

AN IN-DEPTH BIBLE STUDY

WEIGHED AND FOUND WANTING

Belshazzar, the Handwriting on the Wall, and the Scales of Romans 3

Daniel 5 · Jeremiah 27 · Romans 3 · Revelation 6

A journey through history, biblical languages, and a king who knew and drank anyway

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Introduction: A King Who Knew

Daniel 5:22 refuses to let Belshazzar claim ignorance: 'And thou his son, O Belshazzar, hast not humbled thine heart, though thou knewest all this.' The feast that ended with a hand writing four words on a Babylonian palace wall is not a story about a king who stumbled unknowingly into sacrilege. It is a story about a king who had watched his predecessor humbled by the God of Israel, who knew exactly what that humbling had meant, and who called for the sacred vessels of Jerusalem's temple anyway.

This study exists to walk through Daniel 5 slowly: the deliberate provocation of the feast itself, the physical description of a powerful man undone by a hand he could not fight, the words written on the wall and their surprising double meaning as units of currency, Daniel's uncompromising interpretation, and the swift, same-night execution of the verdict. It then traces how the image at the center of the chapter — a person weighed on God's scales and found wanting — becomes, centuries later, Paul's own description of universal human sin in Romans 3:23, and asks what the gospel offers in response to a verdict Daniel delivered five centuries earlier in a Babylonian throne room.

As with the other studies in this series, careful attention is given to the genuine historical and text-critical questions this chapter raises — questions long debated by scholars and substantially clarified, though not entirely resolved, by archaeological discovery.

Did You Know?

For much of the nineteenth century, critical scholars pointed to the figure of Belshazzar as evidence that the book of Daniel was historically unreliable, since no king by that name appeared in the standard king-lists of Babylon known at the time (which listed Nabonidus as the last king before Cyrus's conquest). This changed with the discovery and translation of Babylonian cuneiform texts, including the Nabonidus Cylinder, which confirmed that Belshazzar was real: the son of Nabonidus, who ruled Babylon as co-regent while his father spent extended periods away from the capital, a detail discussed further in Chapter 9.

How to Use This Study

Each chapter includes: (1) the central biblical text; (2) historical and linguistic context; (3) explanations of Hebrew and Aramaic terms; (4) cross references; (5) 'Did You Know?' boxes with historical background; (6) suggestions for maps, diagrams, or illustrations for those teaching this material in a classroom or small group; and (7) questions for personal or group reflection. At the end, you will find a consolidated summary of the main points, a list of further reading organized by theme, and a recommended bibliography for deeper study.

Suggested Illustration

Opening page with a simple illustration of a Babylonian banquet hall, a hand writing on a plastered wall opposite a lampstand, and the four Aramaic words מְנָא מְנָא תְּקֵל וּפְרָסִין — useful for orienting readers to the central scene before beginning the study.

Chapter 1 — Nebuchadnezzar's Humbling: The Precedent Belshazzar Ignored

The Preceding Chapter's Warning

Daniel 5 does not stand alone; it follows directly after Daniel 4's extended account of Nebuchadnezzar's own pride, madness, and eventual restoration. Nebuchadnezzar, at the height of his power, boasted over Babylon ('Is not this great Babylon, that I have built...by the might of my power, and for the honour of my majesty?' Daniel 4:30), and was immediately struck with a period of insanity, driven from human society to live 'with the beasts of the field' (4:32) for 'seven times' (traditionally understood as seven years), until he lifted his eyes to heaven, acknowledged the sovereignty of 'the most High' (4:34-37), and was restored to his kingdom.

A Public, Well-Documented Humiliation

This was not a private or obscure episode. Daniel 4 is framed as a public decree issued by Nebuchadnezzar himself, addressed 'unto all people, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth' (4:1) — meaning the account of his humbling would have been widely known throughout the Babylonian court and beyond, not a forgotten footnote of history by the time of Belshazzar's reign.

Setting Up Daniel 5:22's Indictment

This context is essential for understanding the force of Daniel's later words to Belshazzar: 'though thou knewest all this' (5:22). Belshazzar was not operating in ignorance of how the God of Israel had previously responded to royal pride and the misuse of power. He had, at minimum, access to a well-documented, publicly proclaimed precedent — one involving his own predecessor on the very throne he now occupied.

Did You Know?

The precise family relationship between Belshazzar and Nebuchadnezzar is a genuine historical question addressed at length in Chapter 9; regardless of the exact biological relationship, the Aramaic term for 'son' (בַּר, bar) used throughout Daniel 5 was commonly used in ancient Semitic usage to mean 'successor' or 'descendant in the royal line' more broadly, not necessarily a direct biological father-son relationship.

