and solve mysteries. So if you can read this writing and interpret it for me, you will wear royal robes, have a gold chain around your neck, and will rule the kingdom as third in command.”

<sup>17</sup> Daniel answered the king: “Keep your gifts. Give the rewards to someone else. But I will still read the writing to the king and interpret it for him. <sup>18</sup> Listen, Your Majesty: The Most High God gave kingship, power, glory, and majesty to your father Nebuchadnezzar. <sup>19</sup> Because of the power God gave Nebuchadnezzar, all peoples, nations, and languages were terrified of him. He did whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted: killing or sparing, exalting or humbling. <sup>20</sup> But when he became arrogant, acting in stubborn pride, he was pulled off his royal throne and the glory was taken from him. <sup>21</sup> He was driven away from other humans, and his mind became like an animal’s. He lived with wild donkeys, he ate grass like cattle, and dew from heaven washed his body until he realized that the Most High God dominates human kingship and sets over it anyone he wants.

<sup>22</sup> “But you who are his son, Belshazzar, you haven’t submitted, even though you’ve known all this. <sup>23</sup> Instead, you’ve set yourself up against the Lord of heaven! The equipment of God’s house was brought to you; and you, your princes, your consorts, and your secondary wives drank wine out of it, all the while praising the gods of silver, gold, bronze, iron, wood, and stone—gods who can’t see, hear, or know anything. But you didn’t glorify the true God who holds your very breath in his hand and who owns every road you take.

<sup>24</sup> “That’s why this hand was sent from God and why this message was written down.

<sup>25</sup> This is what was written down:

MENE, MENE, TEKEL, and PARSIN.

<sup>26</sup> “This is the meaning of the word MENE: God has numbered the days of your rule. It’s over! <sup>27</sup> TEKEL means that you’ve been weighed on the scales, and you don’t measure up.

<sup>28</sup> PERES means your kingship is divided and given to the Medes and the Persians.”

<sup>29</sup> Then Belshazzar commanded that Daniel be dressed in a purple robe, have a gold chain around his neck, and be officially appointed as third in command in the kingdom.

<sup>30</sup> That very same night, Belshazzar the Chaldean king was killed.

*America loves a winner. But what sort of winner?*

What makes a good winner? An honorable victor? Does a good winner humiliate the vanquished, disrespect the conquered? Whether it is a spelling bee, a soccer field, or a shooting war, the question is the same. How will we treat those whom we have defeated?

*Belshazzar’s feast*

Nebuchadnezzar has died and his son, Belshazzar, has taken the throne.<sup>1</sup> One day, he decided to throw a huge party, a banquet for thousands. When the day of the party came, the king was very pleased with himself and as the evening wore on and more wine was drunk, the king became even more pleased with himself. When he was quite drunk, he ordered that attendants go and get the various serving bowls, cups, and utensils that had

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<sup>1</sup> Babylonian documents from the time say that Nebuchadnezzar was succeeded by his son, Nabonidus. Belshazzar was the son of Nabonidus. He did serve as regent during ten years that his father was absent from the kingdom. The Aramaic term translated “son” could also be translated “grandson.”

been taken from the Jews' temple in Jerusalem. The partygoers would drink and feast from the gold and silver that belonged to the god of the Jews. What great fun! To the victor goes the spoils!

So the guests used the sacred vessels. And they drank a lot of wine. And, as they raised the sacred vessels, they praised the gods of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone.

Just then, a hand appeared and began to write on the wall in a space illuminated by a nearby lamp. The king watched as the hand wrote. His "face turned pale and his thoughts terrified him. His limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together" (v. 6, NRSV). In his terror, the king called out for all his diviners, magicians, and assorted wise men to come running and read the handwriting on the wall. And they did, but it was for naught. No one could make sense of what the hand had written.

Just then the queen came into the room, having overheard what was happening. She reminded the king of a certain man in the kingdom who had been helpful in similar situations in the past – Daniel. So Daniel was summoned to the king's presence.

When he arrives, the king offers him riches and power if only Daniel can tell Belshazzar what the hand wrote. Daniel, of course, has no interest in riches or wealth, but he will, nonetheless, read it for the king.

