MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN

Daniel 5:1-31

Key Verse: 5:25-26

“This is the inscription that was written: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN

“This is what these words mean:

Mene: God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end.

Tekel: You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting.

Peres: Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.”

In chapter 4, we could see God’s great patience and mercy for one pathetic soul, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. At the end of God’s training, when Nebuchadnezzar raised his eyes toward heaven, his sanity was restored. God is the God of mercy and restoration. But in today’s passage, chapter 5, we see the end of Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians and the fall of Babylonian kingdom. This is an eyewitness account of the fall of the Babylonian Empire by one who was a prime minister of that very empire itself. God is the God of mercy and the God of judgment as well. He numbers our days and brings our life to an end, and he judges according to how we have lived before him. He is also the God of history and he wants us to learn from history.

Verse 1 says, “King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine with them.” Who is Belshazzar? Nebuchadnezzar is well-known in history and his name is mentioned many times in the Bible, 91 times in the Old Testament (28 times in Daniel, 37 times in Jeremiah). But the name Belshazzar is written only in the book of Daniel, 8 times. So critics of this book of Daniel attacked the authorship of Daniel and tried to deny the authenticity of this book. Also, what is written in the book of Daniel was full of supernatural events and amazing prophecies, which are very hard for human minds to grasp. Detractors claimed that Daniel wrote this book out of his own mind. However, chapter 5 supports the historicity of this book on top of the divine writing of this book.

Then who is Belshazzar in history? Daniel does not record for us anything between Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar, a 27-year gap. Nebuchadnezzar was mentioned in 4:37 and, and Belshazzar is introduced in chapter 5, and we have nothing in between. However, history fills it in for us very clearly. Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 BC, after 43 years of reigning. After his death, the empire began to decline. He was followed by his son, named Amel-Marduk, in the Bible called Evil-Merodach (2 King 25:27; Jeremiah 52:31). He was assassinated by his brother-in-law after reigning for 2 years. His brother-in-law’s name was Neriglissar and he ruled for four years. He is mentioned in Jeremiah 39:3 under the name Nergal-Sharezer. He was an official under Nebuchadnezzar. He died and was succeeded by his son, Labashi-Marduk. He was just a little boy and was beaten to death by conspirators. He reigned nine months. Then one of the conspirators appointed Nabonidus as king, and he reigned 17 years. Since he was not related to Nebuchadnezzar with no right to the royal line, he married into the royal family to secure his position. He married either one of the widows of Nebuchadnezzar or one of his daughters, adopting the son Belshazzar. He appointed Belshazzar as co-king. Nabonidus moved the capital city to Tema and went down there, while Belshazzar occupied the throne in Babylon.

The background of chapter 5 is that Nabonidus with his army was defeated by Cyrus, the leader of the Medes and the Persian in the battle at Borsippa 80-some kilometers south of Babylon, and he was taken captive. After the defeat, Cyrus’ army literally surrounded the entire city of Babylon. Now Belshazzar is in Babylon, and all around him is a siege from the Medes and Persians, who have exiled his adoptive father after destroying his army. Yet, Belshazzar thought that the city of Babylon was secure because of strong defence power with thick and high walls and natural defence of Euphrates River. In that situation, Belshazzar gave a great banquet for his nobles, probably to cheer up his military leaders.

However, the great banquet was not a just drinking party, surely with orgies and debaucheries; it went further. Verse 2 says, “While Belshazzar was drinking wine, he gave orders to bring in the gold and silver goblets that Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken from the temple in Jerusalem, so that the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines might drink from them.” Indeed, they drank from the sacred goblets. It was directly defying God, blasphemy. They went further and further. Verse 4 says, “As they drank the wine, they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone.” There you see the descend from the most precious gold down to the most worthless stone. This was a deliberate challenge to God. All civilization follows the very same pattern. Each civilization rises to its heights. At its height, it is filled with pride. In the midst of its pride and self-indulgence and materialism, it begins to descend into degeneration and debauchery and evil. And as it descends, it comes closer and closer to its destruction.

