

The Judgement of God

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 January 2000

Preacher: Rev J.A.M.Mackay

[0 : 00] after a break away from this book of prophecy, I want us to turn again to what this man of God has to say to us.

We come tonight face to face with a rather terrible subject. It is the subject of the judgment of God. Well, that at least is the particular title that I have selected for our own brief glimpse at this chapter here. The judgment of God.

We may be accused at times of perhaps repeating ourselves and of maybe overemphasizing certain aspects of God's truth, maybe at the expense of others.

And yet when we come to it in God's word, we cannot just avoid it and pretend that it isn't there. As soon as we come into this chapter, I don't know what you have felt yourself when you have read it through, either tonight or at other times.

[1 : 14] But I feel for myself that as soon as I come into this chapter of God's word, we feel there is something wrong. There is a whole atmosphere of impending calamity that leaves us rather frightened from the very beginning.

It may be perhaps that nowadays we can't identify so directly with this sort of party that Belshazzar was having within his royal palace.

It's maybe because we feel we've moved on and these kind of days are behind us. It's maybe that we no longer feel at home or would feel at home in that sort of situation.

And yet I feel there is something more, something deeper. It's a fact that here are people from whom God, as it were, is excluded, if it were possible, to exclude the unlimited God.

And when we look tonight together at God's judgment, we see here the writing on the wall that was this, the words which head this particular chapter.

[2 : 33] And I want us to look at the particular message of the finger of God. The message that we have in verse 25 as this hand, the shape of a human hand or the fingers of a human hand inscribed what was written on the plaster of the royal palace.

Many, many take a parson or a parson. Now if you're going to translate that simply or directly into our own language, it would read something like this.

Numbered, numbered, weighed and divided. Perhaps as it stands, or even as we transfer it to our own way of speaking, it still may not make a lot of sense to us.

It didn't make a lot of sense to Belshazzar either. That is what concerned him most of all. He knew there was some message in it for himself. A message that he didn't really want to hear.

But a message on the other hand that he couldn't keep himself from finding out. And so he ordered whoever he could to interpret it for him. Numbered, numbered, weighed and divided.

[3 : 56] It is a message of the judgment of God. And I want us to concentrate our attention on this individual here who is under the judgment of God.

Belshazzar. This king that we read of so briefly, yet I want us to see three things about him. His life, his sin and his judgment.

These three things. Belshazzar's life. In one sense it's not a very difficult thing to write an account of Belshazzar's life simply because we have so little background information.

There is so very little told about him. Some historians even will go as far as saying that he never really existed at all. Those that are trying to write out or to write off the word of God.

On the other hand it is very difficult to give a fair or a balanced account of Belshazzar simply because though he did exist we have so little to fill in the gaps as it were. There are so many blind spots.

[5 : 07] We don't read a lot about him. But we can say two things. First of all his life was secular. secular. Now by that I mean simply that he was a worldly man.

He was a man who did not have God in all his thoughts. That's the sort of person he was. He was a king. He was a person who was in a very important, very prominent position.

He wasn't as powerful, he wasn't as important as Nebuchadnezzar who had gone before him. But he had received power within a particular empire that was still very strong, still a power to be reckoned with.

But within his life he had little place, he had very little time for God. He was probably too taken up with other things. I mean that would be the very simple reason that would be given if Belshazzar was asked to give a direct account of his own existence.

That would be one of the reasons at least. He was simply too busy with other things. And that is a fact with so many people. It may be not that they feel a burning intention within their own heart.

[6 : 25] They maybe do not recognize that there is an enmity against God within them. It's just that they're so preoccupied with so many other things to think about, so many other things to do, and God doesn't figure very much at all in their lives.

There was a man, a king, who virtually ignored God. Yet God had not ignored Belshazzar. We may, if you like, read back into his life when we come to the end of it that God had bypassed Belshazzar. That he wasn't among the company who should inherit God's glory for ever and ever. He wasn't one of God's numbered people. In one sense, God had bypassed him, but in another sense, he had not. Because God had given opportunities to this man. What I would call opportunities of Greece. You see, for one instance, the very example of Nebuchadnezzar, whom we read here was his father. It may have been his father used in a loose sense. Maybe it was perhaps his grandfather. But there was certainly the connection. He was descended. He took over eventually from Nebuchadnezzar.

