

# Apocalypse Now

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] You turn now back with me to Daniel chapter 5. At some levels at least the title of it is well known to us, the writing on the wall, we would use that as a phrase for imminent judgment of one kind or another and we may know the phrase, we might not know the chapter so well but I would ask that you remember and culturally adapt your thinking that this is not a 21st century story, it goes back into pre Christ days and it is an ancient nearest account of culture and life but it still deals with people and it still deals with God and at that level part of God's living word and challenges I hope and helps us think a little bit more about life and about eternity even, it is a fantastic drama, it is an amazing story, I am amazed I have not made a film about it, maybe they have,

I have not seen it but it is a real belchazer of a story, it is a tremendous powerful good story frightening at some levels, strong story and one that for a long time you know biblical critics denied that it was a real story at all, for years there were questions about the historicity of this person, this king Belchard, there did not seem to be any evidence of him but that has changed completely and there is now very strong archaeological evidence of this king Belchazer and his life and the end of his kingdom exactly as it has been retold here and I really want to do today is just retell that story a little bit and then hopefully apply one or two of the principles behind the story as it is part of God's story, God's redemptive story as God points forward towards the coming of Jesus and all that that is involved in as God's people are involved in that.

So can I ask you to just stick with me here as we do a little bit of putting it all into context and start with Belchazer himself, the king, I am sorry if you have been visiting with us, the ones who have been here over these last number of weeks will know the story up till now but he is probably Belchazer, the grand son although it calls Nebuchadnezzar's father, it could be his forefather, predecessor, ancestor, but he is probably the grandson of Nebuchadnezzar and in the time that Nebuchadnezzar had died to the coming of Belchazer onto the throne there had been three or four different sons, had all had very short, very brutal, very mixed reigns on the throne of Babylon and if you remember the original image of gold with Nebuchadnezzar and this great gold, he was the original ruler, well already things are beginning to unravel for this amazing empire and so Nebuchadnezzar rather is about the fourth king, in maybe 12 or 15 years so there has been a lot of disquiet, there has been a lot of change and things haven't been what they were and he is a core region, he is not the kind of real king, he is a core region probably with his either brother or father they are not sure Nebuchadnezzar is his name and Nebuchadnezzar was away from

Babylon at this time so he left his son or brother or son Belchazer on the throne and he seemed to be a bit young, a bit foolish and just loving the power and loving the position that he had and loving the authority that he was able to exert and there is three things probably about Belchazer that come across, he is untouchable, he is unaccountable and he is disinterested so he is absolutely untouchable, he thinks he is untouchable, he reckons that this is great, I am on charge of this throne, nobody is going to touch me, I am the king of God, I am Nebuchadnezzar's grandson, he had a long life and great power and I am untouchable, now even at this point there was imminent danger from the next great world empire, the Medes and the Persians, they were on his doorstep, they were right there, the new kids in the block for world power domination were the Medes and the Persians, the Babylonian empire was fading and this next empire was right on their doorsteps and it is as if he thinks, they are not going to touch me, if you have remembered, if you have seen the pictures of Babylon, the city itself, it was hugely impressive, it had massive, massive ramparts and defences and nobody could get near it and he was in the middle of this thinking, he was completely impregnable, so much so that he ordered a great celebration, a great party with all the nobles, with all the rich men, almost just to, as it were, stick his fingers up at the Medes and the Persians who were nearby and say, look I am untouchable, so he orders these feasts, but within that he is also probably giving the impression of being unaccountable, he is listening to all the hype about who he is and about his position and he feels he is untouchable and that comes across in a kind of spiritual way because he uses the cups from the temple that had been ransacked when Jerusalem fell and the seeds of Jerusalem and the cups were taken from the temple of God and Nebuchadnezzar kept them and so he takes them out of storage and he dusts them down and he says, yeah, this is what we will do, this will be great, this will be enjoyable, I will really show how unaccountable I am by simply using the cups from this miserable God who has been defeated and I will show how unaccountable to him I am. It is a drunken brawl using these cups from the temple, it is kind of sacrilegious act that he was engaged in, it was crude bravado on his part and a blasphemous act that was absolutely weighed and it was done deliberately to show how independent and unaccountable he was to anyone, most of all the miserable God of the Jewish exiles. But at the same time, that was usually disrespectful to his own family and to his own father, his grandfather, Nebuchadnezzar, who had come to put his faith and trust in this living God. Thinly veiled hatred towards the Jews,

I think who were in his country, the believers of the Old Testament and to God himself. He knew all about it, it was not ignorant, he did know about these things but he sets himself against it, unaccountable. Probably in the same way then reveals himself to be disinterested, disinterested in the past prophecies that we have looked at, that Daniel was involved in, speaking about the idol and the kingdoms and the nations and the everlasting kingdom, wasn't interested in what had gone on in the past, the history of his own people, of the Babylonians in his own time, all of that had gone and he was disinterested in what Daniel could have done, or Daniel's work or Daniel's, the three other leaders of the time, self-obsessed, full of his own importance and full of his own significance, Bel Shazer.