When they had a drunken party and defiled and defied God, what happened? Verse 5 says, “Suddenly the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall, near the lampstand in the royal palace.” We remember the finger of God that inscribed the Ten Commandments on the two tablets of stone (Ex 31:18), which was for the life of His people. But the writing of this finger on the plaster of the wall is for the judgment as the king and his nobles provoked God to anger. Immediately, suddenly, and swiftly, when the orgy was at its apex, a hand appeared. And the drinking, and the singing, and the feasting stopped. And the loud mouths were slammed shut. Deathly silence and fear fell like a pall over the whole group. The fingers of a human hand appeared near the lampstand, most probably above the king’s seat, so that all could see it. God is invisible but God shows his living and his judgment in visible forms like the Flood at Noah’s time, burning sulfur from heaven on Sodom and Gomorrah, ten plagues on Egypt, the volcano eruption in Pompei, etc. Finally there will be the time of tribulation. God’s judgment comes all of sudden, while people say, “Peace and safety” (2 Thessalonians 5:3).

When the fingers of a human hand appeared, the king watched the hand as it wrote. At this, his face turned pale and he was so frightened that his knees knocked together and his legs gave way. He called the wise men of Babylon to read the writing and tell him what it meant. But no one could do that. So King Belshazzar became even more terrified and his face grew more pale. His nobles were baffled. We are reminded that the wicked are like chaff and will not stand in the judgment (Ps 1:4-5) while the righteous are secured in God (Ps 7:9).

At this terrifying situation the queen, most likely the queen mother, remembered the time of Nebuchadnezzar, the father of Belshazzar (most likely grandfather, since there is no Hebrew word for grandfather) and Daniel. According to her memory, Daniel is the one who had the spirit of the holy gods in him. He was found to have insight and intelligence and wisdom like that of the gods. She assured that King Nebuchadnezzar appointed Daniel chief of all the wise men of Babylon, stating, “King Nebuchadnezzar your father—your father the king, I say.” And she says more about Daniel that he was found to have a keen mind and knowledge and understanding, and also the ability to interpret dreams, explain riddles and solve difficult problems. The queen mother’s final advice is, “Call for Daniel, and he will tell you what the writing means.”

When Daniel was brought before the king, the king said to Daniel the same things that the queen mother had said: “I have heard that the spirit of the gods is in you and you have insight, intelligence and outstanding wisdom and you are able to give interpretations and to solve difficult problems.” At the time of crisis, a man of God with the Spirit of God and wisdom stands in the light, while all others of human wisdom go out in silence.

Finally the king says, “If you can read this writing and tell me what it means, you will be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed around your neck, and you will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom.” This expression is written three times in this chapter. A royal robe, great honour, and high position will be given to him. Yet, why not the second highest? As we thought of earlier, Belshazzar was a co-king, so the third highest ruler would be after Nabonidus, his adoptive father and Belshazzar. Even though de facto Nabonidus was already eliminated; it still had to be acknowledged that he was king. What an accurate description of history, adding the historicity of the book of Daniel!

Then Daniel answered the king, “You may keep your gifts for yourself and give your rewards to someone else. Nevertheless, I will read the writing for the king and tell him what it means” Yet, in his answer Daniel did not read the writing and tell it’s meaning right away. He first told a long history concerning his father Nebuchadnezzar and what Belshazzar did, which caused the hand to appear and begin writing. The history is written in verses 18-21, “O king, the Most High God gave your father Nebuchadnezzar sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendour. Because of the high position he gave him, all the peoples and nations and men of every language dreaded and feared him. Those the king wanted to put to death, he put to death; those he wanted to spare, he spared; those he wanted to promote, he promoted; and those he wanted to humble, he humbled. But when his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory. He was driven away from people and given the mind of an animal; he lived with the wild donkeys and ate grass like cattle; and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, until he acknowledged that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and sets over them anyone he wishes.” This is the lesson that everyone living on earth has to learn in life. In short, God opposes the proud to the end, until the proud acknowledge the sovereign God over their lives.

