



Dr. James C. Howell
Daniel 5, Selected Verses
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In our quest to work our way through the Bible in the year 2009, we are about to make that dramatic turn from the Old Testament to the New Testament. We are into our last two weeks in the Old Testament in the Book of Daniel. We have the extraordinary privilege tomorrow night (August 3) to have Dr. Mickey Efirid coming to teach us. Mickey is – I've known him all my adult life, I was his teaching assistant when I was at Duke – flat-out, no-contest, the funniest, most entertaining, most moving, informative instructor that I have ever heard. What I wish I could do is to send you off to the seminary – he teaches Greek and Hebrew there, and he does it with this kind of Southern drawl. You'd expect an elevated British accent doing something like Greek and Hebrew, but he does it with a Southern drawl – it's lovely. You'll want to hear him tomorrow night.

This passage that Bob just read – Belshazzar is the king and he throws a royal banquet and there is gourmet fare and wine is flowing, and the guests feel, they're so cool, they're at the king's palace having a fantastic party. Things just couldn't get any better than this, and suddenly, there is a shriek, and it's not one of the guests, it's the king himself, Belshazzar. What's happened is, he has seen disembodied handwriting on the wall. That sounds kind of creepy, or if you're my age, it reminds you of this old TV show called "The Addams Family." There was this disembodied hand called Thing and Thing would light Gomez's cigar or deliver the mail to Morticia, prompting Morticia to say, "Well, thank you, Thing." A disembodied hand. It was not funny to Belshazzar. There was a disembodied hand and, as I said, here was this great man who would have counted himself the most powerful man on the planet. It says that his color changed, his limbs gave way, his knees knocked. He had seen something that frightened the daylights out of him, disembodied handwriting on the wall. What the hand writes on the wall are these words: *Mene, mene, tekel, uparsin* – it's the names of money, and it just would have been small amounts of money in those days. Our equivalent might be nickel, nickel, penny, dime, just chump change. Belshazzar is being measured by God in amounts that are just chump change, nickel, nickel, penny, dime. Let's have dollars, let's have bonds, let's have something great, but he's measured out chump change. The story is that he is being measured by God. He is found wanting, he is found to be nothing. We know the exact date of this Biblical story, very rare, this happened on October 11 of the year 539 BC. The reason we know that is we know that is the night on which Cyrus the Persian...invaded the city of Babylon and killed King Belshazzar and the kingdom was no more. It fell into Persian hands. This great empire that had boasted...one of the Seven Wonders of the World, this great empire was no more, and on the day that it fell, it was God's writing on the wall that pronounced its fall. The point of this story seems to be that our God is the lord of history, that our God is not mocked, that all great powers, no matter how much they bought themselves, will have an end to their days. They all will be judged. *Mene, mene, tekel, uparsin*. No matter how great they are, they will fall short in God's eyes.

It's interesting that the end of the Babylonian empire came during a party. They were having a party, and it was during the party that everything fell apart, indeed, reminding us of George Washington when he crossed the Delaware and he surprised Colonel Rowles and the

Hessians. It was Christmas Day and they had been doing surely what Jesus was born for, getting drunk, of course. They're drunk on Christmas Day and this is how Washington was able to win this great battle, during a party. The world parties, but God's judgment comes while the world is partying. We live in a partying world, we like to have fun, we like to be cool, we love being invited to something like this great party that the king is throwing.

You know, I was reading a book recently about the early history of Christianity, and it was sort of countering this notion that we get sometimes, that the early Christians were sort of a sour, no-fun kind of people and that they were intolerant, and the author rightly says that the early Christians were, in fact, intolerant. The reason is the pagans tolerated things like poverty and hunger, and the early pagans tolerated things like gladiatorial combat, and the pagans tolerated things like crucifixion, and the pagans tolerated things like public drunkenness, and the pagans tolerated things like unwanted children being exposed and allowed to die. In such a tolerant world, the Christians came, first bearing glad tidings to a hollow, sour people, but they also came being, in fact, intolerant. They would not tolerate poverty and hunger. They believed you were supposed to feed people. They did not tolerate something as cruel as crucifixion as political policy. They did not tolerate gross political, gross, public entertainment like the gladiatorial games. They did not tolerate the exposure of unwanted children because, in the Christian realm, all children are loved, all children are wanted. While the world parties, God writes on the wall *mene, mene, tekel, uparsin*. God is judging all of humanity.

