

Daniel: Living by Faith in the Real World

Handwriting on the Wall

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We continue this morning with our series of messages based upon the book of Daniel. The story of Daniel takes place between 600 and 500 BC. The nation of Israel has been conquered by Babylonia. Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylonia, sought to assimilate the people he conquered into Babylonian culture and beliefs. He would bring the young leaders of these nations to the capital city of Babylon and indoctrinate them in Babylonian culture for three years. Afterwards he would send them back as leaders into the provinces hoping they would help to assimilate their countrymen into the Babylonian ways. Some of the Israelites refused to participate in the assimilation process. Other Israelites were completely indoctrinated and became fully assimilated. Daniel and some of his friends found another way to respond. Where possible they sought to cooperate with the Babylonians without compromising their faith. They rose to positions of leadership where they were able to influence the kings of Babylon. But there were times when their lives were threatened because they refused to compromise their belief in one Creator God. The Babylonians believed in many gods and expected all their subjects to accept the Babylonian gods along with their own gods. Babylonia was a pluralistic society much like our own. It embraced many different beliefs.

Our scripture reading this morning takes place 23 years after the death of Nebuchadnezzar. One of his descendents Belshazzar (not to be confused with Daniel's Babylonian name, Belteshazzar) is now the king. Belshazzar gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles. During the party he sent servants to the palace treasury to bring the gold goblets that had been confiscated from the Temple in Jerusalem. They filled the sacred goblets with wine and the nobles toasted the Babylonian gods and drank the wine. While they were partying, something strange happened.

Daniel 5:5-9

Suddenly the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall, near the lampstand in the royal palace. The king watched the hand as it wrote. ⁶His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his knees knocked together and his legs gave way.

⁷The king called out for the enchanters, astrologers and diviners to be brought and said to these wise men of Babylon, "Whoever reads this writing and tells me what it means will be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed around his neck, and he will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom."

⁸Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or tell the king what it meant. ⁹So King Belshazzar became even more terrified and his face grew more pale. His nobles were baffled.

This is one huge party—at least 1,000 guests. Belshazzar brings his wives and concubines to the party. Rarely were concubines included in the parties. The presence of the concubines symbolized that this was a party intended for sensuality and pleasure. Into this atmosphere, Belshazzar sends for the sacred goblets from the Jewish Temple in

Jerusalem. This is a way that Belshazzar demonstrated his power. He could take the sacred items from another religion and use them in a party. It was his way of saying: "I am the conqueror. I am superior. I will do as I please." The guests took the goblets dedicated to the God of the Israelites and toasted the gods of the Babylonians. It was a deliberate act of defiance against the God of Israel.

What is this party all about? Looking at the historical context of the party we discover that just ten days before this party, the Persian King Cyrus had soundly defeated the Babylonian army in a battle only 50 miles from Babylon. Now the capital city and the palace were defenseless. Everyone in Babylon was nervous. Would Cyrus send his army and annihilate Babylon and all its inhabitants? Or would he send a diplomat offering terms of surrender making them vassals of the Persian Empire? Neither alternative was appealing. Everyone was scared.

What do you do when everyone is scared? You throw a party and try to get their minds off the impending doom. "Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die." "Tomorrow we die." That is the main fear of everyone gathered at the party. They feared imminent death or enslavement. Wine was flowing freely at the party. In chapter 5:1-4, there are five references to drinking. The concubines are there. It is a drunken orgy. During the party, Belshazzar sends for the sacred goblets from the Temple. By this act, he is reminding the nobles that the God of Israel must not be very powerful. After all the Babylonians had defeated the Israelites and ransacked their Temple. Their God seemed to be powerless to help them. In an act of irony, the nobles toast the gods of Babylon: gold, silver, bronze and wood. Now it is the Babylonian gods who also seem powerless. They were unable to conquer the invading army of Persia. Babylonia would soon be enslaved just like Israel had been enslaved. Using the sacred goblets of Israel to toast the gods of Babylonia made a dramatic statement. Belshazzar was declaring the powerlessness of all the gods. Israel's

God was powerless and so were the Babylonian gods. The logical conclusion is that there really are no gods. It was the ultimate act of defiance to both the God of Israel and the Babylonian gods. If there are no gods, what is left? We may as well indulge our pleasures and do whatever we want to do. "Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die." When we die that is it—there is nothing.

We are living in a Post-Christian era. There is no longer a Christian consensus in our nation. In fact, there is no longer a consensus that there is a God at all. There are many people who question the existence of God. They believe that life came into existence by the accidental collision of molecules millions of years ago. If there is no God and life is an accident, then we also must conclude that there is no meaning or significance to life. There is no meaning to an accident. It just happens. If there is no meaning then there is no right or wrong; no good or bad. There is simply what is.

Many people buy into this world view without fully recognizing it. Where this issue surfaces is in answering the question: how do you decide what is right and wrong? Our graduating seniors will soon be challenged with many differing ideas about what is right and wrong. How will you make a decision for yourself about where to stand on these issues?

