



### **LIVING A LIFE THAT COUNTS**

There's a certain saying that has inspired memes, poetry – even jewellery:

*Your life is made up of 2 dates, and a dash.  
Make the most of the dash.*

Yes, it's a reference to a gravestone, the dates inscribed upon it, and the brief lifespan represented there. Problem is: people can interpret 'make the most of' in different ways.

Today's chapter of the book of Daniel makes it clear how *God* interprets it.

### **Daniel 5**

The year is 539 BC. Approx 40 years have passed since the events of ch4, along with 3 successors to Nebuchadnezzar's throne. The present king, Nabonidus, is off building a city and temple in Arabia. And he leaves the city of Babylon under the control of his son, a man who up until the discovery of the Nabonidus cylinders 150 years ago was believed to be a fiction:

Belshazzar.

Unlike Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar has no time for the God of Israel. So, the time has come for the first part of Nebuchadnezzar's dream (ch2) to be fulfilled.

It's the eve of the Babylonian moon festival *Akitu*, and Belshazzar throws a party, for 1000 of his nobles. And he has an idea. A bad one. He sends for

the golden vessels which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the Jerusalem temple 50 years earlier. Not to worship, but to party. I.e. he's doing a *Brave New World*: offering people surface stuff to distract them from the deeper realities of life.

So, there they are, partying away, when Belshazzar sees something terrifying: a ghostly hand, writing on the wall. Not surprisingly his knees begin to knock and his 'legs give way' (a euphemism for losing control of his bottom half). He summons his wise men and counsellors, but they can't even understand the words, let alone the message.

At which point the Queen Mum says: "Better call Daniel."

Why has he not summoned the chief of the magicians before this? Maybe it's ageism, maybe it's racism. But Daniel is brought in, and Belshazzar offers to make his position 'official.' Daniel says, "You can keep your gifts." Then he contrasts him with King Nebuchadnezzar and says this (vs23): "You did not honour the God who holds your life and all your ways / paths in His hand. Therefore, He sent the hand that wrote the inscription."

He then reads the graffiti. It would have looked like this (reading from right to left):

*Lamedh, Qoph, Tav, Aleph, Nun, Mem, Aleph, Nun, Mem  
Nun, Yodh, Samekh, Resh, Pe, Vav*

N, Y, S, R, P, U, L, Q, T, ', N, M, ', N, M

Ancient Aramaic had no vowel points. Daniel, led by the Spirit, inserts vowels in 2 different ways: he reads the words as nouns – *mene, mene, teqel uparsin* – then interprets them as verbs. The result is a message to every person in that room. Every person in *every* room. And it touches on 3 aspects of human existence:

**1) Brevity.** The first verb is *mene*, 'number.' "God has numbered the days of your reign and finished it."

The average westerner likes to live as if they're going to be physically around forever. The Bible says otherwise. Hence verses like Psalm 90:12: "Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom." I.e. 'remind us that our lives are finite – in order that we might learn to live them wisely.' Why the morbid tone? Firstly, the life-to-come is eternal, and secondly, what you believe about it will affect how you live this one. And that includes how you see yourself; the people around you; and your time.

Because He loves us, God calls us to consider our final destination. And that begins in the here. And now.

**2) Morality.** The second verb is *teqel*, 'weigh.' "You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting / lacking."

In the ancient world it was not uncommon to compare the righteousness of a human being with the righteousness of a god, like weights on a scale (think *Anubis* weighing a heart against a feather, a symbol of *Ma'at*, Egyptian goddess of integrity). The Bible says something similar: "Surely the nations

are like a drop in a bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales ..." (Isaiah 40:15). But there's a difference, too: in the Bible, *our* righteousness is measured against that of the *Most High* God. No contest!

Now praise God, He's also forgiving. Merciful, too. But to know that we have to turn to Him. Belshazzar does not.

**3) Legacy.** The third verb is *peres*, 'divide.' "Your kingdom is divided and given to the Mede and Persian (*paras*)."

At the end of our lives a great division will take place – because what really makes you dead isn't this health condition or that, it's the separation of the spiritual part of you from the physical. Hence Jesus' words in Matthew 6:19-20: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven ..." What is Jesus saying? 'Invest your energy, your education, your expertise, in what will last forever.'

I.e. make His Kingdom a part of your life. If you do, your life will be a part of His Kingdom. What a promise *that* is!

### **Giving God His Money's Worth**

So, those are the verbs. But if you read them as nouns, as Daniel does at first, what you get are units of currency. *Mene* sounds like the Hebrew mina or 60 shekels. *Teqel* is related to the Hebrew shekel. And *parsin* sounds like the Hebrew for half-shekels. What's the point? God is saying, "Belshazzar, without Me you are not worth a mina. Not worth a shekel. Not worth even a half-shekel." Now, here's the irony. Potentially, he's worth more than that. He's worth *everything* – because Jesus would eventually *give* everything for the likes of Belshazzar. For you. For me.

But we only find our true worth when we recognise *His*.

All of which brings us to the history bit. According to Xenophon and Herodotus, in the buildup to this event the Persians had been busy diverting a branch of the Euphrates River, which led directly into the city. They then marched along the riverbed, under the walls, and conquered Babylon ... in 1 night. Belshazzar was killed, the Persians took over, and the writing on the wall was fulfilled. To the letter.

However, this story is really a message for us. A reminder to live our lives, not as we want, but as God wants. To make every day, count – for Him.

So, if you haven't done it yet, give your 'dash' to Jesus.

And if you have, give your 'dash' to Him.

Again.