



The Lions, The Fire, and the Faithfulness of God
Sermon 3 - Daniel 5 – The Writing on the Wall

STARTING POINT PLUG

Good morning. Listen we have had a lot of new people visiting Mercy Church since the start of the year and we are really grateful you've taken a step into church. I want to offer you a small next step. I want to offer you the chance to discover what Mercy Church is all about. You've probably caught some things from our weekend services but we want to give you the chance to meet some of our pastors and ministry team leaders. Immediately following each service today we are holding a short information session we call Starting Point.

1. Who we are. 2. What we do. 3. How you get connected

Short, maybe 30 minutes. For real listen we are not a super big church, but you could sit around unknown for a long time here. Don't let that be your story. Come to S.P. MercyKids is planning on watching your kids. So if you want to stop by and say "Hey, I'm going to starting point" they'll know.

Ok with that said, let's get into our message. We are in the book of Daniel. And if you are newer with us, here's the

situation. Daniel & his friends had grown up in a culture where all of the institutions were built and guided by a view that the biblical God was the one and only true God. Where everyone worshipped this God. It was a monotheistic society. But now, they are living in Babylon and Babylon is a pluralistic society. There are many gods and virtually no one believed in the idea of a supreme being. And so Daniel & his friends are trying to figure out what faith in God looks like in a pluralistic world. And this is very helpful for us because we live in a pluralistic society here and now. Where people look to a number of different things to find significance & meaning in life.

You heard Daniel Chapter 5 right before I got up here. The short but packed story of King Belshazzar. (Not Beltashazzar) The chapter has 3 movements. There's the party, there's the handwriting, and there's Daniel's explanation about what it all means. That's the outline we are going to follow today as we see what God has to say to us from this. And the big question I have for you is: **What makes your life matter?** Today we are going to see a few of the big things that our culture finds significance in.

I want to set some context for you that is really helpful for understanding this scene. First, we've jumped way ahead in our timeline. Some 22 years after Nebuchadnezzar has died. The year is somewhere around 539 BC and Daniel is now an old man. Here's the situation. The Medo-Persian army, under the rule of Cyrus, is bearing down on Babylon. In fact, just a week prior to this night, Babylon's army was defeated about 50 miles from Babylon. And nobody knows if they are marching toward the palace to kill the king, or if Cyrus is going

to send a diplomatic emissary to declare Babylon some sort of a vassal state where you remain in power but pay taxes kind of thing. So the whole city is running around scared & nobody knows what is happening. What is clear...there is a dark shadow, the shadow of death. & demise, looming over Babylon.

Let me ask you something to help you get into the frame of mind of this moment. If you found out you had 24 hours to live, what would you do?

- Make some phone calls? Go hard after your bucket list?
- Me: EAT a really good Wagyu Beef steak, call pastor scott tell him he's gotta preach Sunday, buy a BIG insurance policy, and play games with my family.
- Talked to our staff: Joey is writing the Schwartz Manifesto. Jessica Murray – Take a nap. Charlie – Watch the Office. Scott – Try to free solo a mountain.

It's actually a pretty revealing question if you get real with it isn't it? Community group ice breaker this week!

Here's the deal: Belshazzar & his people are being confronted with their mortality. The end is likely near. And he can't handle looking death in the eye. Doesn't know what to do with it. So he turns to the. "go-to" things he has always found his sense of significance in. things that help give him a sense of meaning. Maybe just things that help distract him from thinking about death.

And the amazing thing about this party is that his "go-tos" are very similar to the "go-tos" of our culture. The things our culture turns to in hopes of finding meaning inside this life. And ya'll we said this series is about **how to follow God inside of a culture that doesn't**. And we are trying to help people in our culture lift their eyes up out of the fog they live in to see the beauty and glory of God. To see how his ways are the ways they are truly created for. To do that, we have to understand the things people in our culture are using to manufacture **personal significance & meaning. In short – what are the things I can point to in my life and say "THIS IS WHY MY LIFE MATTERS."**

And a few of them I think we can all relate to are right here in Belshazzar's tragedy. We'll go through the party, the handwriting, & what it all means.