Belshazzar at this party, he does something that's truly terrible, in retrospect. He takes the vessels that had been stolen from the Jerusalem Temple, vessels that were intended for holy use, and he uses them just for whatever he wants to do at the party. He gives a cup that would have been used on the altar to just any wedding guest to drink wine out of. Why does he do this? Does he do it just because he can? Does he do it to try to denigrate another religion or another God? The story says that Belshazzar's gods were gold, silver, wood and stone and iron and bronze.

The question that is raised for us is, What are our gods? It's easy to come to church and say, "Our God is the God of the Bible," but in your real life, who are your gods? What causes you to get up in the morning? What can make your day? What can ruin your day? What really drives you through your life? What is it that you're really after? Who are your gods? The fact is that many of us have to admit that our gods are gold and silver and bronze and wood and iron and stone, the things that we have before us. Who are gods? *Mene, mene, tekel, uparsin*.

We're talking about these Methodist Heritage Days, and as Shane (Page) eloquently said at the beginning of the service, "Our emphasis today is on Holiness." In a way, the story in Daniel 5 is about Holiness, and the fact is...I was in a conversation the other day, by the way, that was just something. I was with some clergy and somebody brought up the name of a relatively new clergy person to town, a relatively new Methodist minister, and somebody said, "Do you know her?" And someone didn't, and she was identified as follows, the person said, "She's the one that's really into holiness." And I just thought, "Ohhh," you see, because all Methodist clergy ought to really be into holiness...The fact is that it's not just the clergy who are supposed to really be into holiness, it's the Methodist people who are supposed to really be into holiness, but the sad fact is we are not. We are really into our lifestyles, we're really into

comforts, we're really into having fun, we're really into blending seamlessly into the world, we're really into being part of the parties that everybody else in the world is having. Have you been to this restaurant, have you been to this entertainment? Ahhh – we're just having a grand time, and holiness never crosses our minds very much. Are our hands clean? Mother Teresa said, "At the end of the day, at the end of the day, look at your hands and speak to them, ask them, "Little hands where have you been today, little hands where have you been, what have you done today? Have you been holy today? Have your hands been like Jesus this day?"

We've forgotten the lesson that I told you about several times, where Flannery O'Connor said, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you odd." We do not care much to be odd, we want to be normal. We want to be very good at being normal. We actually want to be better than other people at being normal, but God calls us to be holy and be very clear, at the end of the day, we will be measured by whether we were holy by what our little hands did. Were we like Jesus or not? *Mene, mene, tekel, uparsin.*

Sometimes I think about books that we require people to read at too early an age. I think I was in the eighth or ninth grade and some English teacher made me read a novel called *Silas Marner* by George Eliot. This is wasted on the young. You should be required to read such a book when you're 30 or when you're 50 or when you're 75. *Silas Marner* is a lovely book. It's the story about a man who was a miser and his whole life was about accumulating money. He would work all day and would accumulate his goal and would come home at night and what he would do, he would count his money. *Mene, mene, tekel, uparsin.* And then the worst conceivable thing happened to him, although really, the best possible thing happened to him. Someone came in his home one day and stole all his money, and he came home and he had no gold to count at night. He couldn't come home and go *mene, mene...* He had no money, and he was distraught, he was forlorn. He couldn't think of a reason to get out of bed in the morning. He saw no purpose to life any longer because all of the money that he had accumulated was gone and in his desperation, he came home one night in a very sour mood, indeed, and as he held up his lamp, he saw – he gasped – he saw gold on the floor. He was so excited, someone had returned the money, and he put the lamp down and he reached out to plunge his hand into the gold, but, as George Eliot put it, he felt in his hand, not hard coin, but instead, soft curls. It was a little girl, a little girl. Her name was Happy, and over time, she brought sunshine and joy and humanity and playfulness and love into his world, delights that he had never known when he had been reduced previously to counting his money by night. Now he had the great light of a child.