 **Further Reading:** *Daniel 4:1-37 (the full account of Nebuchadnezzar's humbling); Daniel 5:18-22 (Daniel's later summary of this precedent to Belshazzar).*

Reflection Questions

1. Why does the public, well-documented nature of Nebuchadnezzar's humbling matter for understanding Belshazzar's later actions?
2. How does having access to a clear precedent, and disregarding it anyway, change the moral weight of a later, similar choice?

Chapter 2 — The Feast and the Vessels: A Deliberate Provocation

"Belshazzar, whiles he tasted the wine, commanded to bring the golden and silver vessels which his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple which was in Jerusalem; that the king, and his princes, his wives, and his concubines, might drink therein... They drank wine, and praised the gods of gold, and of silver, of brass, of iron, of wood, and of stone." — Daniel 5:2-4

Specific Vessels, Specifically Chosen

The text is precise about which vessels Belshazzar called for: not generic treasures from Babylon's vast conquered wealth, but specifically 'the golden and silver vessels which his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple which was in Jerusalem' (v. 2) — the very implements consecrated for use in the worship of the God of Israel, described earlier in 2 Kings 25:14-15 and 2 Chronicles 36:18 as having been carried off when Nebuchadnezzar's forces destroyed Solomon's temple decades earlier.

Not Merely Drinking, But Drinking 'Therein'

The text specifies that the king and his court drank 'therein' — using these particular vessels as their drinking cups for the occasion, rather than merely displaying them as trophies of conquest. This detail matters: it transforms a static act of possession (holding captured treasure) into an active, deliberate act of use, incorporating sacred objects directly into a scene of pagan celebration.

Praising Other Gods With Israel's Vessels

Verse 4 records that, while drinking from these vessels, the assembled company 'praised the gods of gold, and of silver, of brass, of iron, of wood, and of stone' — an explicit act of worship directed toward other deities, performed using objects consecrated to the worship of the one true God. This combination of details — specific vessels, active use, and simultaneous praise of rival gods — supports this study's central claim that the feast constituted deliberate provocation rather than careless indifference.

Did You Know?

Jeremiah had prophesied, decades earlier, that the temple vessels taken to Babylon would eventually be returned to Jerusalem (Jeremiah 27:16-22) — a prophecy that would, in fact, be fulfilled after Babylon's fall, when Cyrus of Persia ordered the vessels restored (Ezra 1:7-11). Belshazzar's use of these very vessels for a pagan feast occurred, then, within a period during which their eventual, prophesied return to sacred use in Jerusalem was already a matter of prior prophetic record, even if Belshazzar himself may not have known of Jeremiah's specific prophecy.

 **Further Reading:** 2 Kings 25:13-17; 2 Chronicles 36:18; Jeremiah 27:16-22; Daniel 5:1-4; Ezra 1:7-11.

Reflection Questions

1. How does the specificity of the vessels chosen — not just any treasure, but consecrated temple implements — change your reading of Belshazzar's actions?
2. What does the combination of using these vessels and simultaneously praising other gods suggest about the nature of the offense?

Chapter 3 — The Hand and the Wall: A Body Undone

"In the same hour came forth fingers of a man's hand, and wrote over against the candlestick upon the plaister of the wall of the king's palace... Then the king's countenance was changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his loins were loosed, and his knees smote one against another." — Daniel 5:5-6

An Unmediated, Visible Sign

Unlike many other instances of divine communication in Scripture — dreams, visions, prophetic speech, angelic messengers — the sign given to Belshazzar is startlingly direct and public: a disembodied human hand, visible to the entire assembled company, writing directly on the plastered wall of the banquet hall itself, 'over against the candlestick' (positioned, apparently, to be clearly illuminated and visible to all present, including the king).

A Detailed, Almost Clinical Description

The text's description of Belshazzar's physical reaction is unusually specific for a biblical narrative: his face changed color, his thoughts alarmed him, 'the joints of his loins were loosed' (his hip or leg joints gave way, suggesting a loss of physical control or near-collapse), and 'his knees smote one against another' (his legs shook uncontrollably). This level of physical detail underscores the totality of the king's terror — a ruler at the height of earthly power, surrounded by a thousand of his nobles (v. 1), reduced to visible physical collapse by a sign he could not yet even interpret.

Before Any Words Are Understood

It is worth noting that Belshazzar's terror occurs before Daniel's interpretation is given — the king does not yet know what the writing means, only that its appearance itself, unmediated and inexplicable, signals something profoundly threatening. This detail suggests an instinctive recognition of divine confrontation that precedes, and does not depend upon, full comprehension of the message's content.