The Party

1 King Belshazzar held a great feast for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine in their presence.

Ok. I told you, the storm is coming right. Well, in the face of death Belshazzar is gettin' turnt. I mean this party is wild even by Babylon standards. Notice it says his concubines were in there... with his wives. This is a no-no in every culture ever. And definitely in this one. Kids ask your parents later what a concubine is cause I aint got time for that one today. I mean this is something that would NEVER happen in a normal gathering. It's a very deliberate attempt to create an extremely sensual, indulgent setting. And...he doesn't care about fallout because there may be no tomorrow. Doesn't

that ring a little familiar to our culture? The first of three things he turns to for comfort is **Sex & Romance**.

And our culture today does this. In fact, if you remember how I said in the opening sermon that the cultural ground under our feet has shifted away from being a God-centric culture. Well, this has been one of the biggest impacts. People still feel a need to matter to somebody. Everybody wants somebody to love them. For a long time God was the answer, but culture largely has taken out the answer but still feels the need. And so modern man fixes his need for a cosmic solution to life on another person.

If you don't believe me...Just turn on the radio! 4 out of the top 5 songs on the billboard 100 this week are about Sex & Romance. And the amazing thread right now is how Romance is failing to fix everything in their lives. It's THE plotline of all mainstream music & prime-time T.V. Shocker right! And when the single relationship doesn't work, people bounce from hook up to hook up only to eventually be shook by the damage they are causing to their souls. They watch porn at levels that I don't even need to bring up here because you know how rampant it is. Ya'll THIS WEEKEND with the all-star game here, came articles from all major news outlets warning us about the increase in sex-trafficking that is coming to Charlotte. What is that!?

Culture is giving itself to the sex-craze of Belshazzar hoping that pleasure & intimacy with another will satisfy that longing in their souls.

¹ Becker, Ernest. *The Denial of Death* (MacMillian Publishing. NY, NY. 1973) 26.

The problem of course is...a messed up human person, which we all are, can't possibly fill that need for love that you are carrying around. And eventually our desires twist & turn even darker and uglier. There is no permanent sense of whole-ness, no lasting sense of personal significance, in sex and romance.

"Modern man is drinking and drugging himself out of awareness, or he spends his time shopping, which is the same thing."¹

In short –sex & romance cannot give you meaning. They are not strong enough to make your life matter.

Look at what Belshazzar brings in next.

3 So they brought in the gold vessels that had been taken from the temple, the house of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his nobles, wives, and concubines drank from them.

This is Belshazzar's way of remembering & celebrating the greatness and the might of the babylonian empire. Look at our conquests! Look at all we've achieved and accomplished! Isn't this arrogant and short-sighted? Let's ignore the fact that this is all about to get taken. Ignore the fact it wont last. And let's get everybody to look at me as I parade my accomplishments around. It's like the rich man is piling his wealth onto his deathbed with him to revel in it one last time.

What has he turned to now for significance? To prove he matters? He's turned to **Achievement**. And so do we. Did ya'll ever play king of the hill growing up? I know it was a T.V. show

I never watched and I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about the game where somebody got on the top of a hill...and everybody else had to try and tackle him, throw him off the hill, and take his place. And eventually when you are all dead tired, the last guy on the top of the hill wins. Awesome game. BUT little did I know that was basically a metaphor for all of adulthood. All success is...not only "how much can I get" but "how much more can I get than what you get." And we can lose ourselves in this effort. Find meaning in creating wealth & in my conquest of this world. My grandfather had a saying for this: **Get what you can, can what you get, and sit on the can.** – Al Shelton

It's the American dream. The current American dream is more about standing out...being known...than it is even about money. How can I make MY mark on the world. In research for today I traveled down the rabbit hole of Personal branding. There is a whole industry devoted to helping you build your personal brand. What is underneath all that? Building wealth through being important in other people's eyes.