[7 : 44] He had lived alongside him. He had seen what Nebuchadnezzar had seen. He had seen what this man, this great king that had gone before him, had gone through. He had the very example there of how God himself had intervened and humbled this proud king Nebuchadnezzar and brought him to a place where he acknowledged and where he trusted in the God of heaven.

Now, Belshazzar had seen that. But it didn't change him. It didn't make him think much more about God than he had before. We see, perhaps, through also the influence of Nebuchadnezzar himself. There was a certain ethos, an imprint put on the society and life within the Babylonian empire that was never there before. A certain influence that had come from God through Daniel and the three men who were his close allies, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

That they had taken such a stance, Nebuchadnezzar's own life was changed, that he commanded it through all the empire that this God of Israel would be acknowledged. the living God, the God who had power over all others.

And did even that change within society didn't affect him? I think we sort of live sometimes, as Christians, we live in a kind of hope that if God would only change our nation, if he would only revive us a bit, then people would more likely come to him.

[9 : 14] Now there is no doubt that if and when God moves in reviving power, when he changes the life of this church first of all and he changes with it the life of a nation and the direction it is going and yet men are still bent on ignoring God.

Belshazzar was. He had, we would believe, the very influence of the life and the preaching of Daniel himself.

we do not know exactly what the age differences were, but we reckon that when Daniel was brought into Babylon, that perhaps Belshazzar himself was round about the same age that they maybe in a sense grew up together, though they grew apart.

When he came to this stage in their history together, Belshazzar had forgotten all about Daniel. He had to be retold about him, but he had known of the influence of these men of God around him.

You see, God was in his own way speaking to Belshazzar, but he wasn't listening. He didn't want to listen. He had had his chances, but he had refused these chances.

[10 : 31] He didn't want God. That was just simple, it was down to that. That's where the actual rebellion, the enmity is seen. He didn't really want God. It wasn't that he was just too busy.

He didn't want this religion that God demanded from people, this devotion of a life that was submitted and gave itself over to following this God.

But his life was a life that was secular. It was worldly. It was concerned with the things of this world. It was taken up and preoccupied with what this world in itself could offer to him.

What were his chances in life? How could he get on? How could he make a name for himself? How could he enjoy himself? These were the things that bothered Belshazzar. And he wasn't alone, was he?

These are the things that bothered most folks. Anyone, indeed, who is not wanting God in his life. This man was taken up with his position as king.

[11 : 37] He was taken up with his sense of power that he had over other people and that he ruled the roost. He was taken up perhaps with his parties. He seemed to be a man who wanted to enjoy himself in life. But in all that he wanted to push God out of the road.

He was a secular man. His life was also, we may say, at the end of it, an insignificant life. This is perhaps why the historians have not discovered this man, wherever they have looked.

Simply because the only knowledge that God has left of him in the world is in this one short chapter of his own scriptures. This man is otherwise a man of no account whatsoever, even for anybody else.

In fact, what we have here in this own episode is only a very brief account of one day in the life of King Belshazzar. One of Sothamich's books was One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, I think it was.

I only half read that particular small book. But here was one day in the life of King Belshazzar. We come in on him when he is in the last day of his human existence in this world.

[12 : 56] And all the rest we have to read back into it. there is really only one aspect of this man recorded apart from his worldliness, the fact that he was secular.

The only thing that is recorded is his sin and his end. He is a person who is really of little importance, either to those among whom he lived or to the God in heaven who made him.

And we might even conclude that he was insignificant simply because he was secular. It was because he was so worldly minded that God let his life go down the drain.

Or he opted for that himself. If he had chosen God, if he had gone God's way, God could have made him something. God would have given him an everlasting insignificance.