A Court in Chaos

Daniel 5:7-9 records the immediate aftermath: the king cries aloud for his wise men, offers extravagant rewards to whoever can interpret the writing, and, when none of them succeed, is described as being 'sore troubled' while his nobles are 'astonied.' The narrative lingers on this interval of collective helplessness — the most powerful men in the empire, gathered in one room, utterly unable to address the crisis before them — before the queen (likely the queen mother, given her apparent familiarity with events from Nebuchadnezzar's earlier reign) intervenes to recommend Daniel specifically (5:10-12), setting up the confrontation the rest of the chapter describes.

Did You Know?

The English idiom 'the writing on the wall,' still commonly used today to describe unmistakable signs of impending failure or disaster, derives directly from this passage — one of several English expressions with roots in the book of Daniel that have become part of everyday language independent of their biblical origin.

 **Further Reading:** *Daniel 5:1, 5-6; Daniel 5:9 (Belshazzar's continued distress, and his nobles' confusion, following the initial sign).*

Reflection Questions

1. Why do you think God chose such a public, visible, and immediate sign in this instance, compared to other Old Testament modes of communication?
2. What does Belshazzar's instinctive terror, prior to any interpretation, suggest about the nature of encountering God's confrontation?

Chapter 4 — Mene, Tekel, Parsin: Words That Were Also Coins

"And this is the writing that was written, MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN." — Daniel 5:25

Familiar Words, Unclear Meaning

Daniel 5:8 records that 'all the king's wise men' were unable to read the writing or make known its interpretation to the king — a detail worth pausing over, since the words themselves, written in Aramaic (the common administrative and commercial language of the region), would likely have been recognizable vocabulary to educated Babylonian court officials, rather than an unknown foreign script.

A Monetary Vocabulary

The three distinct terms — מִנָּה (mene), תֵּקֶל (tekell), and פָּרַס (peras, appearing in the plural/dual form as parsin or upharsin) — correspond to known units of weight and currency in the ancient Near East: a mina (a larger unit of weight/currency, itself equivalent to sixty shekels), a shekel (a standard unit of weight/currency), and a peres or 'half' (understood as half a mina, or in some proposed readings, related to 'Persia' through wordplay, discussed further below). Their repetition and arrangement — mene appearing twice, followed by tekell, followed by parsin — would have been recognizable, in isolation, as a sequence of monetary denominations rather than an obviously coded prophetic message.

Why the Wise Men Could Not Interpret It

This study finds the most compelling explanation for the wise men's inability to interpret the writing not in unfamiliarity with the vocabulary itself, but in the absence of any context connecting these ordinary monetary terms to the specific, applied meaning Daniel would supply. Words for units of currency, standing alone on a wall, do not obviously constitute a message about a king's reign, without an interpretive key connecting the concept of weighing and counting currency to the specific application of judging a kingdom and a king's worth. Daniel's contribution was not superior linguistic knowledge of the Aramaic terms themselves, but Spirit-given insight (Daniel 5:11-12) into their intended application.

Did You Know?

Some scholars have proposed that the terms function as a wordplay operating on two levels simultaneously: as their basic monetary sense (mina, shekel, half-mina/half-shekel) and, through subtle alterations or associations in root meanings, as verbs describing the actions Daniel identifies in his interpretation (numbered, weighed, divided) — meaning the writing may have functioned something like a riddle whose solution required recognizing a wordplay between currency terms and their related verbal roots, a literary device consistent with wordplay techniques found elsewhere in ancient Near Eastern texts.

 **Further Reading:** Daniel 5:5-9, 25-28; Daniel 5:11-12 (the queen's recommendation of Daniel based on his prior demonstrated insight).

Reflection Questions

1. How does understanding these words' basic commercial meaning change your sense of why the wise men struggled to interpret them?
2. What does it suggest about the nature of Daniel's gift that his contribution was insight into application, not merely superior vocabulary knowledge?

Chapter 5 — Daniel's Refusal and His Devastating Speech

"Then Daniel answered and said before the king, Let thy gifts be to thyself, and give thy rewards to another; yet I will read the writing unto the king, and make known to him the interpretation. O thou king, the most high God gave Nebuchadnezzar thy father a kingdom, and majesty, and glory, and honour." — Daniel 5:17-18

A Notable Refusal

Before interpreting anything, Daniel explicitly declines Belshazzar's offered rewards — the promise of purple clothing, a gold chain, and rule as 'third ruler in the kingdom' (5:16) — a detail that distinguishes Daniel's approach here from certain other ancient court-adviser narratives in which interpreters might be expected to seek favor or reward. Daniel's refusal signals that what follows is delivered as unavoidable truth rather than a performance calibrated to please or benefit the messenger.