We are constantly rating everything. Rating food, rating movies, rating books, rating our Uber drivers, and we are constantly being rated. I learned recently you can even rate your church on Google. Crazy. Oh and if that weren't enough, there are lists that compare churches to one another. Who is growing fastest? Who is largest? Ya'll – What in the world are we doing?

We are all trying to create meaning for ourselves based on how comparatively successful we are. That's Belshazzar. The

problem is...it's never enough. And the more success we achieve, the more we fear losing it all don't we?

Listen: In the face of death, of eternity...**your achievements don't matter!**

4 They drank the wine and praised their gods made of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone.

Ok PRETTY Brash right. They don't just drink from the goblets, they praise *their* gods as they drink from the sacred artifacts of the God of the Jews.. This is in direct defiance of the God of the Jews. No doubt under Daniel's influence more people had been made aware of Daniel's God. Nebuchadnezzar lived a long time after the events of chapter 4 ended and presumably under the submission to Daniel's God. But this is an act of religious defiance against that God and a sort of religious insult by saying we will use the treasure we stole from your God to toast our gods. In the shadow of death, they defiantly worship their gods.

The final thing he uses to find significance: **Religion**. That's what he's doing. And look at how he's doing it. Taking the things of God and USING them to worship man-made idols. There is a reason the author makes a point to list out the building materials of these gods. He's saying you can go to Lowe's, watch a 10 minute YouTube video and then build one of these things. They are worthless idols! Religion does this through behavior modification. Posit a God & his rules. Follow his rules, you are rewarded, don't & you

are punished. It's a means of controlling people. And when we start to think about how we do that, it's honestly frightening.

Wait...is Pastor Spence saying Christianity does this? No, because Christianity is not a set of rules, it's a faith claim based on a news event. And it doesn't coerce you to changing your behavior to earn reward, it announces to you the behavior of Jesus who earned the reward for you that you could never earn.

But I need to say something: Some of you may be using the things of God to serve your idols. When I was growing up there was an angry older man I saw one Sunday at church look at our pastor and say "You better watch yourself or you will be out of **MY** church." Now that's the most frightening pronoun I had ever heard. Hear me out, it's good we say things like "I love my church." And I hope if you are a member here its because this is YOUR church in the sense it is the people you belong to. But this was different. MY church. **This was a man using something** that belonged to God to serve his own need for control. The church wasn't his. It was God's.

What you are about to see is one of the most severe & swift rebukes in all of the bible. And it came in response to someone repurposing God's things to worship something other than God. **Moralistic Behavior...in the face of eternity...DOESN'T MATTER!**

Sex & Romance, Achievement, & Religion. The big 3 ways we try to make ourselves MATTER in this world. And the PROBLEM with them...is they don't work! Whenever we pause from the Distraction these 3 offer us...we are never satisfied.

When we look at the looming shadow on the horizon...these things don't offer an answer that satisfies the soul.

Ok that's the party. This big exercise in denial of reality that looks so much like how we operate today. And into that comes the hand of God. **THE HANDWRITING**

5 At that moment the fingers of a man's hand appeared and began writing on the plaster of the king's palace wall next to the lampstand. As the king watched the hand that was writing, 6 his face turned pale, and his thoughts so terrified him that he soiled himself and his knees knocked together

Technically the fingers of God. And the main thing I want you to see at this point...this is God waking up the king. And this is Scary! The king soils himself...that is when you know you are scared. Knees knocked together & face turned pale – he may have very well passed out. Now we'll see in a second WHAT the writing was. What we know is that it was a mystery to the king. So, he calls in his guys...

7 The king shouted to bring in the mediums, Chaldeans, and diviners. He said to these wise men of Babylon, "Whoever reads this inscription and gives me its interpretation will be clothed in purple, have a gold chain around his neck, and have the third highest position in the kingdom."