But first, Daniel will confront the king; he will speak truth to this powerful king. The king's father had a hard heart and had everything stripped from him, forced to wander around as

### Why can't the handwriting be read?



"One of the most marvelous illustrations in Western art of a scene from the Book of Daniel is Rembrandt's 1639 depiction of Belshazzar's feast. This painting, done when Rembrandt was thirty-three years old, shows a splendid feast in which the vessels stolen from the temple in Jerusalem—looking rather more baroque than Persian—are being used. The morbid hand is writing on the wall, and Belshazzar has jumped up from his seat, upsetting a beaker of wine. Terror is written on his face. For our purposes, however, the matter of keenest interest is the solution that Rembrandt offers for the exegetical problem of why no one could read the inscription. The hand has written a cryptogram, with the Aramaic inscribed from top to bottom beginning in the right hand column, rather than from right to left. The notion that the inscription was written in some kind of puzzle form was known already in rabbinic tradition and had been given to Rembrandt by his friend in the Amsterdam Jewish community, Manasseh ben Israel."<sup>1</sup>

a wild beast. But he learned that God was sovereign over all, even the Babylonian kings. Belshazzar, however, had not learned that lesson for himself. Rather, Daniel told him, “You’ve set yourself up against the Lord of heaven! The equipment of God’s house was brought to you; and you, your princes, your consorts, and your secondary wives drank wine out of it, all the while praising the gods of silver, gold, bronze, iron, wood, and stone—gods who can’t see, hear, or know anything. But you didn’t glorify the true God who holds your very breath in his hand and who owns every road you take” (v. 23).

And then Daniel gave the arrogant king the bad news. The words written on the wall spelled out Belshazzar’s doom. He had been weighed on the scales of God’s justice and been found wanting. His kingdom would be stripped from him. Despite the bad news, the king gave Daniel all that he had promised him.

And that very night, Belshazzar was killed and, later, his kingdom overrun. The conqueror became the conquered.

*What does it mean?*

Upon the first reading the story seems straightforward. From the sacrilege with the sacred vessels to the message on the wall, the message seems clear. Honor God. Acknowledge and embrace the Lord God as the true and everlasting sovereign. Those seem to be the main points. But are they really? Perhaps the key lies in knowing a bit more about the book’s writing.

The book of Daniel tells the story of Jews exiled to Babylon nearly 600 years before Jesus. But the book was put into its final form and portions were added during a time of great Jewish persecution a bit more than 160 years before Jesus. At that time, the Jewish lands were under the control of a tyrant named Antiochus Epiphanes IV, the latest in the line of Syrian rulers who succeeded Alexander Great. Antiochus was disgusted by the Jews and tried to break them. He outlawed circumcision, which, if obeyed, would put an end to the distinctly Jewish people. He slaughtered thousands and erected in the Jerusalem temple a giant statue of either himself or Zeus. We’re not sure which; both would be unspeakable abominations. The devastation wrought by Antiochus was so vast that it triggered the Maccabean rebellion, the success of which Hanukkah celebrates every year.

In this context, some skilled Jewish writer took the stories and writings of Daniel and shaped them to urge the people to remain faithful even in the face of Antiochus’ threats and edicts. So, W.S. Towner writes in his commentary on Daniel:

Belshazzar’s destruction is itself the message. One can perhaps see this as a sermon to a Jewish community which confronts a similarly insolently sacrilegious monarch in the person of Antiochus IV Epiphanes—a sermon which contains within it the glad news that such insolence will ultimately be brought down by the sovereign power of the God of Israel. Note that there is no notion here that insolence brings about its own automatic reward and that inevitably it will be brought down by the weight of its own sinfulness. It is God who destroys Belshazzar, not some automatic principle. Furthermore, he is brought down in a direct encounter with God following his challenge to God in the sacrilegious use of the devoted things. This suggests that God’s decree was not written from the beginning of the ages but was rather issued in response to Belshazzar’s immediate activity. Things could have gone another way for him, as they did for his “father” Nebuchadnezzar. The determinism of the apocalyptic ideology is not as all-pervasive within the Book of Daniel as might at first appear to be the case.

