

God Wins©
Daniel 5:1-31

For the past couple of decades, television producers and book publishers have been scheduling the release of controversial or scandalous religious products for the Easter holiday, in order to create a buzz and boost sales. A few years ago, it was *The Da Vinci Code*; this year, it was Pastor Rob Bell's book *Love Wins*.

The thesis of *Love Wins* is that the doctrines of judgment and hell make an unappealing story. The solution is not merely to downplay these biblical teachings, but to deny them outright: the only people who face judgment or go to hell are those who *want to*, and they can leave any time they want (besides, it's not clear that they will be suffering while there); eventually, all will reconcile to God. While a great deal of Scripture could be mustered from across Scripture to refute this old heresy, we look this week, first, at the original point of Daniel 5, and, then, at its relevance for Bell's proposal.

Day 1: Daniel 5 The 'Big Idea', part one: Our God reigns

Whenever we approach a text of Scripture, our first goal should always be the same: the original point of this text and its first application, and how that point might apply directly today. And our first reflex should be to expect that the main point will be about God. The main point of Daniel 5 is transparent. A disembodied hand spookily writes a message of judgment on the wall during a royal feast: the king will die for sacrilege. Belshazzar is assassinated that same night. The point? God is sovereign over all kings and kingdoms, over all powers and all superpowers.

The original application of this text considers the setting of the story, and the context of its original readers, in exile. The message of Daniel, and of Daniel 5, is that the exile is not something God could not prevent, but something he actually caused, in order to punish Judah for its sin. God remains sovereign over both conquered and conqueror: he passes sentence on mighty Belshazzar, and the king dies that very night. So the original application is: despite the exile, God still reigns over all empires and all emperors.

Today, Daniel 5 applies most directly to the Christian Church where it faces persecution. God is sovereign in all circumstances, no matter how bleak, even when his people suffer and die. His Church – and our individual lives – are not subject to fickle fate or to random violence, but are under his control, whether in hard times or in easy ... a useful lesson both in countries where the Church suffers persecution, and in economies when

many Christians suffer hardship. Whatever our circumstance, God reigns.

Day 2: Daniel 5:18-23 The 'Big Idea', part two: Those who mock God die

A second aspect of the 'big idea' (not a separate, second 'big idea') considers, 'What did Belshazzar do to warrant death?' This is likely to be something we can learn from, something we should avoid at all costs.

The immediate literary context provides the answer. In the preceding chapter, the previous king also came under the judgment of God, but was merely exiled for seven years, not assassinated. What makes Belshazzar's sin so much worse than Nebuchadnezzar's? Daniel 5 gives particular attention to this question, contrasting the two sins in 5:18-21 and 5:22-23.

The former, 5:18-21, identifies Nebuchadnezzar's sin as pride. As we saw in Daniel 4, his power and his success went to his head. Scanning the city horizon, he took credit for it all: "Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?" (4:30). "No," says God, "you rule at my discretion, and until you learn that, I will depose you" (4:32). According to Daniel 5, Belshazzar's sin is worse in two regards. First, he fails to learn humility from his predecessor's experience. Instead, secondly, he goes so far as to gloat over God. He takes sacred vessels from the Jerusalem temple and profanes them by using them in a drunken feast. Additionally, instead of honoring the sovereign God, he uses God's vessels to honor impotent idols. God sentences him to death for his Insolence and sacrilege.

What message did this send to Daniel's generation? The Babylonians appeared to conquer not only their nation, but also their God. Military defeat not only destroyed their nation, but also threatened their faith. In response, Daniel proclaims that those who mock God will know his power first-hand, and they will come to regret their insolence.

What message does this send, and to whom, today? It assures the Church, where it is under the boot of either totalitarian regime or totalitarian religion, that God is not vanquished, and will not be mocked. Sooner or later, he calls all to account, and puts all in their place, whether they deny him outright or worship other gods instead. (Daniel 1-6 indicates that he will sometimes do this sooner; Daniel 7-12, sometimes later.)

What message does this send to us who do not suffer, in a culture which does not worship idols? In two respects, people today continue to mock God. Cognitively, a new coterie of atheist-evangelists has recently arisen: Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and so forth. Morally, our culture as a whole mocks biblical standards, especially on sexuality and on greed. STDs and a near meltdown of the American

economy may be a first sign of what is certain to come, when God judges those who mock him.