Notice if you've been here for other parts of this sermon series that this is a pretty common occurrence. There is something mysterious that happens and then God uses that mystery to prove the impotence of the wisdom of the age. Because all the smartest people in the kingdom CANNOT

figure it out. Once they are out of ideas, they turn to Daniel. And God gives Daniel the words to say.

Same thing happens here. The king tells his best & brightest to figure it out and they can't. And the king loses it. He's panicking. And at this point I don't want to get fully into what the writing says because the passage hasn't yet. & we are just following it. But here's what I'll say:

Sometimes we go to great lengths to explain away the things God is using to get our attention. Like we will look for any way to figure this out that DOESN'T end in us surrendering to God. And when we do that, we look as confused as the king. Until we finally turn to God & say ok God I'm yours.

Whenever your only option left is turning to God, that moment is his kindness towards you.

Now we'll see that for Belshazzar it was too late. But one of the reasons this is in here is so that YOU & I, the readers, don't make the same mistake Belshazzar made. But I have this awareness that some of you are going through a moment where life is confusing & maybe scary. And I promise that when it feels like your only option is turning to God & trusting him to be faithful to you, that's actually God's grace. Because he was always the only option.

Ok Skip forward 10 verses and Daniel comes in. **WHAT IT ALL MEANS**

17 Then Daniel answered the king, "You may keep your gifts and give your rewards to someone else; however, I will read the inscription for the king and make the interpretation known to him.

Daniel is saying God is not for sale. He owns you, not the other way around. And, his grace is free. **AND THAT STUFF DOESN'T MATTER!!!** Belshazzar can't get his mind around that. So Daniel recounts our story from last week. Saying listen GOD was the one who gave Nebuchadnezzar his greatness & then when he got proud, God took it away. And God didn't give it back, verse 21, until Neb acknowledged the Most High God is ruler over human kingdoms. Then he turns to Belshazzar and says

22 "But you his successor, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, even though you knew all this. 23 Instead, **you have exalted yourself against the Lord of the heavens.** The vessels from his house were brought to you, and as you and your nobles, wives, and concubines drank wine from them, you praised the gods made of silver and gold, bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which do not see or hear or understand. But you have not glorified the God who holds your life-breath in his hand and who controls the whole course of your life. 24 **Therefore, he sent the hand,** and this writing was inscribed.

Two phrases that make what is happening here very clear. You exalted yourself against the Lord of the heavens...therefore he sent the hand.

25 "This is the writing that was inscribed: Mene, Mene, Tekel, and Parsin. 26 This is the interpretation of the message:

'Mene' means that God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end. 27 ekel' means that you have been weighed on the balance and found deficient. 28 Peres' means that your kingdom has been divided and given to the Medes and Persians."

29 Then Belshazzar gave an order, and they clothed Daniel in purple, placed a gold chain around his neck, and issued a proclamation concerning him that he should be the third ruler in the kingdom.

30 That very night Belshazzar the king of the Chaldeans was killed, 31 and Darius the Mede received the kingdom at the age of sixty-two.

Take the rest of our time and tell you what you and I need to take away from Daniel's message to Belshazzar. Because it is FOR CERTAIN in here for two purposes: 1). To warn us away from the futility of the Babylonians and 2) To point us towards something that will finally give us the significance we've been searching for.

1. Make God's word your first priority instead of your fallback plan. - What I wanted to say here was "trust God's word" but what I realize is that the way you can tell if you trust it is how you prioritize it. See when you boil down what happens in Daniel 5 is that God busts into a hopeless situation with his WORD. It's his word that wakes Belshazzar up to the

futility and actually counter-productive things he'd been doing. Here's the thing...our culture is searching for significance. In Relationships, In achievement, even in false religion. They won't find significance there. They won't find purpose there. They will find distraction from, and denial of, the reality of our mortality. To answer the big questions like: What is my purpose in life, do I matter? What happens when we die? you need answers bigger than what the culture can give.