A History Lesson Before the Interpretation

Rather than proceeding immediately to interpret the writing, Daniel first recounts, at some length (5:18-21), the full account of Nebuchadnezzar's rise, pride, humbling, and restoration — material this study examined in Chapter 1. This structural choice is itself significant: Daniel ensures Belshazzar cannot receive the coming verdict without first being reminded, in detail, of exactly what he already knew and had disregarded.

The Full Weight of the Indictment

Daniel's summary indictment is direct and unsparing: 'thou his son, O Belshazzar, hast not humbled thine heart, though thou knewest all this; but hast lifted up thyself against the Lord of heaven' (5:22-23). The phrase 'lifted up thyself against' (rather than, for instance, 'stumbled into offense against') reinforces the deliberate, willful character of Belshazzar's actions that this study has traced from Chapter 2 onward.

Did You Know?

Daniel's approach here — refusing personal reward while still faithfully delivering a difficult, unwelcome message — mirrors a pattern seen in several other Old Testament prophetic figures who prioritized faithful proclamation over personal benefit or safety, a consistent feature of genuine prophetic ministry throughout Scripture (compare, for example, Micaiah's refusal to soften his message in 1 Kings 22:14).

 **Further Reading:** Daniel 5:13-23; 1 Kings 22:13-14 (a related instance of prophetic refusal to compromise a difficult message).

Reflection Questions

1. Why might Daniel's refusal of reward have strengthened the force and credibility of his subsequent message?

2. What is the significance of Daniel recounting Nebuchadnezzar's history in full before delivering the interpretation, rather than proceeding directly to the verdict?

Chapter 6 — The Verdict: Numbered, Weighed, Divided

"This is the interpretation of the thing: MENE; God hath numbered thy kingdom, and finished it. TEKEL; Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting. PERES; Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians." — Daniel 5:26-28

Three Words, Three Verdicts

Daniel's interpretation assigns each term a specific verbal sense connected to its base meaning: mene ('numbered') relates to counting or measuring a duration, applied here to the length of Belshazzar's reign, now declared complete; tekem ('weighed') relates to the standard use of scales for determining weight or value, applied to a moral and royal assessment of the king himself; peres ('divided') relates to breaking or dividing something into parts, applied to the kingdom's coming partition between conquering powers.

Judgment on the Reign, the King, and the Kingdom

The three-part structure moves methodically from the abstract (the kingdom's allotted time, now finished) to the personal (the king himself, weighed and found insufficient) to the concrete, immediate consequence (the kingdom's actual, physical division and transfer to new rulers). This progression builds toward the specific, devastating conclusion that Belshazzar's reign was not merely criticized but definitively ended.

"Found Wanting": The Heart of the Verdict

The central verdict, 'weighed in the balances, and art found wanting' (tekem), uses the image of a balance scale — a device requiring an object to be measured against a known, fixed standard on the opposite side. The verdict does not merely state that Belshazzar was flawed in some general sense; it declares that when placed against the appropriate standard of divine judgment, he was measured and found insufficient — a specific, decisive, and complete verdict, not an ambiguous or partial one.

Aramaic Term	Base Meaning	Applied Meaning in Daniel's Interpretation
Mene	Numbered / counted	God has numbered (counted out) the days of Belshazzar's reign, and it is finished
Tekel	Weighed	Belshazzar himself has been weighed on the scales and found insufficient
Peres (Upharsin)	Divided	The kingdom is being divided and given to the Medes and Persians

Did You Know?

Some scholars note a further possible wordplay in peres, since the same consonants can evoke 'Persia' (Aramaic Paras) — meaning the very word for 'divided' may have carried an embedded, additional signal of exactly who the kingdom would be divided and given to, a layered wordplay some find remarkably precise for a message that appeared instantaneously on a wall.

 **Further Reading:** *Daniel 5:24-28; Job 31:6 ('let me be weighed in an even balance, that God may know mine integrity').*

Reflection Questions

1. Why might the image of a balance scale be a particularly effective way to communicate the finality and objectivity of divine judgment?
2. How does the three-part structure — reign, king, kingdom — build toward the verdict's full weight?