Day 3 Daniel 5 Which gospel is true: Rob Bell's or the OT's?

Does 'love win'? Are only those people condemned who choose this fate for themselves? And is this fate remedial, with people coming and going as they please? Daniel clearly indicates that Belshazzar's death is God's judicial verdict on him for blasphemy, not his own preference, and it is final, not remedial. Is the book of Daniel "first and foremost about the love of God for every single one of us" (Bell p. vii). No, it is first and foremost about the sovereignty of God, and the respect due him. Secondly, it is about both his love *and* his justice. In fact, given the context of Judah's sin and Babylon's arrogance, Daniel spends far more time reinforcing the wrath and judgment of God, than his love and mercy. 'Love' may not win here, but God does. While we may not enjoy this reality, and may want to be careful how we communicate it to those who do not know God, we cannot claim to accept God's word while rejecting this truth: *love* does not always win, but *God* does.

Day 4 Romans 1:18-32 Which gospel is true: Rob Bell's or the NT's?

Bell bases his argument mostly on the New Testament, particularly on the gospel: "*Jesus's story* is first and foremost about the love of God for every single one of us" (p. vii, emphasis added). This narrow focus makes good sense: the Old Testament is widely recognized as giving heavy emphasis to divine judgment. So can Bell's gospel be sustained at least from the New Testament? No.

Romans provides Paul's fullest exposition of the gospel, and it begins entirely in harmony with Daniel 5, warning of judgment against those who reject or mock God. In 1:18, Paul lays out a two-fold indictment of human beings for (a) godlessness, and (b) wickedness. In 1:19-23, he expands on the godlessness: though people readily perceive two of God's attributes from creation (he is eternal and he is divine: that is, he precedes creation, and he exists outside creation), instead of worshipping him, they, like Belshazzar, worship other gods and idols. In 1:29-32, he expands on the wickedness: though people intuitively sense God's moral standards, they flagrantly violate them. As a result, they 'deserve death'.

This New Testament exposition of the human spiritual condition is identical with Daniel's description of Belshazzar's condition: mankind rejects the true God and worships other gods. As a result, they – we – deserve death. The gospel is first and foremost about *God*, not just his

love, but also his sovereignty and his justice, and his insistence that all worship him alone, as well as his judgment against those who refuse.

Day 5 Romans 5:6-10 Which gospel makes a 'better story'?

Bell places less emphasis on the biblical *truth* of his gospel than on its *appeal*. "Which makes a better story," he asks: One in which people come under judgment, or one in which everyone is saved? Yet he gives no thought to the downside – to the negative corollaries – of his gospel. A story in which all enjoy God's salvation requires that God be tolerant of sin, negligent in judgment, and willing for his Son to die brutally for no purpose. This is the old 'liberal gospel': in Richard Niebuhr's caustic critique, "A God without wrath / brings men without sin / into a kingdom without judgment / through Christ who does not need to die on a cross."

The biblical gospel, in contrast, proclaims the sin of man, as well as the wrath and judgment of God. At the same time, it offers a God whose love for us is so deep, and whose passion for us is so strong, that he sends his own Son to die on a cross, so that we might be saved. Which is the better story? A lax God who is tolerant of sin, and indulgent toward sinners? Or a holy God who deeply loathes sin, but even more deeply loves sinners, and pays the ultimate price for their salvation?

Day 6 Romans 5:1-5 How does all this affect how we live?

God is sovereign, even when his people suffer. God is sovereign, even when his name is mocked. All people will one day experience his sovereignty: those who have embraced him will enter his presence; those who disregarded him will enter judgment. Man is sinful; God is angry; sin brings judgment; but God brings salvation through the death of his son on the cross. This is the gospel of Old Testament and New ... no matter what a megachurch pastor may teach, and no matter how many books he may sell, no matter how much our culture may prefer a gospel that tolerates sin and indulges sinners. Our role is not to shape the gospel; its role is to shape us.

How should this gospel shape us? Paul explains one facet, in Romans 5:1-5. Our salvation brings peace with God, and a firm expectation of future glory. A hope that sustains us in suffering, that empowers us to face the future – and death – with confidence. A hope that is firm and strong, because it is based on the death of Christ for us, and the life of the Spirit in us. Our God gets angry at sin, but he is kindly disposed toward us. And he welcomes all who come to him, and rejects all who refuse or mock him. This is the gospel of both Old and New Testaments.

God has no other gospel.