One of the debates in our society today is in regard to same sex marriages. During a recent Miss USA pageant, Miss California, Carrie Prejean, was asked her views on same sex marriages. This was her response:

VIDEO of Prejean response to question

(Text version: "We live in a land where you can choose same-sex marriage or opposite. And you know what, I think in my country, in my family, I think that I believe that a marriage should be between a man and a woman. No offense to anybody out there, but that's how I was raised.")

She was booed by the audience. The first time in the history of the pageant that a contestant's answer to a question was booed. She was mocked and ridiculed by many in the

media for stating honestly what she believed. Many called for her title to be taken away from her.

How do you determine your answer to that question? The primary argument used to support same sex marriage is that some persons are genetically wired to be attracted to the same sex. If that is the way they are wired, then they should be allowed to enter into same sex marriages. They can't help it, they are wired that way. There is no right or wrong to sexual attraction. We have to accept what is. Science tells us the way things are. Once science determines the way something is, then it just is. If you follow this line of reasoning then you believe that science determines what is right and wrong.

Can we live with that argument if we apply it to every thing? There is some evidence that pedophiles are wired that way. They are genetically wired to be attracted to children. If same-sex attraction is OK because that is the way those persons are wired, then pedophilia must be OK as well. They can't help it; they are wired that way too. A pedophile in prison was recently considered for parole. He told the parole board that if he were released he would probably continue his behavior. It was the way he was wired. He could not do anything about it. Some people say there is a difference between pedophilia and same sex marriage. In same sex marriage we are talking about consenting adults--not taking advantage of children.

But wait a minute, as soon as you say there is a difference between consensual and non-consensual sexuality you have made a value judgment. You have gone beyond mere science to determine what is right and wrong. You have declared that one behavior is acceptable and one is not. You have determined that one is good and the other is bad. But if life is just an accident, you have no basis upon which to say that some things are good and some things are bad. Those things matter only if life has meaning and significance.

If you want to determine if your life has significance and meaning, science and atheism cannot help you. The only way to determine if you are significant is to believe that you are created. If you are an accident then life is pointless, meaningless and anything goes—anything. No one has the right to say to anyone else, “What you are doing is right. Or what you are doing is wrong.” If there is a Creator then he has a purpose for what he has created. His purpose determines the significance of life. His purpose determines what is right and wrong. Those things that align with his purposes are good. Those things that go against his purposes are wrong. It is the Creator God that determines the meaning of life.

It is a faith assumption to believe that there is a Creator. It cannot be proven. It is reasonable to look at the complexity and order of the universe and come to the conclusion that some intelligent being put all this together. But it is still a faith assumption. But it is also a faith assumption that there is no God and that life is an accident. We each have to decide which faith assumption we can live with. Either there is no God and you are an accident and life has no meaning. Or there is a God and He created you for a reason and your life has meaning. If there is no God then anything goes—anything. If there is a Creator God then we need to discover what his purposes are and what he says is good and bad.

As Christians, we believe that God has revealed his purposes in his Word. This is what Daniel says to Belshazzar about the handwriting on the wall. Belshazzar called all the wise men of Babylon to interpret the writing. He offered them gifts and power if they could interpret the writing. Daniel comes before the king. He tells the king to keep all his gifts. Why? Because the interpretation of the handwriting is not something that Daniel can do through his own abilities or intelligence. He is not being humble. He is stating a fact. The interpretation of the meaning of life is not something that any human can do. Daniel says to the king: “What I’m about to tell you is not human wisdom; it comes from God.” Worldly wisdom cannot explain the meaning of life. Belshazzar has come to the conclusion that

there is no real god, so all he has left is human wisdom and humans cannot determine the meaning of life. There is nothing left to do but eat, drink and be merry.

Daniel interprets the meaning of the handwriting:

"This is what these words mean:

God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end.

You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting.

Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians." Daniel 5:26-28

Daniel informs Belshazzar that there is a Sovereign God who numbers our days.

There is a God who has standards of right and wrong—he weighs Belshazzar in the scales.

He compares Belshazzar to God's purposes—and finds him missing the mark. There are

consequences to our behavior. If we choose to ignore God and go against his purposes, we

cut ourselves off from the source of life and we die. That very night Belshazzar was slain.

We don't know how. But the meaning is clear. There is no life apart from our Creator. If

there is a Creator then he determines what is right and wrong.

When it comes to the discussion of same sex marriage, human wisdom and science cannot answer the question "what is the purpose of marriage?". That question can only be answered by the Creator of marriage. What was his intent and purpose for marriage? He tells us in the account of creation in Genesis 2:

"Therefore a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and they will become one flesh." (Genesis 2:24) God's design for marriage is one man and one woman.

We live in a world that is very similar to the Babylonian empire. It is a world in which many people live as if there is no God. There is only human wisdom to tell us what is right and wrong. But if that is all we have, then anything goes. Living by faith in the real world means that we choose to believe in a Creator God. We seek to discover his purposes and his plan for his creation. As we live in harmony with his plan, we experience meaning and significance to life.

How do you choose to live in our world? How will you determine what is right and wrong?