But as it was, he was an insignificant man. That was his life. Secular and insignificant. It is always a fact. that those who are concerned to build their life around this world, at the end of it, they're very easily forgotten by anybody.

[14 : 05] Because they're people of really little importance. Can we think in the second place here of Belshazzar's sin?

Because this is really tied in with what his life was. It's centred in a sense around this one thing. What was Belshazzar's sin? Now we can see that I think in different ways.

But the first, the basic thing about his sin was this. It was that it was defiance against God. He defied God. Though he was insignificant from God's point of view, from his own point of view, he was important and he was very proud about it.

He was a somebody. And it was this pride, like it would be in anybody else's life, like the Bible says it always is. It was this pride that was his downfall, or led to his downfall.

You look at there in verse 22. This is the one thing Daniel had to say to him when he said it straight on. But you, his son, son of Nebuchadnezzar, O Belshazzar, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this.

[15 : 15] You knew all about what happened to your father, about those who went before you. They were humbled, though they were proud. But you have not humbled yourself. He was a proud man, and he wanted to stay that way.

He was so proud that he set himself up against the God of heaven. You go on to read in verse 23. Instead you have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven.

At the end of that longest verse, but you did not honour the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways. You know, if you're going to take that and translate that into the experience of many people, it would read exactly the same.

The only thing that changes is the name. There are those, perhaps in a different way, perhaps they're not so important in life in their own way, perhaps they don't have the position that Belshazzar had, but in their own hearts, what they are doing is setting themselves up against God. There is a basic element of pride there in their own existence. And they are not honouring the God, the God who is holding them in their hand, holding all their life, holding all their days, by his mercy thread.

[16 : 36] But they do not recognise it, and they do not honour him at all. Here was a defiant man. And I think his defiance is seen especially, and this is what Daniel points out to him.

It is at that point when he went beyond himself altogether, and then in his drunkenness he went and he ordered that the vessels, the holy, the set apart vessels that were taken from the temple in Jerusalem should be brought into his drunken party in the palace, and should be used, and should be used in drinking and in the singing of praises to gods of stone and of wood and of other things who were not the living God.

God, he went beyond himself. The defiance that this man had was really saying, here are these gods, holy things, we'll see how holy he is, we'll see what sort of God he is, he doesn't rule here anyway.

That was the attitude that was in his heart, an attitude of absolute direct defiance against God. And it wasn't just a drunken mistake, it wasn't just one of these stupid things a person will do when they're not under their own control, but under the influence of something else.

This is something that was deliberate within himself, a deliberate choice on his part. Can you imagine, for example, somebody taking the communion cups from the congregation here, breaking into the church and taking these and taking them along to some pub in Livingston and using them to sing body songs and drink out of that.

[18 : 14] That's a sort of very vague parallel to what we are talking of here. It is worse. These particular vessels were actually consecrated by the very presence of God in the temple when they were set there.

God himself had taken these as being holy, but this man wanted to despise them. But he did so deliberately. It was a deliberate choice on his part.

You know, sin in the life of a human individual is never an accident. It is never something that well just happens to us because we cannot help ourselves. Sin is more often than not it is something that we are doing because we intend to do it.

It is purposely transgressing, cutting across what God asks of us, going against what God says that we ought to be or ought to do. That's what sin is. It is transgression of the law of God.

Now this was no accident of circumstances. As if poor Belshazzar had no option in his life but to go this way. We may say at the end of his life that he was not one of the elect.

[19 : 25] But the reason that he was cast out by God was not because of his non-election. The reason that he was cast out by God was because of the sin that was deliberate against God.

That was defiant in the face of God. He was cast out of God's presence because he himself chose to be cast out of God's presence. We have a doctrine within scripture which is the doctrine of election.

That God chooses some people to inhabit his eternal glory but others he passes over and leaves them behind. And it's a problem that bothers many people. It may bother ourselves.

But we can always say this about it and we must always say this about it. That nobody lands up in a lost eternity simply because God left them to it.

But they themselves chose what they chose. They did what they did deliberately. Sin is something that God rightly holds us responsible for and accountable for.

