

In That Night Belshazzar Was Slain

*"In that night was Belshazzar the king of the Chaldeans slain." –
Daniel 5:30*

Summary:

Belshazzar's sudden death shows that earthly rank cannot resist death or divine judgment. He was slain during a night of celebration, open profanity, and final visitation, while danger seemed remote. God may delay judgment in longsuffering, but no sinner can presume upon another hour. The handwriting on the wall awakened terror without repentance because repeated warnings had already been rejected. Belshazzar's end calls us to live honourably, avoid careless delay, and consider the eternal state and final judgment that make death so solemn.

Outline:

1. The person remembered in disgrace

- Belshazzar's brief biblical remembrance warns that a wicked name survives only in infamy.

2. The event that did not respect rank

- The king yielded to death suddenly, prematurely, and violently.

3. The night of festivity

- Celebration concealed the nearness of danger and exposed the folly of boasting about tomorrow.

4. The night of wickedness

- Belshazzar profaned God's vessels and praised idols until judgment interrupted his sin.

5. The night of final visitation

- The handwriting on the wall brought terror but no repentance, urging us to heed God before death.

Text

The person in question is Belshazzar. Not widely recognised in secular history, he is scarcely mentioned in Scripture. Belshazzar was Nebuchadnezzar's grandson; his father was Merodach-Baladan, and his mother, Nitocris, was a wise woman whose advice proved invaluable.

He stands in sacred history as a man symbolically hung in irons by the roadside. "The memory of the just is blessed, but the name of the wicked shall rot"; if the wicked are remembered, their reputation is marked by disgrace. Let us live in a way that, even after death, our words or deeds may continue to speak out – for our honour and to inspire others.

The event was that Belshazzar was killed. Despite being a king and called a king of kings, he succumbed to the king of terrors. It is said, 'I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the Most High. But ye shall die like men.' Those honoured and wise are compared to beasts that perish. Those who once feared the king of Babylon are now asking, 'Art thou also become weak as we? art thou become like unto us?'

What a transformation! But note not just his death, but how it happened. He could have died peacefully in old age, quietly in bed. Instead, he was taken prematurely, suddenly, and brutally murdered.

When did this happen? "In that night"—the night of his celebration. He hosted a grand feast for a thousand of his lords, with music, dancing, and all sorts of pleasures filling the palace. Yet, he never realised how close danger and death were.

Marriage celebrations have occasionally been overshadowed by funerals. One man constructs and furnishes

a mansion and arranges festivities to celebrate, but instead of entering his new home, he enters “the house appointed for all living.” “Boast not thyself of to morrow; for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth.”

Usually, celebration, excess, and sacrilege occur together. Job did not prevent his children from feasting at each other's homes, but he was concerned for their well-being, praying and offering sacrifices in case they had sinned or cursed God internally. That night, the excess was terrible. While Belshazzar sampled the wine, he commanded that the gold and silver vessels from the Jerusalem temple be brought out. The king, along with his princes, wives, and concubines, drank from these vessels. They consumed wine and bowed in worship to gods made of gold, silver, brass, iron, wood, and stone.

Sentence against evil deeds is not always carried out quickly, because God is patient and desires none to perish. However, sin has sometimes been punished instantly, as seen with Lot's wife, Gehazi, Herod, and Ananias and Sapphira. Any sinner cannot be certain they won't die while committing the crime; their life is fragile, and death can come at any moment—it's just a step away.

A liar has died with a lie still on his lips. A person who swears has cursed his own soul, and almost immediately, his curse is fulfilled. A drunkard, overwhelmed by intoxication, is suddenly brought back to sobriety, even when no water can soothe his thirst. Similarly, mental instability can be a form of sudden death. “He, that being often reprov'd hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy.”

That night also marked his visitation. During that hour, a man's hand emerged and inscribed words on the palace wall's plaster. The king observed the hand as it moved. His face paled,

his mind was disturbed, his strength waned, and his knees knocked together.

The effect appears extraordinary because the inscription's meaning was still a mystery. However, what could be more unsettling than the unknown and ambiguity? Why didn't he think that the wonder suggested approval or praise? His conscience sensed what it might mean, because the wicked flee when they are not being pursued.

Daniel explained the message and warned him, but it was ineffective. Belshazzar had been previously warned. This final warning was not aimed at saving him. How could a few moments of panic, fear, resistance, or fleeing alter his moral condition?

What use are the hours or moments that many rely on, while putting off attention to things that bring peace? Deathbed alarms, prayers, and all the exercises that attend them are most likely, if useful at all, to benefit the living rather than the dying.

Where is Belshazzar now? He has been in the same state since the night he was slain. What a long period has passed! Yet, after two thousand five hundred years, he has not faced the ultimate judgment. It's not the end of existence that makes death terrifying, but the intermediate state and the final Judgment that follow. "O that they were wise, that they understood this, that they would consider their latter end!"

This sermon is taken from William Jay's devotional, *Morning and Evening Exercises* (January 12, Evening), first published in 1854.