[ 8 : 16 ] That's just by way of introduction to the story and to the history of it. Then the second thing I want to say and it's a very clumsily headed point, the incredible divinely orchestrated theatre, okay sorry. I couldn't think of anything a bit less bulky and wordy than that. But it kind of, there's an incredible God involvement in this story and it's an incredible act of divine theatre as it would come to this point in Bel Shazer's life. In the midst of this great going party, in the midst of the revelry, almost in complete contrast and relief to what is going on as the sinister and dramatic, scary hand that writes a message, engraves a message on the wall, a bit like the engraving on a tomb or on a grave. And you can imagine the tension of the moment and even made more so by, you know, when there's a huge party and there's singing and dancing and laughter and merriment and maybe kind of drunken brawling and then there's a great change and the music stops. And the King and everyone else looks to this and there's probably one daft drunk guy in the corner still dancing and he hasn't noticed anything. But eventually when the music stops and even he looks around and there's silence and you know the bravado absolutely drains from Bel Shazer in an instant. That bravado drains from him along with the contents of his bladder and possibly his bowel because it says that his whole lore, that's the kind of intention of the Hebrew that's written very kind of gently here. He's in a state of collapse. Everything has given, given in and he realizes something dreadful is happening. So the glamour is gone. And so what does he do in this position? Well he does what his forebears have always done. They wheel in the astrologers and the Chaldeans and the leaders and the people who are supposed to be able to interpret dreams. Again there's kind of a, there's an undercurrent of humour in the way it's written that says, you know, the King called for the enchanters, the astrologers and the diviners to be brought. As they were said previously, when Nebuchadnezzar brought them in again and again and each time they didn't know what to say, each time they didn't have any answers and it's the same again here. Even though they're given huge promises, this is the third place in the kingdom. See that would suggest that he wasn't an outright ruler. He was second to Nebonidus. He was second to him and so he could offer only third place in the country. But nonetheless, it's a pretty good offer for these guys. So that's the situation and at this point Daniel comes into the story. Now Daniel's nowhere to be seen and it doesn't appear that he has any position of authority anymore unlike he previously had. Remember there's been these different kings that have come in and he's probably been relegated down and down the ranks to someone who wasn't considered an advisor anymore. But the Queen remembers who he is. She was older and she would have remembered some of Daniel's previous answers and help that he had given. It's quite interesting that Daniel just kind of appears in this story so all these kings have come and gone and kingdoms have begun, kingdoms are very shortly to end, but Daniel's kind of a steady figure here. He appears again.

He is still around. Your powerful kings have come and gone, but Daniel's still here and he also responds to Bel Shazer. But interestingly, if again if you've been with us and you'll notice the tone of Daniel's response is very different to Bel Shazer in the tone he gave to his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar. There was some, there was clear relationship between Daniel Nebuchadnezzar and respect that came through in a lot of the, but here Daniel is much more curt, much sterner in what he says. He doesn't want his money. He's not interested in the position the king's going to give, but nonetheless he will answer it. There's, Daniel knows what's happening. He knows that this is the end of this kingdom and it's the end of Bel Shazer's reign and he's short with him. Bel Shazer had many opportunities to turn to the living God, but he's absolutely despised God and the mercy of God and he had the life of his grandfather, the conversion of Nebuchadnezzar, the people of God, the miracles, he had blessings, he had prophecies, but he would not listen, he would not turn and Daniel attributes that to his pride, but you, oh son in verse 22, have not humbled yourself. Though you knew all this, he knew all, but he was absolutely arrogant and proud before the living God. He thought his life was completely untouchable, that he was unaccountable to anyone, so he was disinterested in all that spiritual mumbo jumbo that was coming from Daniel. So Daniel does interpret the dream, twice, or not the dream, rather the writing on the wall, and twice it's repeated that his days are numbered and he's been found wanting in the balance of God's judgment and the kingdom is taken and delivered to the means and the Persians. Remember that was the prophecy that Daniel had given in previous chapters to us. Belshazzar, I don't know what he's thinking, we don't know what he's thinking, but he does give Daniel this third place, he makes him, gives him all these new clothes and a gold chain and proclaim them the third highest in the kingdom, it's like he just simply doesn't deal with it. It's like he says, okay, that's the interpretation of the dream, Daniel you've got your reward and he carries on almost, maybe he's a bribe, maybe he thinks that in the past there was a time gap between God's prophecy and then between the fulfillment, I don't know, but he seems blinded to it all, but then we're told that very night, Belshazzar king of the Babylonians was slain and Darius, the Mede took over a different nation, a different people took over that kingdom. It's a very powerful and solemn and moving unfolding of history in this drama. Now in the cuneiform script cylinders that have been uncovered by archaeologists, you'll get the human side of that story, you'll get all the events, you'll get all of these things happening, but this is the story from