[20 : 32] Belshazzar's sin was this. It was defiant. It was deliberate. And it was also involved in a process of degeneration. What I'm saying is this.

That he went from bad to worse. And sin always follows that course as well. Sin never just starts with itself and improves. Or starts with itself and stays as it is.

Sin always gets worse. Sin always produces at the end of the day something more terrifying. It produces death. That very separation from God.

You know it is this that makes playing about with God's laws. With cutting across God's commands and wishes. Most terrible.

It is simply that we start playing about with something like this. We get to the stage where we can't handle it anymore. And it goes completely beyond our control. It is like the person for example if we can use this example of someone who perhaps doesn't know the power of drink in their own life and doesn't know the weakness of their own particular body or attitude to it who may start drinking and soon find very soon may find that they're in a position where that thing masters them rather than them mastering it.

[21 : 55] And that's a problem. It's a problem in that particular area. It's a problem with sin as such in any particular going against God. We may start with something that seems very small trivial incidental but it always gets worse.

It always degenerates. And that is what we see with Belshazzar's sin. He was defiant. He was someone who made a deliberate choice to be so and he was somebody who went from bad to worse.

You know God's word isn't always pleasant to listen to simply because it doesn't just point out the good things that we may have in life.

It points out the bad things that we do have in life. And that's the problem. It speaks of things like small three lettered words called sin. And because we know that that is part of us we may not like it. But God speaks about these things so that we can get rid of them and deal with them. And not be like Belshazzar who went on but worse and worse and worse.

[23 : 03] Until. Until we see Belshazzar's judgment. We see it this night. The last night of his life. When he had called together this fantastic party.

A thousand of his rulers of his special people were there. Special guests. And when the party was at its full height when things were really going the way that they would want at least.

Or God was furthest from their thoughts. There then appeared somewhere along beside the king writing on the clear plaster of the wall the fingers of a hand in the shape of a human hand inscribing words in the wall.

So perplexed. So bothered. so shattered. Belshazzar and his friends. That his knees literally knocked together.

And he couldn't stand on his legs. They were like jelly under him. As even this proud man was brought to a place where he could no longer physically or otherwise stand for himself.

[24 : 14] We read that his face turned pale. It turned ash and white. because he couldn't understand except perhaps he did understand. He knew that something was up.

And he makes partly through his drunkenness and partly through the sheer terror of experience. He makes his rash promise to anybody at all who can interpret this they will become next to him in the kingdom.

There was possibly another king sharing the throne with him. He was number two. Daniel or whoever else would do it. was promised a place of number three on the throne.

The third ruler of the kingdom. This was the judgment of God breaking into this man's life. We can read this story.

It may be better still if we tried to act it. To try and put ourselves in the shoes of Belshazzar or whatever he wore. To try and see how he really felt. To try and get the idea of just how terrifying the experience was to this otherwise proud and defiant man.

[25 : 25] And when we take that we can then transfer it to our own situation and we can say this, that the judgment of God is always terrifying. Always. It is a frightening experience.

It is a frightening prospect. impact. You know, there is something very interesting about the characters here. Belshazzar and his many legal friends.

That they trembled when they saw God writing on the wall. I wonder how much we really take God's word seriously. To tremble when we read it or when we hear it.

Does it make us like it made him shake in his shoes? See, one of the signs of the ungodly that we read in scripture is this, that there is no fear of God before their eyes.

It was a problem with Belshazzar himself, at least until it was too late. He was frightened then. He was terrified then. And perhaps if he had the proper fear of God in his heart when he was a younger and a wiser man, he might have been saved from this whole situation.

[26 : 33] You know, it's not just something that is old fashioned. but it's something that may be and will be beneficial for us if we discover that fear of God. For we learn to be afraid of God rather than just treating him as a friend whom we can call on whenever we want to, whenever we think we need him.

Belshazzar's judgment was frightening. But this other thing about it was this. It was final. There was no way back for this man now. None at all.

It was not simply for him a warning that was inscribed on the wall so that he would look to his senses and so that he would come round and repent and become like Nebuchadnezzar did, a renewed man.

