



Turning Lost Students into Christ-Centered Laborers

THE HANDWRITING ON THE WALL • Decree of Judgment

What Do I Need to Know About the Passage?

Daniel 5

Chapter five opens with a new administration ruling in Babylon. King Belshazzar is the reigning viceroy, second in command under King Nabonidus. We know from other sources that Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 BC, and that the events of this chapter occurred in 539 BC. At least 23 years, and probably more, have elapsed since the close of chapter 4. In that interval, Daniel has largely been forgotten.

Belshazzar is having a party, and in an act of drunken foolishness, decides he would like to toast the gods of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone, using the goblets taken from the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem. Bad call.

As his guests drink to the praise of empty idols, a hand appears and writes in a script Belshazzar cannot understand, “Mene, Mene, Tekel, Parsin.” He is terrified. Though he has no idea what the writing says, he’s still sober enough to realize that when a disembodied hand appears, and writes on your palace wall, the message probably isn’t good.

Once again, the charlatans who advise the king are at a loss to explain the meaning. Fortunately, the queen knows about Daniel, and suggests that he could give an interpretation. Daniel is summoned, and offered lavish gifts and authority, if he will only explain the mystery to the king. Declining the rewards, he agrees to interpret for the king.

He explains the meanings of the words, and also the messages of judgment they carry. God has numbered the days of Belshazzar’s reign (and tonight he’s on the last number). Belshazzar has been weighed and found wanting, and the kingdom is being given to the Medes and Persians. That night Belshazzar dies, and the prophecy is fulfilled.

There are three lessons in this chapter that you should help your students discover.

God’s Ambassadors

Number one, God is often speaking to non-believers, but they need someone who is a friend of God to help them understand it. This is the third time that God has given a message to someone, and then used Daniel to make the message clear. He explained the dream about the statues in chapter two; he explained the dream about the tree in chapter four; and now he is explaining the handwriting on the wall. This isn’t because God is unable to make Himself clear

What’s the Big Idea?

Chapter five is a snapshot of a different sort of ministry for Daniel. Here you want to show that not all successful ministry ends in faith. Sometimes successful ministry ends in judgment.

What’s the Problem?

In ministry we may feel like failures when people don’t respond in faith. We have a difficult time seeing judgement as a legitimate outcome of our efforts to call people to repentance.



without help, but because God wants to use us as His ambassadors. He gives us the unspeakable privilege of playing a real role in God's eternal purposes. What could possibly be more exciting?

There are trials in peoples lives, events in our culture, even movies in our theaters, that carry messages from God. We, the friends of God, need to interpret these messages to the people around us. We are the ambassadors.

John Eldridge has observed that every story that anyone loves, takes its life from the gospel. The themes that our hearts incline towards, are gospel themes. Stories of rescue and redemption, of a beloved who is pursued by her lover, or of sacrifice for someone cherished, are all taken straight from the gospel. Help your people see that they can come alongside their friends and interpret their longings – the things with which they struggle, and even the movies they watch.

God's Holiness

Two, God is serious about sin. We so often trivialize His holiness and think our sin goes unnoticed. God is jealous for His honor and will not be mocked. We need to be a holy people living upright lives, and we need to be deeply concerned about those around us who aren't. His judgment is real and the stakes are high. Are you participating in unholy things by the TV shows you watch, or the clothes you wear (and coincidentally the stores you advertise)? We should be thoughtful about what part of our culture we go along with, and what parts we avoid. What about the people around you? If they were to die tonight, what would happen to them? Are you mindful that they walk over hell on a rotten covering that could give way at any moment? Everything is at stake.

God's Prerogative

Third and finally, success in ministry is based on our faithful obedience, not the results. Obviously, our desire is to see people turn in faith and believe the gospel. Sometimes, however, successful ministry results in judgment, not mercy. Our job is to tell the truth, and to be gracious in that communication. We should do everything we can to show the beauty of the gospel, but it's God's job to move in peoples' hearts as He sees fit. In His mercy, He has saved billions, including you and I, and for that we give Him praise. But He is also just in punishing those who rebel and refuse to give Him worship.

In ministry, we will see both of these outcomes. In 2 Corinthians 2:14-16, Paul says, "Thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task?"

