

Too Late!

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Preacher: William Philip

[0 : 00] Well, do turn back with me, would you, to Daniel chapter 5. And tonight's title is just two words.

Too late. Imagine a scene. The camera is zooming in as the movie begins.

And looming into view is the darkness of the night just lit up by the flickering of thousands of lamps, giving just enough light to see the splendor of the ancient city, Babylon.

And the view closes in on the streets of the sleeping city. And it's almost as if we can imagine the cool night air wafting against our cheeks and carrying with it the myriads of sweet and spicy fragrances from the magnificent hanging gardens that cascade down either side of the great avenue of the centre of the city.

And the camera carries us on. We're going towards the great palace. And it truly is awe-inspiring.

[1 : 23] The roof is inlaid with gold. The huge ziggurat towers above it, up into the dark sky, way above the reach of any of the lamplight.

But we see that nothing's moving. And now you notice the strangeness. There's a very eerie silence.

Only the sounds of crickets seem to pierce the quiet of the night. And the camera carries us on through the grand arches of the palace gates, through courtyards, through corridors.

And at last, through great doors that lead into the banqueting hall of the king. And now the sweet scents of the gardens is left behind.

And instead, there's the stale smell of wine and the vaped perfume of incense that's spent.

[2 : 24] And as we look, a ghostly sight meets our eyes. The great banqueting table in the centre of the room is deserted. There are plates and goblets strewn across it.

There are flagons shattered on the floor. It speaks of a sudden panic-stricken exodus before some great invasion of terror. Then we notice, no, the room's not quite deserted.

There's a solitary figure slumped over the centre of the table. The camera homes in and we can see him. He's fallen forward, face down, right in front of the great throne.

And his crown is dislodged and it's fallen and it's lying upside down on the table in front of him. On the back of his magnificent robe, in the middle of his chest, there's a dark patch.

In the midst of it, something just glistening in the dying candlelight. And we can see it's the hilt of a dagger. And a single blow had ended the life of Belshazzar, king of Babylon, and had pinned him ingloriously to the table of his last great drunken banquet.

[3 : 46] The same blow, in fact, that brought to an end forever the mighty empire of Babylon. A place of grandeur, of learning, of art, of culture.

The Babylonian empire, the envy of the entire ancient world, but how quickly a nation can deteriorate. And the scene tells a solemn story, doesn't it, of the decay that can so easily and so quickly consume a society that is arrogantly taken up with its own exaltation.

Our chapter begins with the greatest and the best of the empire. Here they are, gathered in the center of world culture. And yet the scene shows them to be reduced to drunken reveling and carousing.

Wives and concubines are plenty. And it's a picture, isn't it, in miniature of the decline and the fall of a great civilization. And now, in the twinkling of an eye, one of the greatest world empires, one of the greatest civilizations on earth, was just snuffed out, was lost forever in a sudden, unexpected coup d'etat.

That very night, we're told, Babylon fell to the Medo-Persian empire. And the epitaph of the king and his empire is there.

[5 : 16] We can see it right across the king's body. It's written on the wall in that mysterious script right behind him. Weighed in the balance and found wanting.

Well, it's a great drama, isn't it? And it would make a captivating movie. It's inspired wonderful paintings. There's that great one by Rembrandt in the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square.

Inspired that great oratorio by William Walton. But you see, our purpose must go deeper than just the drama to its message. Because this is a word from God.

It's a word he's recorded for us. And if we miss that, we'll miss the whole point of this story. It's not just a drama to be admired, although of course it is.

But it is an oracle of God to be heard and to be heeded. Now the writer of this book places Belshazzar's story quite deliberately after chapter 4, the story of Nebuchadnezzar's humbling and restoration.

[6 : 19] And he does that to make a deliberate contrast. In fact, as the footnote in the ESV, I think, indicates, yes, I think it's there, yes, it says that father can mean predecessor.

And in fact, Belshazzar was not Nebuchadnezzar's literal son. It may very well be. He was his grandson. He was probably ruling as a regent in place of his father.

That may be why the gift that he offered to someone to interpret his dream was to be the third highest ruler in the kingdom, not just the second. This event, therefore, happened quite some time after the events of chapter 4.

But these chapters are arranged like this to make a deliberate point. And we can hardly miss it, can we? It's the reaction of two kings to the day of reckoning with the God of heaven.

And in both chapters, the message that comes through loud and clear is exactly the same. It's words that we see repeatedly through chapter 24 and they occur here again in chapter 5, verse 21.