Chapter 7 — Tekel and Romans 3:23: Weighed and Found Wanting

"For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." — **Romans 3:23**

A Shared Image of Insufficiency

Paul's declaration in Romans 3:23 does not use the specific vocabulary of weighing or scales, but the underlying concept — measurement against a standard, and a universal verdict of insufficiency — closely parallels the image at the heart of Daniel 5's *tekel* verdict. Where Belshazzar was individually weighed and found wanting against the standard of God's justice, Paul extends the same fundamental verdict to all humanity: 'all have sinned, and come short (Greek ὑστεροῦνται, *hysterountai*, 'fall short,' 'lack,' or 'come short of a standard') of the glory of God.'

An Important Distinction: Explicit Citation Versus Thematic Resonance

It is worth being precise about the nature of this connection. Paul does not explicitly cite Daniel 5 in Romans 3, nor does he use the specific Greek equivalent of *tekel*. This study presents the parallel as a meaningful thematic resonance — two texts independently expressing the same fundamental truth about human insufficiency before a divine standard — rather than a direct citation chain. The strength of the connection lies in the shared conceptual structure (measurement against a fixed standard, resulting in a universal or individual verdict of insufficiency), not in verbal dependence of one text upon the other.

From Individual Verdict to Universal Diagnosis

Daniel 5 presents a specific historical individual, judged for specific, documented actions. Romans 3:23 universalizes the underlying principle: not one particular king's particular offense, but the condition of 'all' humanity relative to God's own glory and standard. Read together, the two texts model a movement from a vivid, singular illustration to the doctrine it illustrates in its fullest, most comprehensive form.

Did You Know?

The broader context of Romans 3 (verses 10-18) draws on a cluster of Old Testament citations — from Psalms and Isaiah — to build its case that 'there is none righteous, no, not one' before arriving at the summary verdict of verse 23, demonstrating that Paul's doctrine of universal sinfulness is itself constructed from a wide pattern of Old Testament testimony, of which Daniel 5's individual illustration forms a fitting, though not explicitly cited, complement.

 **Further Reading:** *Romans 3:9-23; Psalm 14:1-3; Isaiah 53:6; Daniel 5:27.*

Reflection Questions

1. How does seeing Belshazzar's individual verdict alongside Paul's universal one deepen your understanding of Romans 3:23?

2. Why is it important to hold this connection as a thematic resonance rather than claiming Paul had Daniel 5 specifically in mind as he wrote?

Chapter 8 — That Very Night: Judgment Without Delay

"In that night was Belshazzar the king of the Chaldeans slain. And Darius the Median took the kingdom, being about threescore and two years old." — Daniel 5:30-31

Immediate Execution of the Verdict

The text records no gap between Daniel's interpretation and its fulfillment: the very night the writing appeared and was interpreted, Belshazzar was killed and the kingdom changed hands. This immediacy reinforces the sense of finality already established by the language of Daniel's interpretation — the verdict was not merely a warning of future possibility but an announcement of an already-decided, imminently executed reality.

A Historically Attested Transition of Power

The fall of Babylon to Persian forces in 539 B.C. is well attested in extra-biblical historical sources, including the Nabonidus Chronicle and the Cyrus Cylinder, both Babylonian records confirming the transition of imperial power to Cyrus the Great's forces around this time. The broad historical event Daniel 5 describes — Babylon's fall to a new imperial power in a single, rapid transition — fits comfortably within the known historical record of the period, even as certain specific details (addressed in Chapter 9) remain subjects of ongoing scholarly discussion.

A Kingdom That Believed Itself Secure

Babylon, protected by massive fortifications and considered by many in the ancient world to be effectively impregnable, fell with a swiftness that Daniel 5 presents as directly tied to the divine verdict delivered that same evening. Whatever the precise military mechanics of the city's fall (a question historians continue to study), the theological point Daniel 5 makes is unambiguous: no human fortification or accumulated power provides security against the verdict of 'the Most High' when He has determined a kingdom's time is finished (compare Daniel 4:17, 25, 32, establishing this principle already in the preceding chapter).

Did You Know?

The Cyrus Cylinder, a famous Babylonian clay artifact now held at the British Museum, records Cyrus's own account of his conquest of Babylon, describing the city's capture in terms that suggest relatively little resistance or destruction — a detail some historians connect to accounts of the city being taken via strategic or diplomatic means rather than prolonged siege warfare, broadly consistent with the swift, decisive transition Daniel 5 describes, even though the Cylinder itself does not reference Belshazzar, the handwriting, or Daniel specifically.

 **Further Reading:** *Daniel 5:30-31; Daniel 4:17, 25, 32; Isaiah 21:1-10 (an earlier prophetic anticipation of Babylon's fall).*

Reflection Questions

1. How does the swiftness of the verdict's fulfillment — that same night — reinforce the sense of God's sovereign authority over human kingdoms?
2. What does it mean that even a city considered nearly impregnable fell so rapidly once its 'time' had been determined?