You see, the story in Daniel was about a disembodied hand. The goodness of God is that God at the end of the day did not keep sending disembodied hands. God finally sent an embodied hand, two embodied hands. I imagine at that moment that Jesus was born, that Mary, like all other mothers in history, as soon as that child had come out through the pangs of childbirth, she lifted him up, and once he had cried so that she would be assured that he was alive, she did – you know what she did – she took his hands and took those little small, malleable fingers and counted them – one, two, three, four five – one, two, three... – all there, hands of Jesus, God, embodied. Those hands of Jesus grew and became stronger and they worked at Joseph's carpentry business, but, in time, those hands put that work behind, and Jesus went out in the world to fulfill his Heavenly Father's mission. He came to people that no one else would touch. He came to the leper that everyone else said "Ohh, lepers, we'll catch something from

them, run, run, they're unclean, they're unclean." And Jesus came to them and he reached out with his hands, and as he touched their hands, he wrote on their hands the very love and Grace of God. He touched those no one else would touch. And because he did such things, there were evil men who would not have it, and so they took Jesus' perfect, beautiful, holy, divine hands and they nailed those hands to a cross and when those hands were extended on that cross, Jesus was writing for the world the story of the love, the mercy and the power of God. I do not believe that Jesus endured that cross so that you and I could have the same old two-bit life that we've always had, so that we could blend seamlessly into the culture and just have a grand time at the party like everyone else. I think Jesus came and was killed on that cross so that you and I could be different, so that you and I might be like him, so that you and I might be holy. The question at the end of our days will be, "Have we been holy?" When God weighs us out, what will our worth be?

Belshazzar had everything opulent, great wealth, but at the end of the day, he was only worth some chunk change. *Mene, mene, tekel, uparsin*. What will our worth be? Our worth will not be measured in how much fun did we have and how much gold did we have. Our worth will be measured in, Were we holy? Did we believe in Christ as our Savior?

There's one other thing about this holiness – I know I've talked too long, but I want to add one more thing. When John Wesley talked about holiness, he said there were only two kinds of holiness that God would work in us. There's inward holiness – this would be purity of our thoughts. What do we think? Do we have tawdry thoughts? Do we have clean thoughts? What are our actions when we are in private, when no one is looking, are we holy, are our hands holy, are we pure, are we good? He said there is also a social holiness. The question is, "What do you do for people who are out there?" The pagans were willing to tolerate poverty and hunger, but the Christians have never tolerated such. Are we holy socially?

I've been reading a little about economics lately, and, of course, you have Adam Smith, the great guru of capitalism. Adam Smith spoke of – what? The invisible hand, the invisible hand of the economy. He spoke of the self-regulation of the market, the self-regulation of the market, the invisible hand of the economy. I couldn't help but think of this, many of us in our Christian life, it's like we've got an invisible hand, and we're willing to let the market just regulate itself out there. But God calls us not to the invisible hand; God calls us to be visible hands. God calls us not to just let the world regulate itself. God calls us to regulate the world, and because of what we do together we try to change the equation out there. We try to alter where things are headed just on their own. We are called to be the visible hands of Christ in the world. We are called to be holy. We are called to be different from those pagans who would tolerate all kinds of evil in this world. How shall I say it? Jonathan Edwards, the great evangelist from early American history, his wife, Sarah, was writing in her journal one day, and she said, "I want to be a pencil in the hand of God." Think about that.

During this next week and during every week, what are you writing about God with your life? Or to shift the image one more time, I wrote a book years ago called *The Hands of Christ*. When you do this, people send you hand things, photos of hands, candles of hands, anything with hands. I have a son named Noah, do you know how many arks we have at our house? So I got all these hand things and some are interesting. My favorite, though, is of a sculpture, and I've

actually seen the sculpture in person. It's a Rodin sculpture, and its two hands. The hands don't quite touch, but they're sort of together like this – they're forming a space, and the name of that sculpture of two hands is Cathedral, Cathedral.

You and I are called together to let our hands be shaped like the hands of Christ. He calls us to be holy, and when we are holy, together we create a space and in that space, there's room for the people out there who don't know anything else but going to parties and trying to count their money at night. They see the space where God is and we become that cathedral, and they are drawn in to be yet one more who worships God, who looks to God, who understands that our very life depends on the Grace and Mercy of God and that our measure at the end of our days – *mene, mene, tekel, uparsin* – would depend on how much we have lived in that cathedral, that our lives have been a great offering to God. Little hands, little hands, where have you been today? Have you been like Jesus? Have you worked for Jesus? Is it an invisible hand or is it a hand that writes the very words of God, a cathedral? *Mene, mene, tekel, uparsin*. Amen.