[7 : 26] The Most High God rules over the kingdom of mankind and sets over it whom he will. In chapter 4, we saw the total sovereignty of the Most High God, didn't we?

Nebuchadnezzar lost his kingdom until such time as he humbles himself. Only then is he restored. But here in chapter 5, we see what happens to another ruler who fails to humble himself before the one true God of heaven.

And it's a story, sadly, about a man for whom it becomes too late. So what are we to learn?

Well, let's look at this drama then as it unfolds in three acts. The first four verses of the chapter begin with an opening scene, don't they? And here we see a man openly scorning the God of heaven.

We see this king defiant but deaf in the presence of the majesty of God. Here's a man who is laughing God to scorn.

- [8 : 35] And he's totally deaf to all of God's revelation that is, in fact, everywhere around him. In the articles of the temple that speak of God's greatness and of God's holiness.
- In the family history that he knows all about of his ancestor, Nebuchadnezzar, his forebear who was totally transformed by the grace and the mercy of God.
- By the revelation that has surrounded him in Babylon through the witness of men like Daniel and his compatriots and others who have stood throughout their lives publicly for the truth in the midst of a hostile culture.
- But you see, not only does Belshazzar's behavior display decadence and degeneracy, he actually goes out of his way to shake his fist at Almighty God.
- He openly celebrates, he openly desecrates the holy things of God by bringing these things from the temple and profaning them. But that's not something that's very uncommon, is it?
- [9 : 45] It's certainly a rigour today for artists and others to make deliberate mockery of the Lord Jesus Christ, to deliberately profane things that are held to be holy.
- That was what the Jerry Springer show was all about, wasn't it? What are the names of those two modern artists in London who keep producing more and more wicked and blasphemous shows? I forget their names, but they're all around us, aren't they?
- Things which make the cartoons of Muhammad look absolutely trivial by comparison. Of course, they would never do it of Muhammad, would they? But that's Boshazzar and his crew openly defiant, scorning the God of Heaven and shouting their scorn publicly for everyone to hear.
- But oh dear, how desperately wrong they are. How utterly foolish they are with their mumbo and jumble of praise to these contemporary hip and trendy gods, the God of gold and silver and bronze and wood and stone.
- We only have to read these first four verses, don't we? And we know that there's a big shock coming. Because we've read chapter 2 and we've read of the sheer impotence, the sheer stupidity of all such ideas that you can resist the God of Heaven.
- [11 : 09] We've seen the sheer futility of the bankrupt pagan religious system that can never answer any of the questions. And we know that there's only one God of power, the very God of Heaven that they're defying, the God that they're mocking.
- And we know that it's this God and this God alone who gives the kingdom to whomsoever he pleases. His plans and his purposes are the ones that will be fulfilled.
- Whether kings bow down to him and repent and acknowledge him and humble themselves or whether they don't. And so already you see the writer is reminding us that what we're to see in matters of world history and current affairs is not just what lies on the surface.
- No, we're to see rather from the perspective of the watchers of the heavens that we've already come across. and when we do that we begin to see that there's so much more to the story than what we see at first here on earth.
- When evil and ruthless regimes appear to prosper and penetrate and persecute the people of God as is happening in many places in the world today. When sneering secularism as in the West today is determined to marginalize the truth of God in our society and ridicule the name of Christ the God of heaven.
- [12 : 34] When we see these things happening we are to see the truth and say beware God will not be mocked. He sees and he records and the time will come when he'll act.

For all such who set themselves up against the God of heaven the writing is already on the wall that's the message here. And if you think you're safe if you think you're arrogant either individually or as a nation or a people or anybody defying God look at Daniel chapter 5 that's what the Holy Spirit is telling us look and learn before it's too late for you.

What's portrayed in this chapter for us is the very real historical event of the fall of the Babylonian Empire. It was snuffed out forever friends because of its defiance of God.

And we know that history is littered with the shattered relics of great empires that once thought they were invincible. Once the fear of nations but now lying beneath the sands of time.

Their strength long gone their pride absolutely laid low. That's what Shelley was talking about in his sonnet Ozymandias. You probably knew it.

[14 : 06] I met a traveller from an antique land who said two vast and trunkless legs of stone stand in the desert. Near them on the sand half sunk a shattered visage lies whose frown and wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command tell that its sculptor well those passions read which yet survive stamped on these lifeless things the hand that mocked them and the heart that fed.