But, in God's word you can find real significance. Real meaning. Daniel is, in this way, telling us not just that we can trust God's word, but that we should. That we should trust all of it and we should dive into it.

So if you are on the fence about the bible...can I just ask you to give it a shot? What have you got to lose? But don't take only the parts you like. When we do that we make it, & the God it tells us about, an idol of our own making. Instead, just for a little while give it a shot. Whole thing. Read the gospel of Mark. And do it with a Christian friend who can walk you through it. If you don't have a Christian friend, I will gladly do it with you. And Christian...I want to invite you to lose yourself in God's word. Maybe its time to make it your home once again. And you'll find an identity in Christ there that will be far more fulfilling, more stabilizing, more peace-giving than anything our world has to offer.

2. Beware of presuming on the grace of God – Verse 22
Daniel says...all that stuff that happened to Nebuchadnezzar...Man you knew ALLL of that. And you STILL chose to exalt yourself against the Lord. Even though you knew that what you were doing was in direct defiance of

God...you did it anyway. And maybe he thought that God would just give him second chance after second chance like he did with King Neb. Maybe he thought...surely as long as I have Daniel around I'll be ok. He presumed on the grace of God. And he forgot that God sets whoever he wants as ruler over his people. And can I tell you one of the most frightening things I hear people say... "I know I shouldn't do this, but God will forgive me, so I'm gonna do it anyway."

I've heard those words verbatim come out of the mouths of people as reasons to engage in all kinds of rebellion against God. Humbly here is what I have to say...if you find yourself trying to get God in a theological loop-hole that will justify your sin – that's called pride. We took pride to task pretty hard last week but we have to come back to it again. There is a reason the book of Daniel has really four episodes of pride all in a row in chapters 2-5. It's because we are SO, SO susceptible to pride.

What we said about pride is that **Pride is replacing God with You**. And every chapter in Daniel is telling you to look at your pride. When you say "God will forgive me so I'll just do it" that is actually revealing you don't worship the most high God. You worship yourself & just call yourself god. Listen though, you will never be able to find true significance, the meaning you are meant to have, until you come to grips with your pride. Think of it this way: Christianity is telling you that God has made a way for you to be saved from your sin. But if you don't think you are sinful & in need of saving...why would you care? But if you come to terms with your sin, the flood gates of God's grace will open and his love will finally satisfy what you've been looking for. Those are the warnings: prioritize his word, beware of your pride

But this also points us towards a source of significance. You see, in one sense the writing on the wall is for all of us: All of our days are numbered, All of us are deficient in some way because we are all sinners, and none of our kingdoms here will last forever. **The sentence on all of us, for our sin, is mene, mene, tekel, & parsin.** Yet the hope of the gospel is that Christ has reversed that sentence.

- In Christ – God offers us eternity with him. To be absent with the body is to be present with Christ. So now that shadow looming in the distance...we don't have to fear it. That's why the apostle Paul says DEATH HAS BEEN SWALLOWED UP IN VICTORY! "WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY DEATH?" So we ask the Lord to teach us to number our days here that we may use them for HIS glory. We don't NEED romance or achievement to find significance.
- Apart from Christ I have been found wanting – That's sin measured against the holiness of God. But the gospel says my sin is forgiven & my record is cleansed by his blood. I'm now hidden with Christ. I wear his righteousness like new clothes and God says welcome home son, welcome home daughter.
- Parsin – My kingdom will fall. The Shelton kingdom, all .5 acres of it, will one day fall away. But we are citizens of an eternal kingdom. I've got eternal significance and an eternal permanent place in God's kingdom so I'm not trying to cling to my kingdom here. I'm just a resident. Which allows me to be open & generous.

Do you know Christ like this? Where he fills you with victory?
with true forgiveness and wholeness where you were once
broken? With purpose & significance? Turn to him...