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It was New Year's Eve, 1999. We threw a big party. Some of you know that cooking is not my thing, but for this party, I went all out. We had our friends over to celebrate and spend the last evening of the twentieth century together. Our friends brought their children, who had the time of their lives setting off fireworks. Our son David was a freshman in high school. His friends were there, too.

If you remember that time, the world waited with baited breath for the year 2000 because computers were going to all-at-once crash. There were dire predictions. There was a *Y2K Computer Disaster Survival Guide*, because the calculation was that there would be no utilities, no banking, and nothing related to electronics. What would happen this night?

The hour drew near. We gathered in the living room, ready with our toasts to cheer and welcome the twenty-first century!

Ten—nine—eight—seven—six—five—four—three—two—one!

Immediately, at that very moment all the lights went out.

It was a sudden outcome after a couple of years of dire predictions. For two minutes it was a sudden and certain reality. Several people cried out.

Then, while we were looking for candles and lighters, the lights came on. The garage door opened and slammed. In marched several rowdy teenage boys. Right at midnight they had thrown the breaker.

I remember us looking around and saying, “Wow, the lights work! We are saved! Surely our money is still in the bank. Our computers will continue to work. Y2K didn't happen! It's all good, though for a moment it seemed like the end.

It was New Year's Eve. The king was in his castle holding a great party. He calls for the best—which just happened to be the silver and gold chalices from Israel's temple, God's sacred vessels. All the king's relatives and friends drank the wine from God's best. While they were drinking, they praised *the gods* of silver and gold, bronze and iron, wood and stone.

This was an in-your-face-affront to God. It was an insult of the highest disrespect. Daniel tells us that Belshazzar knew all about Nebuchadnezzar—that he was great because God gave his greatness; that he had power—but God supplied his power; and that he was humbled by God until he acknowledged God's sovereignty over him and his kingdoms (5:18-21).

Belshazzar knew all of this but, Belshazzar did not learn from his father. Belshazzar had not humbled himself before God. Daniel said:

Instead, you have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven by taking God's goblets from his temple and drinking wine from them, all the while praising the gods of silver

and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or understand. But you did not honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways. (v. 23)

Therefore God sent the hand that wrote the inscription. (v. 24)

“Your days are numbered and have ended; you have been measured and found wanting; your kingdom has been divided and given to the Medes and Persians.” (v. 25-28) That very night he died.

That’s pretty immediate action. It is as immediate as flipping a breaker and turning the lights off instantly. The writing indicates immediate awareness of the heart and mind of Belshazzar and his friends, who joined him in praising false gods.

God’s hand writing on the wall is shocking action meant to make a point.

Has God a habit of communicating so clearly? Or should we be sleepy headed about seeking God, trusting instead our own devices, our counselors, our self-help books, advice-givers on TV whose “buy a new car and you will be happy” mentality leads away from God.

There’s a saying: “Most of us can read the handwriting on the wall; we just assume it’s for someone else.”¹

But this passage encourages us to take this passage to heart. This passage, if you look at the positive note, says, “God speaks, and you can count on it to mean something for yourself.”

God spoke to Nebuchadnezzar quite clearly, did he not?

God sent dreams,
God sent visions,
God sent an interpreter,
Then God sent consequences.

Finally God made a believer out of Nebuchadnezzar. God’s effort to communicate would be no different for Belshazzar. The question was, would Belshazzar respond?

There’s another side to this story. This story speaks to Israel. Israel had been deported because they had turned away from God and began serving the same idols as these people in Babylon. Undoubtedly, they had been praying ever since they had been deported to Babylon. People who are wise will wake up when hard circumstances strike. And so people like Daniel sought the Lord. But now a whole generation has gone by and their prayers have not been answered. They are still captives living in a foreign land. How do you handle those long waits?

Does God’s delay make you a little hardened? Or, do you keep pressing on and trusting God?

¹ Ivern Ball

Remember the story of Zechariah? He prayed for years for a child. Then Gabriel, God's right-hand angel, appeared to him with the answer. But, Zechariah thought it was too late. *"I'm an old man now, and my wife is old, too!"*

Gabriel tried to soften the blow:

"You will have great joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the eyes of the Lord. . . . And, he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth." (Lk 1:14-15)

But Zechariah had become hardened. He squinted, "How can I be sure this will happen? I'm an old man now, and [so is my wife]!" (v. 14-15) The angel said, "Okay, since you don't believe me, that's going to make it hard on you for exactly nine months. You will not be able to speak, since you are jaded." (or something like that! ☺)

What are you praying for? Are you hardened because it has been so long? Have you decided you can expect nothing?

Daniel was a generation older when Belshazzar became king. He had been praying all along. Others were praying too. Some of those prayers went like this:

When they were frustrated:

"Wake up, O Lord! Why do you sleep? Get up! Do not reject us forever. Why do you look the other way? Why do you ignore our suffering and oppression?" ~ Ps 44:23-24

When they were discouraged:

"Why am I discouraged? Why is my heart so sad? I will put my hope in God! I will praise him again -- my Savior and my God! Now I am deeply discouraged, but I will remember you." ~ Ps 42:5-6

When they were mad:

"Why do you hold back your strong right hand? Unleash your powerful fist and destroy them." ~ Ps 74:11

When they released it all to God:

"Your promises have been thoroughly tested; that is why I love them so much." ~ Ps 119:140

Aren't those prayers great? How helpful to be honest with God. Are you frustrated, discouraged, or mad? Are you praying for someone and nothing seems to happen? Instead of hardening your heart, use one of these prayers, be honest with God, look at what God is saying to you, and then release it to God.

Belshazzar could have avoided the outcome of the handwriting on the wall had he listened to his father's testimony, taken heed, turned to God, and prayed. He was responsible for his actions. He had not measured up because he had not turned to God. Had he turned to God, he would be turning to the real God who held the king's destiny in his hands.

Thus the message of this passage for Israel and for us is this:

“Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, when your ancestors tested me, and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work. For forty years I loathed that generation and said, “They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they do not regard my ways.” Ps 95:8-10

Every person has to understand God’s real power and authority. The lights go on or off at his command. Our responsibility is to listen to God’s correction, respond, pray, and not give up. It will be all good for you. In fact, Jeremiah had prophesied Babylon’s downfall to give hope to Israel. God gives you and your family hope, too.

Turn on the light of faith and you will receive answers and blessing. Or, proclaim God weak and turn away in unbelief to lesser gods, and you will receive judgment. This is the word of the Lord.

AMEN