And on the pedestal these words appear my name is Ozymandias king of kings look on my works ye mighty and despair. Nothing beside remains.

Round the decay of that colossal wreck boundless and bare the lone and level sands stretch far away. And so it's always been and so it always will be.

Belshazzar committed deliberate sacrilege. He abused the holy vessels that bore the very name of God upon them. He praised false gods using the very holy things of the one true God.

Greece and Rome great empires that followed also sowed the seeds of their own destruction when they indulged in moral depravity on a grand scale rejecting God's ways very especially as a point of fact in regards to matters of sexual morality.

[15 : 37] The Nazi Reich and Hitler's megalomania that looked to be invincible at one time. Well above all his abomination of the Holocaust touching a people bearing God's name.

We saw the same with Soviet communism the same scorn and hatred of God and his church. Where are these things now? Beneath the sands of time.

Yes nations of power and influence need to be aware don't they? do not think that you can scorn and abuse the name of the God of heaven and do so with impunity.

Do not think that nations rulers governments kings and citizens God sees and God knows.

And yes those who scorn and are defiant against the God of heaven even within the professing church of Jesus Christ must also look at this chapter and learn.

[16 : 45] Those who take what God has called holy and abuse it turn it into sin lead many astray shut up the gates of heaven to others the message is very clear beware God will not be mocked he will have the last word the writing is already on the wall if that is what you think and the writing spells disaster and so you know friends when we see such things going on in the world we must see the bigger picture we must see the story behind the story we must see that the God of heaven is enthroned in heaven and will never have his kingdom destroyed and that should be such an encouragement to us we can take encouragement in God's coming judgment when we feel like a tiny minority when we feel oppressed when we feel even persecuted when we are like a minority sect just like the Jews were in

Babylon and isn't that what we seem to be more and more in the west today when we seem to be powerless in a hostile culture remember the writing is on the wall for all who oppose God it's there already even if nobody yet sees it even if nobody cares the most high is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and he gives them to whom he pleases we don't need to fear as the people of the most high God and we can stand and we can bear witness to the truth of God the God we know and we love because we know that however dark the present may seem a day of reckoning is coming when everything will be changed so we can take courage in God's judgments and we can take courage in God's certain salvation you see not only did the day of reckoning come against

Babylon for its sin it was that very judgment that ushered in the day of the Lord's salvation for his people it was the Persians who took over Babylon and it was Cyrus their emperor Cyrus is really another name for Darius it was he who decreed the return of the Jews back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple to rebuild the holy city and it was that of course ultimately that led to the coming of Christ himself in time to fulfill all the promises of God's redemption to bring in all God's blessing forever you see that strange little detail there in the very last verse of chapter 5 in verse 30 telling us how old Darius was when he assumed power why do you think that's there seems a strange thing it seems very insignificant but no actually you know it's very significant because it takes us back all those years right to the very beginning of the exile and the point is that even then at the darkest hour of

God's people going into exile already God's mercy was at work he was raising up a man to be a pagan empire who in time would bring salvation and restoration to his people isn't that extraordinary isn't it staggering that the very moment that Babylon came against God's people to capture them to enslave them at that very moment both the seeds of its own destruction were sown and the wheels of God's salvation for his people were set in motion isn't that staggering but it's just like right at the very beginning isn't it in Genesis chapter 3 when the seed of promised redemption was sown the very moment the devil sought to destroy God's man in the promise of another man the second man who would destroy God's enemies who would deliver

God's people the very moment of darkness was the moment that God planted the seed of his salvation God's for that's a pattern of the God of scriptures you know the hymn even the hour that darkest seemeth will his changeless goodness prove from the mist his brightness streameth God is wisdom God is love wasn't it just like that on the cross at Calvary the darkest hour of human history and yet also at the same time in that horrific judgment on human sin his brightness streamed in mercy and in forgiveness that's the way our God is isn't that a great encouragement to us as believers whatever age we live in whether we were in Daniel's time or whether we were later on reading this or today that's the way our

[22 : 01] God works never forget that whatever the appearance is whatever defiance and scorn there is against our Lord Jesus Christ never forget the most high God is sovereign over the kingdoms of this earth he has the issues to decide but there comes a time of course when these issues home in on individual people in a very personal way and when for those who scorn God the writing on the wall that has always been there unseen begins to come into view and begins to appear on the wall of their lives through events of good or ill things come about and at last they cannot they cannot ignore it but you see when that happens nevertheless often it's still very perplexing it's very worrying maybe incomprehensible and they need to start asking questions they want to understand and that's just exactly what we see happening to

