

Daniel 5:5-9

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A hand appears and carves words into the wall. King Belshazzar is terrified to see this strange sight. He calls all of his magicians and wisemen to interpret the message, but none can. Everyone is alarmed and confused.

King Belshazzar is hosting a feast for one thousand of his nobles. The Medes and Persians are besieging the city of Babylon outside, but the king chooses to drink and show off to his subjects. With a lot of wine in him, he calls for the plundered vessels taken from the Jerusalem temple to be brought to the feast. From these vessels, he, his wives, his mistresses, and his nobles drink wine. Then they praise idols of precious metals, wood, and stone.

The divine response to Belshazzar's idolatry and arrogance is immediate. God answers his actions in a supernatural and unsettling way: *Suddenly the fingers of a man's hand emerged in front of everyone at the feast and began writing on the plaster of the wall.* In the midst of feasting and drinking and laughter, a hand without a body begins to etch words into the wall. This immediately grabs Belshazzar's attention as he sees *the back of the hand that did the writing.* Even a sober person would probably react the way he does; his *face grows pale* and he is *alarmed by his thoughts; his hip joints go slack and his knees begin knocking together.* What he is witnessing is so bizarre and frightening that the blood has left his face and his body is shaking uncontrollably. His own thoughts are disturbing to him as his human brain tries to process this supernatural sight.

Apparently, the hand disappears, leaving only the words it wrote in the wall. Belshazzar takes action to unravel this mystery. He calls *aloud* in a panic for his *conjurers* (magicians), the *Chaldeans* (astrologers) and the *diviners* (fortune tellers or prophets). God has communicated to Belshazzar, so he summons the court spiritualists to translate the message. Once gathered, these *wise men of Babylon* are offered a magnificent reward if they can tell Belshazzar what the writing on the wall means. Still drunk and panicked, Belshazzar promises that whoever *can read this inscription and explain its interpretation* to the king will be *clothed in purple* and be given a golden *necklace*. Even better, the interpreter will be given *authority as third ruler in the kingdom.* The fact that Belshazzar promises the position of *third ruler* likely points to the co-rulership between him and his father, Nabonidus, who is abroad.

After hearing the promise of power and wealth, Belshazzar's *wise men* look at the writing on the wall, but they *can not read the inscription or make known its interpretation.* It is interesting that not only do the wise men fail to interpret the writing, they cannot even read it. The words were written in the plaster of the wall. They are carved into it. The words haven't gone anywhere. The written words are Aramaic, the language of Babylon. So it may be that the wise men's failure to *read the inscription* means they cannot make sense of it. If we put ourselves into that context, and a supernatural hand writes on a wall "reckon, number, weigh, divide," the meaning would not be apparent to that crowd.

It is obvious that at this time Daniel has fallen out of favor, as he is not among the group of advisors who are called in. This is likely another demonstration of King Belshazzar's poor judgment. The king is *greatly alarmed* that none of his magicians, astrologers, or diviners cannot explain the written words. His face grows *even paler* than before. He has witnessed a supernatural event, which terrifies him, and the inability to explain it alarms him even more. The *nobles* at this feast are *perplexed*. Everyone gathered there is overwhelmed by the mystery.

⁵ Suddenly the fingers of a man's hand emerged and began writing opposite the lampstand on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace, and the king saw the back of the hand that did the writing. ⁶ Then the king's face grew pale and his thoughts alarmed him, and his hip joints went slack and his knees began knocking together. ⁷ The king called aloud to bring in the conjurers, the Chaldeans and the diviners. The king spoke and said to the wise men of Babylon, "Any man who can read this inscription and explain its interpretation to me shall be clothed with purple and *have* a necklace of gold around his neck, and have authority as third *ruler* in the kingdom." ⁸ Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the inscription or make known its interpretation to the king. ⁹ Then King Belshazzar was greatly alarmed, his face grew *even* paler, and his nobles were perplexed.