It wasn't just a warning. This was the last word from God to this man. Numbered, numbered, weighed and divided.

You know, God's dealings and grace, are not something that we can say, well, they were here last week and they're here tonight so they'll be here next week or tomorrow we won't.

[27 : 43] God's dealings with grace with any man who is not a Christian. He will be speaking to them. He will be giving them opportunities as he gave to Belshazzar. But one day they stop and they will be no more.

And then God only speaks in angry voice. He only speaks in judgment. judgment. You know, we have an interesting thing here in Belshazzar's case.

And his judgment was pronounced before he actually died. He knew the worst before he passed from this scene of time. For most of us it is the other way.

We read in the Hebrews that it is appointed unto man once to die. and after this the judgment. It is after we pass from this particular life that we are brought face to face with Jesus Christ before whom we must all give an account.

We may not have the kind of judgment that Belshazzar had. But we will have judgment. We will have to face it. Why is this written here?

[28 : 59] It wasn't for him a warning. But perhaps it may be for us a warning. So that we ourselves can be ready for the reality of God dealing with his own creatures on an individual basis.

As God will and must do. I believe that this account comes to us in God's own handwriting. In God's concern concern for us as individuals.

God telling us not to go the way that Belshazzar went. And yet to all who live apart from Christ God is saying the same thing.

Many, many tickle a person. Numbered, numbered, weighed and divided. Like Belshazzar we find it a hard thing to interpret perhaps into our own experience.

But he's saying this one thing and he says in fact this one thing twice. He's saying our days are limited. We have it in our own colloquial speech. Our days are numbered.

[30 : 06] Numbered, numbered. Our life is limited. We do not know how long it is or will be. We do not know if you like to put it the other way how short it will be.

In Psalm 90 we have this terms of prayer through the psalmist. Lord teach us to number our days so that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.

Lord teach us arithmetic, basic arithmetic. Lord teach us to count, to count the things that are important, to know how long we are going to live. Teach us that.

I say I put it another way. When he said to his people of his day, seek the Lord while he may be found. Call upon them while he is near. Because God will not always be found and he will not always be near either.

We can't presume on God's presence or on his willingness to save. Now our days are numbered. We don't know that number.

[31 : 09] But we dare not play around. And God says it twice to enforce the fact of how important this is. Our life in this world is limited.

Then he says pekel, which means weighed, or perhaps better still it means assist. We read in the scriptures that by God actions are weighed.

That by God every man's actions are weighed. All of them. Whether it be your open sins, sins that perhaps other people see the faults that other people take note of, these are known and far more of them are known to God himself.

Or whether it be these secret sins that are perhaps so much part of us that we are unaware of our going wrong all the time, all our secret faults are brought before the light of his presence.

God is weighing us on the scales. It may be our own neglect or our own abuse of spiritual things. It may be our very resistance against God.

[32 : 13] God knows about it. That's what he said to Paul, remember to Saul of Tarsus as he was when he encountered him on the Damascus road. He said, Saul, Saul, it is hard for you to kick against the pricks.

That's what we have in the Navy. It's hard for you to resist me. But he knew that Paul was resisting him. It may be our unconcerned about spiritual things.

It may be our attitudes towards other people and towards God himself. It may be the pride that is in our own hearts. It may be our order of priorities in life. God has against us because we've got life all

jumbled up and back to front.

God is assessing it all. He's assessing the way that we are, the way that we think, the way that we feel. We're on the scales. God is taking account.

You know, there's something that is quite recent, perhaps, within our own society. I'm speaking comparatively so. And that is the invention of the video recorder, or indeed of the sound recorder.

[33 : 20] Comparatively recent. But ever since the beginning of time, God has been recording fully and infallibly all the actions and the attitudes of people.

He weighs them. As he did with Belshazzar, so he does with everyone. Our lives are assessed by God. Then he says one other thing to Belshazzar.

Your life is divided. This man went down in history, and I mean literally, he went down. And he lost the little that he had.

