

The Writing is On the Wall

This is a phrase we use when the signs are clear that something is about to change. It means that clear signs of something unfortunate or disastrous have appeared. Something is about to end, and often it spells catastrophe. If someone tells us that 'the writing is on the wall' for us, then we worry, with good reason.

The expression is used frequently nowadays, whether to talk about the fall of a government, the failure of a business, or even the end of a relationship. It spells disaster, and the source of the saying gives us the reason why. It is God telling us that a crisis is coming!

Belshazzar's Feast

So when was the writing first on the wall; where does this idea come from? The story is a Bible one, from the Book of Daniel, chapter 5. At the time of the Babylonian empire, King Belshazzar held what sounds like a debauched party. With a thousand of his governing class, his wives and concubines, he drank from cups taken from God's temple at Jerusalem, and they praised their pagan idols. They were having a tremendous time, until:

In the same hour the fingers of a man's hand appeared and wrote opposite the lampstand on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace; and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote. Then the king's countenance changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his hips were loosened and his knees knocked against each other (Daniel 5:5-6).

The mood changed from fun to fear, and the terrified king needed help. Who could read the writing, and who could tell him what it meant? None of the kingdom's wise men, astrologers or soothsayers could read or interpret for him, and the situation seemed hopeless.

Then the queen spoke up. There was a man, who during the reign of one of Belshazzar's predecessors had proved he could solve such puzzles, a man of excellent character. The man, Daniel, was fetched and the king offered him wealth and power to explain the writing to him. Daniel refused the offer, and explained that the message had come because of Belshazzar's pride and godlessness.

This is the interpretation of each word. Mene: God has numbered your kingdom, and finished it; Tekel: You have been weighed in the balances, and found wanting; Peres: Your kingdom has been divided, and given to the Medes and Persians (Daniel 5:26-28).

That very night, mighty Babylon was attacked. Belshazzar was killed and Darius took the throne as the Medo-Persian empire succeeded Babylon. The writing was indeed on the wall!

The End of an Era

We learn from this episode that, when God signals a dramatic change in the world, it happens. He is the creator of heaven and earth, with boundless power, so however unlikely we may think the message, it will be fulfilled.

In very early times the world was very wicked, full of violence. People did whatever they liked, with no care for God. He decided that He would destroy them, and said to Noah, whose family were the only God-fearing people on earth:

The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth is filled with violence through them; and behold, I will destroy them with the earth... And behold, I Myself am bringing floodwaters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die (Genesis 6:13, 17).

The flood came, and only Noah, his family and the animals with them in the ark survived. The flood seemed unlikely, but God's power made it happen, made a new start for humankind, and established a positive relationship with those who tried to please Him.

Jesus gave a very similar type of message to the Jews of his day, warning them that the end was coming for their nation.

When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near... And they will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led away captive into all nations. And Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled (Luke 21:20, 24).

Within 40 years, the Romans did indeed besiege Jerusalem, and destroy it. There was awful slaughter, atrocities and slavery, which Jesus also foretold in this chapter. It was another era coming to an end, however much people did not want to believe it.

But there was good news too. This time of sorrow would come to an end, said Jesus, and better things would follow.

Exciting Times

This is where it gets exciting for us. Jerusalem is no longer ruled by Gentiles (non-Jews) but is celebrating 50 years under Israeli rule. So what should we expect?

Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near (v27–28).

The writing is on the wall for our world. Jesus will soon return to the earth and establish the perfect Kingdom of God. Let's take his advice and not be caught out like Belshazzar.

Take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that day come on you unexpectedly. For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth. Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man (v34–36).

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