God's angle, from God's point of view, from the biblical point of view, because God wants us to know about this story and he wants us to hear what is almost sometimes underneath the surface of what's happening in society. It's a clear and a powerful message about him and about history and about our lives. So just for the last few minutes, can I just apply that to our own lives for a moment? A story like this challenges us, the historicity of this story and the place of the story in God's word in the Bible challenges us to sit up and recognize God in our lives. And the unchanging reality that the one thing that stops us from doing that is pride. That was what kept Belshazzar from doing that. He wasn't willing to humble himself before the living God and that is the great barrier that keeps us from dealing with or considering or thinking about God, particularly a sovereign God, but also a God who comes as we'll say at the end in the person of Jesus Christ. We wonder and we ask questions about God and sometimes we can think we are untouchable. Life goes on as ever. We got this morning. We'll get up tomorrow morning. I'll get up the next morning. Life goes on. All this stuff about God and judgment, nonsense. Life just goes on and it will continue to go on. And the temptation beyond that is to go on and say, well, I'm unaccountable and everyone will tell me today that I'm unaccountable. You can't possibly believe in a God, an independent, sovereign being to whom we're accountable.

That is just scary stories. It's just about me and how I live and what I do. I'm not accountable to anyone or to anything in my life and therefore I'm disinterested in this message. I'm disinterested in the challenge of this message and I've got better and cheery are things to do than think about a God to whom I have to recognise. But I think this story does and it fits in of course with the rest of the Bible is that God reveals himself as one who's sovereign over history. Even within this book we begin to see in the passage of time that Daniel had prophesied the ending of this kingdom and the dividing of the kingdom or God through Daniel had prophesied that and the dividing of the kingdom to the means and the Persians. And that of course even within the history of this book that's exactly what happened. And that's what we know as we look back. We see that kingdoms and philosophies come and go. And we're living in the middle of a day today in the 21st century Western civilization where we think that the whole world should be judged by our modern Western civilization standards and everything else before that or everything else alongside that is worthless and meaningless. Every nation should be democratic. Every people should do exactly what we do in the West because in our arrogance we think we're the centre of the universe and that we will not come and go. But there's a great challenge and a great comfort to us if we simply look through history and look through the Bible itself.

And when we look through the way that kingdoms and nations and leaders come and go and interestingly just through all Daniel's consistency, Daniel always remains part of that story here. But that sovereignty or history of course includes questions and mystery and difficulty for us but it is clearly, clearly portrayed in scriptures the reality of the God that we have and the God that there is. But also within the message that Daniel gives here to Bel Shazer, we're reminded that God holds our time. God holds our times in his hand. So if that's the kind of, if the first thing is just this massive big picture of God who's sovereign over the universe, you think, well that doesn't really affect me. But also the intimacy of God being sovereign over your life and over man who holds our times in his hands. Every moment then it's his gift. You know the author of life, the giver of life, the sustainer of life. Your life is in his hands. Every moment is a gift from him from the end or the beginning to the end, the end to the beginning. Every breath you take, every breath I take, a gift from the living God. So as we get up in the morning, she's gifted me another day. I have one more day. I have one more day that he's given me. In this life I might have more but we don't presume on that and we remember and give thanks and humble ourselves under that knowledge that you know ultimately we're not the dictators of these things. We're not the ones that hold that. And the third thing within that recognition of God is that we are accountable to him, made in his image. For the Creator God we have to give account to him. You've been weighed and the scales and found wanting and that is the reality of our lives. That we all give account to the living God. Now there's another thing really in the Bible which reminds us that the verdict has already been given.

[ 21 : 54 ] All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. The balances have already been struck and in the balances of divine justice we're found wanting. That's why we need a Saviour.