It was, in one sense, a great kingdom that he inherited. But he had made a fool of himself. In a sense, he had made a fool of what he was organising and running. And he lost even the little importance that he had in life.

You know, Jesus said a very interesting thing. He said, those who seek to save their own life, to save their own skins, will actually lose them.

[34 : 26] And they'll lose their own soul in the process. They'll not only miss out on the best that God has, but they will actually lose everything that they try and keep and get for themselves.

Now that's a fact of life. And that is precisely what happened to this man here. It's what happens to everyone in the judgment. Belshazzar's kingdom was going to be taken, it was going to be divided, it would be destroyed, it was going to be worth nothing at all to him then, the night after.

That's a terrible party. And not only did he lose that kingdom, that he was once proud king of, but he also lost another kingdom, he lost his place in the kingdom of God, he lost belonging to God forever and ever.

Now when Jesus is rejected, or Christ is pushed out of somebody's life, it's not simply that that person is temporarily refusing something good, it's that they are losing the place altogether.

And God will no longer speak to them, but he will take away the very privileges that they had. Those who have had a Bible for themselves, those who have had a church to go to for themselves, those who have had the opportunities to hear God for themselves, if they will not listen, God is going to take them all away.

[35 : 53] And that is what happened also in the life of this man. world. We lose ourselves and all that we could have had. One day it becomes too late to change our minds and call on God.

Now these may sound familiar thoughts to some of us, and yet they are also true. They are the facts, the inescapable facts of what we are coping with.

There is a judgment of God for every man. And who knows when we ourselves as individuals cross that otherwise invisible boundary from the place that God is good to us to the place that he stops speaking to us forever in his love.

Where there is nothing else to look forward to but as the Bible says, the wrath of God, a fearful looking forward to judgment. Who knows when we cross the land to the land of no return.

There is a verse, part of Ahim, which we can think of in this instance. There is a time, we know not when, a place, we know not where, that marks the destiny of man in glory or despair.

[37 : 19] There is a line by us unseen, that crosses every path, the hidden boundary between God's patience and God's wrath.

The answer from the skies is clear, is set. You who from God depart, while it is called today, repent and harden not your heart.

You know, there was a day once, I don't know when it was in this life that we read so little about, a day when God was speaking perhaps good things, offering mercy to someone even like Belshazzar.

But whether he recognized it or not, he let that day go, God spoke to him never again in that same way, until he spoke in judgment. I wonder tonight, whether we be Christian or whether we are not Christian, how do we stand before God?

It is not just the unbeliever that has to stand there in that lonely valley of judgment, before that terrible and glorious throne. A Christian has to stand. We all must give account of ourselves before God, of what we have done in our body, not somebody else, whether it be good or whether it be evil.

[38 : 42] And God is assessing us as we sit tonight in his presence, where he sees and knows everything, right inside us. What does he see?

What does he know? What does he think? Where do we stand? May God himself, as he sees us, also speak to us in such a way that we will be shaken before we're terrified in judgment, brought to himself, to know him as a God who forgives all our sins and heals all our iniquities, and a God who accepts everyone who comes to put their trust, all their trust, in the Lord Jesus Christ.

You know, Psalm 2 says this, we sang it already, God's wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are those who take refuge in him.

Take refuge in him. Trust him before it's too late to trust him. May God bless his word to us. Shall we join in prayer?

Let's pray. our God and our Father, we do know this night that you are the God also who is a consuming fire, and a God of righteous anger, and a God of terrible wrath, and a God who cannot leave the guilty to be unpunished.

[40 : 17] And our God, you know exactly what is our guilt, and our sin, and our offence against you. You, Lord, know the pride and the rebellion and the carelessness of our own hearts.

We pray, our God, that you would speak to us, that you would call us from the waywardness of our own existence to that place that we shall be called the people of God. We pray, Lord, that even the very terrifying truths of your own word would draw us, push us to yourself, so that we will be those, every one of us, who set our trust in the only God, our only Saviour.

This we ask, and we ask it in the name of our Saviour, Jesus, for his sake, and his glory. Amen.