Belshazzar all of a sudden in the second act of this drama that runs from verse 5 right through to verse 24 because here we see a man you see searching now for the secrets of heaven the king is disturbed but he's also deluded in the presence of the message of God here's a man who's forced to be face to face with the message of God about his personal life but he can't understand it he's shouting for answers he's demanding understanding but but you see he's deluded he thinks he can control God he thinks he can manipulate him for his own ends now that he has deigned to become interested he thinks God will jump to his call but he's wrong you see he discovers it's too late he discovers that in fact heaven is deaf to his call heaven's secrets are in fact locked up against him now the king is tormented by this sudden intrusion of the divine into his happy carefree life look at verse 6 he nearly faints he can hardly stand up and you know sometimes that is exactly the reaction we see when someone who has had no time for God suddenly is arrested by a message from God that they cannot avoid we see it at funerals don't we when the reality of mortality hits home can't be avoided when you're standing in this church and there's a coffin at the front you cannot avoid the intrusion of matters of eternity we see it in the reactions that people have to sudden tragedy of various kinds when suddenly the issues of life and death and eternity rise up and confront us face to face we can't hide them away in the noise of the background as we so often do and that's just what happens to

Belshazzar here he goes berserk he's desperate for answers but of course he's not going to get any answers from the mumbo jumbo men in Babylon verse 9 says when he finds that out he gets even more alarmed doesn't know what to do and so the queen comes to the rescue and she brings a reminder again as a last resort we've seen this before how about consulting the word of God she says and so at last as a last resort as usual the bible teacher is wheeled in and the king offers Daniel riches and power and all sorts of things if only he'll help his troubled soul but you see friends the great tragedy here was that the word of God and the teachers of that message had been in Babylon all along they'd been there all the time the mercy of God and the gospel of

God had overshadowed that place for generations in the person of Daniel and his companions in their constant witness in that pagan land to the God of heaven and in the very experience of Nebuchadnezzar who had come to understand the message of the God of heaven but you see it had been studiously ignored it had been scorned look at verse 22 you knew all this and yet you have not humbled your heart Belshazzar it turns out knew the gospel all along he grew up with it but like so many today he resisted it he ignored it he fought against the claims of God on his life he had refused it seemed constantly to bow the knee to the God of heaven to seek his forgiveness as Nebuchadnezzar had done he had refused to offer him his allegiance and to do that you see only has one interpretation in the language of heaven and it's there in verse 22 to do that is to lift yourself up against the

God of heaven to make yourself his enemy it's to make a deliberate choice of darkness in the face of the bright light of the mercy of God that's what it is to refuse the light that God gives him now it was too late and there wasn't any voice any word of warning and of mercy as there had been for Nebuchadnezzar now for Belshazzar there was only silence and the words written on the wall people you see when crisis made it impossible for him to ignore any longer the summons of God he found that the day of opportunity had passed him by it slipped away again and again it seems he had refused to listen and would not respond and eventually God had simply granted him his request he could not hear and he no longer could respond may be significant that this is all portrayed for us as an evening scene because a long long day of opportunity had been extended to him when he had been given every opportunity to respond just as

[29 : 04] Nebuchadnezzar had done but now that day had drawn to a close and it was night just as those fearful words in John chapter 13 tell us Judas went out and it was night just like the man in Christ's parable in Luke chapter 12 who worried about getting right with God later on after he had filled up his barns for a prosperous retirement and God said you fool this night your soul is required of you and it was too late for him and Belshazzar likewise was called to account and he was found wanting just like the foolish virgins in the parable who discovered that midnight was far too late to go out to the shops to start buying oil and so when Belshazzar came by night searching at last for the secrets of heaven God says you fool this is the night

I'm going to require your soul from you and there's no time left anymore for explaining the secrets of heaven to you there's only silence from heaven and the words that have already been written on the wall and so Daniel you see is no longer an evangelist bringing good news instead he has to bear the other side the terrible side of the gospel of truth and that he does faithfully in the last act in verses 24 to 30 where we witness a man sentenced by the writing from heaven the king of Babylon you see damns himself and he's deposed in the presence of the mercy of God the heart of the indictment has been summed up you knew all this and yet you have not humbled your heart instead well you've deliberately lived as though you yourself are God reigning over your own life ignoring the God who holds your very life and the universe in the palm of his hands and you've chosen to worship everything and anything except him your wealth your status your career your ambitions your bodily appetites even your family your dynasty whatever it is and now says God it's gone too far the day has ended the night has fallen and God says there's no more time what is written is written what is written is there in verse 26