Chapter 9 — Common Questions and Historical Caution

Daniel 5 raises several genuine historical questions that careful readers should address directly rather than avoid.

"Was Belshazzar a real historical figure?"

Yes, and this is now well established. As noted in this study's introduction, nineteenth-century critical scholars once cited the absence of any 'Belshazzar' from known Babylonian king-lists as evidence against Daniel's historical reliability, since Nabonidus was understood to be Babylon's last king before Cyrus's conquest. The discovery and translation of Babylonian texts, including the Nabonidus Cylinder and various administrative and business documents, confirmed that Belshazzar (Akkadian Bel-shar-usur) was Nabonidus's son and functioned as co-regent, ruling in Babylon while Nabonidus spent extended periods at Tayma in Arabia — a historical detail unknown to nineteenth-century scholars but since confirmed by primary Babylonian sources.

"Was Belshazzar actually Nebuchadnezzar's son?"

This remains a genuine point requiring careful handling. Babylonian records identify Belshazzar as the son of Nabonidus, not Nebuchadnezzar, and Nabonidus does not appear to have been a blood descendant of Nebuchadnezzar's line. Several explanations have been proposed: that 'son' (Aramaic *bar*) was used in a broader dynastic sense meaning 'successor' or 'descendant of the royal house' rather than strictly biological offspring (a usage attested elsewhere in the ancient Near East, compare the Assyrian king Jehu being called 'son of Omri' on the Black Obelisk despite no blood relation); or that Nabonidus's wife (and thus Belshazzar's mother) may have been a daughter of Nebuchadnezzar, making Belshazzar a grandson through the maternal line, though this specific genealogical claim is not conclusively documented in surviving sources. This study holds the broader dynastic-usage explanation as the most likely and best-attested resolution, while acknowledging some uncertainty remains regarding the precise family relationship.

"Who was 'Darius the Mede'?"

This is perhaps the most actively debated historical question connected to Daniel 5. No extra-biblical source identifies a ruler by exactly this name and title corresponding straightforwardly to the period immediately following Babylon's fall to Cyrus. Proposed identifications include: Darius the Mede as a throne name or title for Gubaru (Gobryas), the Persian-appointed governor of Babylon under Cyrus; as an alternative name or title for Cyrus himself; or as a distinct historical figure not otherwise well documented in surviving records. This study does not resolve this question definitively, since the evidence remains genuinely debated among evangelical and critical scholars alike, and presents it honestly as an open historical question rather than a settled matter.

Did You Know?

The resolution of the Belshazzar question — from a supposed proof of Daniel's unreliability to a confirmed historical detail unknown to earlier critics — is frequently cited as a caution against assuming that an absence of extra-biblical corroboration for a biblical detail is itself proof the detail is unhistorical; the 'Darius the Mede' question may yet see similar clarification from future archaeological discovery, though this study does not claim to know how it will ultimately be resolved.

 **Further Reading:** *Daniel 5:1-2, 30-31; Daniel 6:1 (further reference to Darius the Mede's reign).*

Reflection Questions

1. How does the historical resolution of the Belshazzar question affect your confidence in engaging honestly with other still-unresolved historical questions in Scripture?
2. Why is it more trustworthy to acknowledge an open historical question directly than to force a confident but unsupported resolution?

Chapter 10 — Practical Applications for the Christian Life

Belshazzar's feast, and the pattern of judgment and grace it reveals, carries direct implications for how believers understand accountability, sin, and the gospel's answer to human insufficiency.

1. Known Truth Carries Real Responsibility

Daniel 5:22's indictment — 'though thou knewest all this' — reminds believers that accumulated knowledge of God's character and past dealings increases, rather than excuses, responsibility for how that knowledge is acted upon. This is a sobering but clarifying principle for self-examination: what do we already know about God's character that we may be disregarding in our own choices?

2. Nothing Sacred Is Safe From Misuse Without Consequence

Belshazzar's specific choice to use consecrated vessels for profane celebration models a pattern worth examining in one's own life: are there things set apart for God's purposes — time, resources, relationships, gifts — being redirected toward self-serving or dismissive ends? This study's careful attention to Belshazzar's deliberate choice, rather than careless accident, invites honest self-examination about similarly deliberate choices in believers' own lives.

3. The Scales Declare a Verdict We Cannot Change Ourselves

Romans 3:23's universal application of the tekel principle — all have been weighed, all fall short — removes any possibility of self-justification through comparison to others. Every person stands, individually, under the same verdict Belshazzar received, unable to alter the scale's reading through personal effort or accumulated merit.