And then Daniel directly rebukes Belshazzar: “But you his son, O Belshazzar, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this. Instead, you have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven. You had the goblets from his temple brought to you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines drank wine from them. You praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or understand.” This is the exact description of what Belshazzar did. When he did such acts, he may have thought that what he did would be gone and no one would remember it. Yet, it was completely recorded and cited.” And Daniel added, “But you did not honour the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways.” Now there is no more chance of repentance. Daniel did not advise him, as he did Nebuchadnezzar, saying, “Renounce your sin…” Daniel straighthood said, “Therefore he sent the hand that wrote the inscription.” That’s it. The chance of repentance is not given forever, but limited.

Now Daniel reads the writing and tells what it means. This is declaration of the verdict pronounced against Belshazzar: “This is the inscription that was written: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN.” All the wise man of Babylon could not read this writing, probably because this was a heavenly language. The meaning of these words comes. Mene: God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to end. Tekel: You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting. Peres (the singular of Parsin): Your kingdom is divided and given to Medes and Persians.” Simply, numbered, weighed, and divided. That’s the judgment message upon Belshazzar king of the Babylonians and upon the kingdom of Babylon. Verses 29 and 30 says, “Then at Belshazzar’s command, Daniel was clothed in purple, a gold chain was placed around his neck, and he was proclaimed the third highest ruler in the kingdom.” Belshazzar kept his promise, but here would the shorted ruler, the third highest ruler in the kingdom with less than one day of ruling in history. For that very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians was slain, and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom at the age of sixty-two.” It all came to a fast end. Babylon is fallen, is fallen. Why? Because of sin. Babylon fell on the sixteenth day of Tishrei, in the year 539 B.C, in October around the eleventh and twelfth of that year by our months. We are remind of the fall of Babylon, the sudden destruction of the final kingdom of the world, the kingdom of the antichrist in written in Revelation 18, “Woe! Woe, O great city, O Babylon, city of power! In one hour your doom has come!” (10, 16, 17, 19)

It is worthwhile to review the meaning of the writing: MENE, MANE, TEKEL, PARSIN. MENE: God has numbered the days of your reign and brough it to an end. God numbers our days. How good it will be if we can number our days before God numbers our days! Moses says in Psalm 90:12, “Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.” Paul says in Ephesians 5:15-16, “Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.” In ESV, “Make the best use of the time.” For our days quickly pass, and we fly away, as Moses said in verse 3 of Psalm 90. The meaning of MENE is important. So it is written twice.

Tekel: You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting. We are reminded of Romans 3:23, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” All fall short of God’s when each one is weighed on the scale of God. Before all are unrighteous and to be judged. But a righteousness form God has been made known, and this righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. Those who believe in Christ Jesus are justified freely by God’s grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus (Ro 3:22, 24). How precious one’ s faith in Christ Jesus is! Through our faith in him his righteousness becomes our righteousness and his weight, ours. The cross of Jesus is heavy enough to reach God’s standard. So we are to keep our faith in Christ Jesus, however difficult our situation becomes, how the world changes and how others live.

Peres: Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persian.” This is the end of the kingdom as well as the king. We are reminded of the white throne judgment written in Revelation 20:11-15, “I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it…And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books…each person was judged according to what he has done…If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.” There is also judgment for believers written in 2 Corinthians 5:10, “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.” Here “judgment seat” is in Greek *bema*. So this is the bema judgment. Among believers there are those who live selfishly only for themselves, striving just to live a better life, but there are also those who live sacrificially for the sake of Christ and his kingdom, take care of God’s flock of sheep. The rewards will be different. Here “bad’’ is in other translations ‘worthless.’ It is easy to do worthless things, not truly valuable. Many spend their money and strength on worthless things. But when we offer our materials and energy and youth to God, all these will be stored up in heaven. Nothing we offer to Christ comes back empty, but is richly rewarded. We are to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, and at the same time to aware of Christ’s judgment as we live with limited opportunity in the body.

Indeed “MENE, MEME, TEKEL, PARSIN” is related to the gospel message, the message of salvation and judgment, to be kept in our hearts.