The answer to that question, is that none of us are equal to it. God, however, gives us the grace to be His ambassadors as we are filled with His Spirit. One excellent definition of successful witnessing is, "Taking the initiative in the power of the Holy Spirit to share Christ, and leaving the results to God." It will be helpful for your students to memorize that definition and understand that they will experience a variety of outcomes in ministry, and that their success is based on their faithful obedience, not the results they see.

What's Our Response?

Encourage people to:

1. Look for opportunities to "interpret" what's happening in the lives of those around them.
2. Live in light of God's holiness – both by seeking to be holy themselves, and by being concerned for those who are in danger of judgment.
3. Understand the true definition of successful witnessing.

What Are the Questions?

Daniel 5

LAUNCH

What has been one of the most discouraging evangelistic experiences you've ever had? When you are sharing your faith what makes you feel like a success? What makes you feel like a failure?

EXPLORE

1. Much has changed since chapter 4. Scan chapter 5, looking for clues about the new setting. What do you see?

2. Who is Belshazzar?

Read vv. 1-6.

3. In v. 5, a hand appears and writes a message on the wall. What has Belshazzar done to provoke this?

Read vv. 7-17.

4. This passage is reminiscent of events in chapters 2 and 4. What unifies these three episodes?

5. Why is Daniel needed to give an interpretation?

6. How can you play a similar role today?

Read vv. 18-24.

7. Daniel gives a review of history which Belshazzar knows, but has chosen to ignore. Why does he do this?

8. When is it appropriate to confront someone with a history of their sin? When is it not?

Read vv. 25-31.

9. Daniel reads and explains the three terms that were written on the wall. Each word has two meanings, which are probably in your footnotes. What are they?

10. What unifies one set of meanings for the words? Why do you think God chose to use them?

11. What is the essence of the overall message?

12. How mindful is your campus of the holiness of God? What can you do to help them be aware of His righteous judgment?

13. How mindful are you of His holiness? Where have you compromised?

14. Was this episode a success, or failure, in the ministry of Daniel?

Read 2 Corinthians 2:14-16.

15. What does the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ smell like?

APPLY

16. When have you felt like your gospel message was spreading the fragrance of life? When have you felt like you were spreading the smell of death?

17. How have those experiences motivated or demotivated you to keep sharing your faith?

18. Since legitimate, successful outcomes vary in ministry, what are some better, more enduring motivations?

What Are the Answers?

1. Apparently, a long time has passed since chapter 4. Daniel is not known by Belshazzar. Nebuchadnezzar is spoken of in the past tense, and thus probably dead. There is a new king. (See “What Do I Need To Know?” for extrabiblical information.)
2. They won’t know this, but he is the second in command under his father Nabonidus. This is why he offers Daniel the “third highest” place in the kingdom. (Nabonidus was first, Belshazzar second, Daniel third.)
3. He used holy articles from the temple to worship false gods. This flagrant disrespect earned God’s judgment.
4. In each case, God gives a message that needs to be interpreted by a mediator.
5. Allow the group to discuss. God uses people to communicate His message.
6. Allow the group to discuss. (See “What Do I Need To Know About the Passage?”)
7. Allow the group to discuss. Daniel’s purpose was to show Belshazzar’s guilt, and the righteousness of God’s judgment.
8. Allow the group to discuss.
9. “Mene” means “numbered” or “mina” (which is a unit of money). “Tekel” means “weighed” or “shekel” (also a unit of money) “Parsin” means “Persia”, or “divided”, or “half shekel” or “half mina.”
10. One set of meanings is a unit of coinage. He may be connecting the judgment to His worship of gold instead of worship of the true God.
11. You’re dead.
12. Allow the group to discuss.
13. Allow the group to discuss.
14. Allow the group to discuss. It was a success.
15. To those who believe, it is the fragrance of life. To those who are perishing, it is the smell of death.
- 16.-17. Allow the group to discuss.
18. Our responsibility is to take the initiative in the power of the Holy Spirit to share Christ, and leave the results to God. Motives to do this may include showing love for God through obedience, or bringing Him glory whether it’s for His justice or mercy. Allow the group to discuss others.

Memorize

Campus Crusade defines successful witnessing as, “Taking the initiative in the power of the Holy Spirit to share Christ, and leaving the results to God.”