God will not fail to exercise his sovereignty over a sovereign who scoffs at God’s power and makes light of the sacred things. God sends his agents to make known the truth of his sovereignty and to reveal the lifeless gods for what they are. This is the faith of the writer. It may be the only hope of those mocked and oppressed by the king.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Towner, W. S. (1984). *Daniel* (pp. 77–78). Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press.

There is another message from this story, especially because we live in a culture that so values winning. What sort of winner are we? Belshazzar and his princes never even stopped to consider their treatment of the vanquished, abusing objects sacred and revered by the Jews, these people whom the Babylonians had yanked out of their lives and sent a thousand miles from home, far from their loved ones.

Is this how we or anyone should treat those whom we have vanquished? General George Marshall taught the world some very valuable lessons after the end of the Second World War. His treatment of the conquered stands in stark contrast to the decisions made by the victors in 1918.

Mel Lawrenz offers some criteria by which we can know if we are being “worthy winners.”<sup>3</sup> Good reminders in our present time.

1. “Good winners are generous.”
2. “Good winners have gratitude. They view the ‘win’ as a gift that would not have been possible without the people in their past getting them to this place.”
3. “Good winners give glory to God. Every human accomplishment you can think of points to that higher intelligence, that master designer, who is God. The evidence of God’s existence abounds—and oftentimes our “wins” show what God has done.”
4. “Good winners do not gloat. They understand they could have been the losers even if they had given an all-out effort. They respect the efforts of others.”
5. “Good winners are humble.”
6. “Good winners evaluate their performance. They know that every victory has flaws within it, and they don’t miss the opportunity to learn from mistakes they made—even when they have won.”
7. “Good winners celebrate. Consider the feasts, festivals, and celebrations in Scripture. Celebration is more than a party. It is a way to give thanks, and to affirm hope for the future.”
8. “Good winners let other people celebrate with them.”
9. “Good winners take time to rest. The joy they see in the faces of others becomes their joy—not as flattery, but as affection. Good winners do not keep their ‘wins’ to themselves.”
10. “Good winners get back to work. The ‘win’ of one day is not the same thing as a lifetime of honorable work.”

## **Questions for Discussion and Reflection**

1. By the time we get to this story, Daniel has been in Babylon for many years. When he is called before the drunken king, Daniel tells him the truth. He speaks boldly and disapprovingly to a tyrant. God calls us to be similarly bold. When the Jewish authorities threaten the newly born Christian community, the believers pray for boldness. Have you ever encountered a truly bold Christian? When? What were the circumstances? How can we be bold Christians and yet be governed by humility and gentleness (1 Peter 3:16)?
2. Our culture loves winning. And there is nothing wrong with winning. But we have a lot to learn about winning well. You might look over Lawrenz’s ten tips for being godly winners. How well do you think we teach our children to be good winners? How do we live out Paul’s teaching that we are to put others interests ahead of our own (Philippians 2:4) when we are competing? Remember that Paul used a lot of sports metaphors in his letters, including Philippians.

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<sup>3</sup> From a brief essay by Mel Lawrenz posted on the Brook Network website, Feb 7, 2011.

## *Daily Bible Readings*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

five psalms about boldness and courage

<b>Monday, Psalm 16</b> “I will not stumble because he is on my right side.”	<b>Tuesday, Psalm 27</b> “The Lord is my light and salvation. Should I fear anyone?”
<b>Wednesday, Psalm 31</b> “You are definitely my rock and my fortress.”	<b>Thursday, Psalm 119:113-120</b> “You are my shelter and my shield.”
<b>Friday, Psalm 138</b> “Whenever I am in deep trouble, you make me live again.”	<b>Weekly Joys and Concerns</b>

## Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own.  
This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.  
On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can  
check [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org) to make sure the class is meeting.

### Monday Evening Class

**We are studying Paul's letter, 1 Corinthians**

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

### Tuesday Lunchtime Class

**We are studying the book of Judges**

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

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## Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

The current series:

*Making Sense of Revelation:  
The Theology of John's Apocalypse*

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**Coming May 9 & 16:**

**7pm in Smith Worship Center**

**Two Special Evenings with  
Rev. Arthur Jones and Dr. Scott Engle**

## ***Connect the Dots: The Bible in Six Acts***

A dynamic multi-media presentation of the entire biblical story.  
Come learn the Bible in a way you never have before and have  
some fun along the way!

### Sermon Notes

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