We've been found in the Bible makes clear that already we've been found wanting and we need our demon. And sometimes we just really just hate that reality and we hate the idea of being found wanting. It's a, we might not feel guilty. We might not feel that before God we are not innocent. But a very trivial example might be you know you thought you've driven really well somewhere. I think I've used driving illustrations before which may say something about my level of guilt in these matters. But I've driven somewhere before and I thought I've driven very well. Maybe didn't realise that I'd gone through. I'm going to use an illustration driving tonight as well. That's poor. I've driven well but then there's video evidence to suggest otherwise that I didn't go through a red light. Definitely didn't go through a red light. But then there's video evidence to suggest well absolutely you did go through a red light. The evidence is there. And I may not feel that I did anything wrong. I may feel that I did everything in the right way. I may completely declare my innocence but the evidence is there that shows that I actually broke the law in doing that.

It's purely fictional by the way in case you're wondering. But we can be like that with God. We can say well I don't feel guilty before him. I feel that's an unfair judgment and yet the evidence by his, not by standards of each other but before God he says look we have abandoned our love for you, for him and our love for one another in a perfect way and we have gone our own way and we are found wanting spiritually before him. We are sinners and thoughtward and deed. We just set up and recognise the God of his word. But I don't want to finish there. What I want to finish is with this. When you come to terms and recognise this God you also must come to terms with this God crucified. That's what we must come to terms with. That's where we mustn't finish. You mustn't walk out here and say wow that was a rubbish story about a vindictive and harsh and brutal God who's sovereign over everything and just gives us no hope. That's not the message of the Gospel. That's not the message of the truth. It's not the message that comes through Daniel which points forward to an everlasting kingdom with a King of Kings on that throne. Who is the Lord Jesus Christ?

We need to come to terms with this God crucified on a cross. The King of Kings who opens up the way into that relationship and into that forgiveness and that love with him through his own death on our behalf on the cross. I'm going to spend a little bit of time looking at that this evening. Let me look at the person of Jesus Christ, fully man and fully God.

This amazing grace where God sees our need, who recognises we are weighed in the and found wanting and the balance of his divine justice and that we can't deal with ourselves so he comes himself. The sovereign, glorious, infinite, all knowing, all seeing, all powerful God comes and he becomes flesh and he humbles himself. It's not interesting that Belshazzar wouldn't humble himself to bow before the Creator God but the Creator God humbles himself in order to be our redeemer, to be one of us in order to be our substitute, to die in our place and to offer us hope and forgiveness and light. So our response should be one of humility and humbler humbling ourselves by faith and trust in this amazing, sovereign, living, love giving, life giving, rescue offering God in Jesus Christ and as believers live in the light of these truths, live in the light of the truths that we are accountable, that we are people who are not untouchable and be interested. And as tonight we'll see the great law of God for us as believers is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind and our neighbour as ourselves. So let's live in the light of these truths this morning as we seek to live out our lives as Christians. And I would really challenge you if you're not a Christian today to think about the revelation of God as He gives it of Himself here. I know it's absolutely counter cultural. I know it goes against everything you will hear in the media and in the secular world in which we live and yet do your business today before the living word of the living God and your own heart and soul and your own needs and make up your decision on this God who reveals Himself as sovereign but also crucified on our place for God. So love the world that He gave His only begotten Son and I encourage you to put your faith and trust in Him as we have done and it has transformed our lives.

[ 27 : 53 ] So let's bow our heads and pray. Lord God we ask and pray that you would help us to see that history and time and distance from these events doesn't make them any less relevant and reminds us that these events particularly are included in scripture because they are part of this ongoing revelation. Preparing us for the coming of Jesus Christ in scripture and also pointing forward to that day and the timing and the purposes and the plans and the revelation of yourself that is given in these words. And we ask that by your spirit you would challenge us, that you would speak to us face to face as it were eyeball to eyeball through your word that your conscience, our conscience would be spoken to by you that we would feel the power of the living God at work in our lives just because something may have been said that really makes us think, yeah God absolutely knows my heart and God absolutely knows what I am and God absolutely knows sometimes my rebellion and my rejection and my doubt and my fear and may it be that we find grace and help and forgiveness and joy as we come to humble ourselves and turn away from our rebellious independence from you and begin to give thanks for the breath of this day, for our gifts, for our love, for the families that we are part of, for the jobs we may have, the abilities and talents we have been given, we begin to see them in the light of grace and in the light of your person and help us to deal with the anger and the frustrations and the doubts and the questions that we sometimes allow to distance ourselves from you. So help us Lord we pray and enable us to live by faith as we move forward in Jesus name. Amen.