

# Daniel 5:1-4

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*At a great feast, King Belshazzar drunkenly calls for the Jerusalem temple cups to be brought from the treasury. He and his nobles, wives, and concubines drink from these sacred cups and then worship idols.*

Over twenty years have passed between the events of [Daniel 4](#) and this chapter. Someone named *Belshazzar* is introduced to readers as *king*. Belshazzar was the grandson of King Nebuchadnezzar. Belshazzar's father, Nabonidus, likely married one of Nebuchadnezzar's daughters, yet spent most of his time as king away from Babylon, giving authority to his son and heir, Belshazzar. The passage calls Nebuchadnezzar the *father* of Belshazzar, though this word (אב, 'ab') can mean something like forefather or predecessor.

History outside the Bible tells us that the Medes and Persians were besieging the city of Babylon at the time of this feast. Belshazzar was either ignoring the problem of the siege, or more likely was overconfident in the strength of Babylon. Babylon was the capital city of the most powerful empire at the time, yet an empire in decline. The city of Babylon was expansive, surrounded by massive walls.

Within it were farms and the Euphrates river, so it was self-sustaining, and not vulnerable to siege. Also the walls were considered unassailable. However, the Persians did something the Babylonians apparently did not consider. They

diverted the Euphrates river, then just walked in under the wall. The Greek historian Herodotus writes that the Babylonians in the center of the city were unaware of when the Persians entered it, because they were “celebrating a festival at that moment, and so they sang and danced and enjoyed themselves until they found out all too well what had happened” (Herodotus’ Book 1, 191). This mirrors [Daniel 5](#). Belshazzar *held a great feast for a thousand of his nobles*. The wealthy rulers of Babylon were celebrating and eating, believing they were safe from the invaders outside the city.

The passage makes note of Belshazzar’s drinking alcohol. He is *drinking wine in the presence of the thousand nobles* at his feast. This drinking is public and highlighted by the author, probably to show its excess. Belshazzar’s drinking results in him giving *orders to bring the gold and silver vessels from the temple which was in Jerusalem*. These vessels were taken when *Nebuchadnezzar his father* conquered Jerusalem, when Daniel and the other Jewish slaves were brought to Babylon. In [Daniel 1](#), the vessels are specifically mentioned: “The Lord gave” Nebuchadnezzar “some of the vessels of the house of God” which he carried back with him to Babylon, and put “the vessels into the treasury of his god” ([Daniel 1:2](#)).

So, when *Belshazzar* tastes *the wine*—likely meaning he was drunk—he gives a brash order to bring out the sacred vessels from his grandfather’s conquest in Judah many decades ago. His purpose for these vessels was that he *and his nobles, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them*.

There was no practical reason to do this. The party was already drinking wine, so clearly there were cups at the table. Belshazzar wants to drink from the holy plundered vessels. We are not told why he makes this decision. Perhaps, with the Medes and Persians besieging his city, his mind turns to the old spoils of war from his grandfather's powerful reign, a better time for Babylon. Perhaps he believes focusing on conquests of other peoples and other gods will raise morale. Or, perhaps it is as simple as drunken vanity; he desires to drink from *gold and silver* to show off his kingliness and possessions. Whatever the reason, it might indicate what we will soon hear directly from God—that Belshazzar's reign will be judged because of his arrogance and pride. It seems we are told about Belshazzar requesting to drink from the holy vessels to demonstrate that he is asinine and self-serving. This is apparently a picture of how he has ruled. He desires to desecrate the vessels of the Living God, and the Living God will respond to him.

And so the king's command is obeyed. His servants bring *the gold vessels that had been taken out of the temple, the house of God which was in Jerusalem*. Belshazzar, *his nobles, his wives, and his concubines* proceed to drink from the vessels.

Adding further insult to God, they not only drink *the wine* from the vessels, but they praise *the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone*. Babylon was a polytheistic civilization; it worshiped many gods. There is an ugly contrast in praising gods made of elements, lifeless images crafted from natural materials, while drinking from the vessels of the Living God. Belshazzar praises mute, inert, created things, in defiance to the Creator—the

God of Judah, the Most High. Belshazzar's grandfather, Nebuchadnezzar, came to acknowledge and fear God as a "God of gods and a Lord of kings" ([Daniel 2:47](#)), "the Most High God" ([Daniel 3:26, 4:2](#)). Roughly a couple of decades later, Belshazzar does not share this humility or understanding. His gods are statues made of metal, wood, and stone.

### **Biblical Text:**

**Belshazzar the king held a great feast for a thousand of his nobles, and he was drinking wine in the presence of the thousand. <sup>2</sup> When Belshazzar tasted the wine, he gave orders to bring the gold and silver vessels which Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken out of the temple which was in Jerusalem, so that the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines might drink from them. <sup>3</sup> Then they brought the gold vessels that had been taken out of the temple, the house of God which was in Jerusalem; and the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines drank from them. <sup>4</sup> They drank the wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone.**