God has numbered your days and brought it to an end verse 27 you're weighed in the balance and found wanting verse 28 it's all over everything your life stood for is finished it's been taken away and friends the message is that it is possible to so resist the day of opportunity that a time comes when God must and God will withdraw his hand and pass over there is such a thing as too late with God if this chapter has anything to say at all if it makes any one stark fact plain then it's that don't make any mistake about it and you know there are many people today who have grown up with the gospel just like Belshazzar they've heard it all their life maybe in church a Christian family maybe just from other family or friends and workmates wherever it may be they know the gospel and they know its demands but they too have never humbled their hearts though they knew all this and for them too at last the day ends and night falls and it may be it often is isn't it suddenly and unexpectedly just as it was for

Belshazzar the scholars tell us he was only in his forties when he was killed and they find that now heaven is silent there's only the sentence of the writing in heaven saying weighed in the balance and found wanting a sentence that pronounces a lost eternity far far away from the presence of the God of heaven the Lord Jesus Christ all because you've damned yourself and disqualified yourself through a lifetime of rejecting the presence of God and his mercy offering itself to you again and again in the love songs from heaven that are flooding the earth in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ the Son of God who came and who died that we might be forgiven and friends you can do that you can resist in that way the grace of God and when you do do that it's not

God who damns you it's you yourself who damns yourself listen to Jesus in John 12 if anyone hears my words and does not keep them I do not judge him for I did not come into the world to judge the world but to save the world the one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge the word that I have spoken to him will judge him on the last day you see sentenced by the writing from heaven writing that stands as a silent witness for a life of deliberate refusal of every word of grace from God in heaven and God has no new word for Belshazzar only the one that his own life had caused to be written on the wall because there comes a time when no more can be said when we've made our choice unmistakably and clearly and it's irreversibly set the writing is there

[35 : 54] I don't expect Daniel even needed to look at the writing on the wall he'd seen it coming for a long long time his dreams had showed him about the fall of the kingdom he'd foreseen it long long ago and he knew as Fitzgerald puts it in the poem Omar Kayam he knew the moving finger writes and having writ moves on nor all thy piety nor wit can lure it back to cancel half a line nor all thy tears wash out a word of it you see Belshazzar was lost not not because of his great sin his debauchery his murder his cruelty no he was lost because he adamantly refused and resisted the mercy of the God of heaven to be offered mercy and to be offered the grace of God in Jesus

Christ and to turn away and to refuse it that is the only sin that can never be pardoned you knew all this and yet you have not humbled your heart friends every single one of us in this church tonight is like Belshazzar every one of us has been weighed in the balance and found wanting every one of us has writing writ large against us but you know God is gracious he's blazed his mercy to us in the gospel of his son the Lord Jesus Christ the new testament tells us his death on the cross was to blot out the handwriting that is against us and yet he asks us still today every one of us will you be a Nebuchadnezzar or a Belshazzar will you allow that writing to be blotted out or will you insist that it stands there as a monument eternally against you you see there's an urgency about the message of the gospel none of us know how far gone is the daylight of our own lives none of us know if the twilight has already begun none of us know the night that God will call us to account for some of us here it might be this very night and that's why Jesus calls alive he says don't delay awake he says the night is coming and that's why the apostle

Paul urges us don't be like Belshazzar do not receive God's grace in grain I tell you now is the day of salvation now is the day to respond before it's too late and tomorrow it may be too late so the message the love song that comes from heaven tonight is very clear it's very loud it's very real for every one of us don't wait to humble your heart before the Lord Jesus Christ don't wait do it today keep on doing it every day until the day that you stand before him don't be my friends if there's anybody here tonight don't be like

Belshazzar don't wait until it's too late let's pray great God of heaven we bow before you and acknowledge you to be the only God we know all that you have against us but we know also the grace and the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ offered to us as the one alone who washes away all that is against us and erases every indictment held against our lives don't let any of us refuse you we pray by your grace would you move us to bow our knees to you we may never be fine with those who hear those dreadful words on the last day too late for

Jesus Christ sake Amen