4. The Gospel Answers the Verdict, Not by Erasing It, But by Transferring It

Where Belshazzar's story ends with the verdict fully and immediately executed against him personally, the gospel offers something structurally different: the same verdict of insufficiency, but carried by Christ on behalf of those who trust in Him (2 Corinthians 5:21, discussed at greater length in an earlier study on the bronze serpent). Believers can hold both truths together: the verdict of Romans 3:23 is real and inescapable on its own terms, and Christ's substitutionary death is the only means by which that verdict's consequence is not personally borne by the believer.

5. God's Sovereignty Over History Remains Unshaken

Belshazzar's fall, and the swift transfer of Babylon's power to Persia, illustrates a principle stated explicitly already in Daniel 4: 'the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will' (4:25). Believers navigating uncertain political or historical circumstances in their own era can find grounding in this

consistent biblical testimony to God's ultimate sovereignty over human power structures, regardless of how permanent or unassailable those structures may appear.

 Did You Know?

Daniel himself, according to Daniel 5:29 and 6:1-3, continued to serve in a position of significant authority under the new Medo-Persian administration following Belshazzar's fall — a detail suggesting that faithful service to God did not require political neutrality or withdrawal from public life, even across a dramatic and violent transition of imperial power.

Reflection Questions

1. Which of these five applications feels most relevant to an area of accountability or self-examination in your own life right now?
2. How does holding together the reality of the verdict in Romans 3:23 and the hope of the gospel's answer shape the way you think about your own standing before God?

Appendix: Daniel's Refusal and the Character It Reveals

It is worth returning briefly to a detail already noted in Chapter 5, since it says something about Daniel himself worth sitting with a little longer. By the time of Belshazzar's feast, Daniel was, by his own account elsewhere in the book, an old man — likely in his eighties, having served in the Babylonian court since his youth under Nebuchadnezzar decades earlier (compare Daniel 1:1-6 for his arrival as a young man, and the length of Nebuchadnezzar's reign plus the subsequent years before Belshazzar's fall).

An aging courtier, summoned to a chaotic, terrified royal court in the middle of the night, might reasonably have been tempted to soften an unwelcome message, or to accept the considerable rewards offered — purple robes, a gold chain, the position of third ruler in the kingdom — regardless of what he was about to say. Daniel does neither. He declines the reward before he has even delivered the message, and then delivers a message that could not have been less flattering to the man offering it.

This detail is not incidental to the chapter's larger argument. A messenger who has nothing to gain personally from softening or sharpening a message is a more credible witness to that message's content. Daniel's refusal of reward functions, in effect, as a form of testimony in itself: whatever else is true about Belshazzar's judgment, it was not shaped by any incentive Daniel stood to gain from delivering it in a particular way.

Did You Know?

This same Daniel would go on to serve, according to Daniel 6, well into the reign of the new Medo-Persian administration — meaning his career as a faithful, undiplomatic truth-teller in foreign courts spanned the reigns of at least four different kings across two successive empires, a remarkable record of consistent integrity across a lifetime of political upheaval.

This pattern of unflinching honesty regardless of personal cost recurs throughout the book that bears Daniel's name, from his initial refusal to defile himself with the king's food as a young exile (Daniel 1:8) to his continued prayer in open defiance of a royal decree designed specifically to trap him (Daniel 6:10). The Daniel who stands before Belshazzar in chapter 5 is not acting out of character; he is simply the same man he had always been, decades into a long career of consistent, costly integrity in courts that had every incentive to reward flattery instead.

A Closing Reflection: The Verdict That Found an Answer

Belshazzar's story ends exactly where the scales declared it would: numbered, weighed, divided, finished — all in a single night, with no appeal, no delay, and no substitute standing in his place. Read on its own, Daniel 5 offers no relief from that verdict, only its swift and total execution.

Read alongside Romans 3, the same verdict reappears — not as Belshazzar's alone, but as the condition of 'all' who have ever been weighed against the glory of God. What Daniel 5 does not offer, the rest of Scripture does: a place where the verdict of tekel was not simply carried out against the one found wanting, but carried by another in his place. The scales did not change. What changed was who stood on them.

This is the same pattern this study series has traced from a different angle in its earlier treatment of the bronze serpent lifted in the wilderness, and in the mercy seat of the Ark: judgment that is real, and grace that does not pretend otherwise, meeting at a single point in history where the deficit of everyone who has ever been weighed and found wanting was, in the language of the cross rather than the language of Babylon, declared paid in full.

 **Further Reading:** *Daniel 5:26-28; Romans 3:23-26; 2 Corinthians 5:21.*

Summary of Key Points

- Daniel 5:22 explicitly states that Belshazzar knew about Nebuchadnezzar's earlier humbling by God (recounted in Daniel 4), making his later actions deliberate defiance rather than innocent ignorance.
- Belshazzar specifically called for the consecrated gold and silver vessels taken from Jerusalem's temple, actively drinking from them while praising other gods — a deliberate, provocative combination of details, not careless indifference.
- A disembodied hand appeared and wrote on the palace wall in full view of the king and his nobles, producing an immediate, visible physical collapse in Belshazzar even before the writing's meaning was known.
- The words written — mene, mene, tekel, and parsin/upharsin — were recognizable Aramaic terms for units of currency (a mina, a shekel, and a half-mina/half-shekel), and the wise men's inability to interpret them likely reflects a lack of applied context rather than unfamiliarity with the vocabulary itself.
- Daniel refused Belshazzar's offered rewards before delivering the interpretation: the kingdom's time was numbered and finished (mene), the king himself had been weighed and found insufficient (tekel), and the kingdom would be divided and given to the Medes and Persians (peres).
- The verdict was executed that same night — Belshazzar was killed, and the kingdom changed hands — consistent with the broader, historically attested fall of Babylon to Persian forces around 539 B.C.
- Romans 3:23's declaration that 'all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God' shares a meaningful thematic resonance with Daniel 5's tekell verdict, though this is a well-supported theological parallel rather than an explicit New Testament citation of Daniel 5.
- Genuine historical questions remain regarding Belshazzar's precise family relationship to Nebuchadnezzar and the identity of 'Darius the Mede,' both addressed honestly in this study as areas of legitimate, ongoing scholarly discussion rather than settled certainties.
- Practically, this study grounds the seriousness of accountability for known truth, honest self-examination regarding the misuse of what is set apart for God, sober acknowledgment of universal insufficiency before God's standard, hope in the gospel's substitutionary answer to that verdict, and confidence in God's ultimate sovereignty over human history.

Further Reading by Theme

On Daniel 4 and Nebuchadnezzar's Humbling

Daniel 4:1-37; Isaiah 14:12-15 (a related motif of pride preceding a fall).

On the Full Account of Belshazzar's Feast

Daniel 5:1-31 (best read in its entirety in a single sitting).

On the Temple Vessels and Their Later Return

2 Kings 25:13-17; Jeremiah 27:16-22; Ezra 1:7-11; Ezra 5:14-15.

On Universal Sin and the Gospel's Answer

Romans 3:9-26; Psalm 14:1-3; Isaiah 53:4-6; 2 Corinthians 5:21.

On God's Sovereignty Over Human Kingdoms

Daniel 2:20-21; Daniel 4:17, 25, 32-35; Psalm 75:6-7; Proverbs 21:1.

Bibliography and Recommended References

The works below are recommended for readers who wish to go further than this introductory study, whether through academic commentaries or accessible reference resources.

Commentaries on Daniel

- GOLDINGAY, John. Daniel. Word Biblical Commentary. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.
- LUCAS, Ernest C. Daniel. Apollos Old Testament Commentary. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.
- MILLER, Stephen R. Daniel. New American Commentary. Nashville: B&H Publishing Group.
- COLLINS, John J. Daniel: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel. Hermeneia. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

On the Historical Background of Belshazzar and Babylon's Fall

- WISEMAN, Donald J. Nebuchadrezzar and Babylon. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- BEAULIEU, Paul-Alain. The Reign of Nabonidus, King of Babylon 556-539 B.C. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- KUHRT, Amélie. The Ancient Near East, c. 3000-330 BC. London: Routledge (for broader historical context, including the Cyrus Cylinder and Nabonidus Chronicle).

On Romans 3 and the Doctrine of Universal Sin

- MOO, Douglas J. The Epistle to the Romans. New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- SCHREINER, Thomas R. Romans. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

On the Identity of Darius the Mede

- WISEMAN, Donald J. 'Some Historical Problems in the Book of Daniel,' in Notes on Some Problems in the Book of Daniel. London: Tyndale Press.
- SHEA, William H. 'Darius the Mede: An Update,' Andrews University Seminary Studies (for one proposed evangelical identification, among several scholarly views).

Dictionaries and Original-Language Tools

- BROWN, DRIVER, BRIGGS. A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament (BDB), including its treatment of Biblical Aramaic vocabulary.
- VINE, W. E. Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words.

— End of Study —