

BELSHAZZAR ... who knocked down all the fences
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(DANIEL 5)

The late P.C. Dawes was once on point duty in Oxford-street, London, when a boat-race fan flippantly asked, "I say, Bobbie, can you tell me the way to hell?" The policeman answered immediately, "Certainly, sir. Keep straight on." There are people who believe that the way to disaster is the easiest road in life—a man merely keeps straight on, and without any difficulty reaches his disastrous end. That is not true. God never ceases to seek a man until the sinner is beyond redemption. The road to hell is filled with barriers—all erected by the love of God; and if a man is ultimately lost, it can only be because he has resisted every attempt to turn him from his way of evil. The story of Belshazzar provides a classic example of this truth.

The Testimony of a Transformed Father

The conversion of Nebuchadnezzar provides one of the most thrilling accounts in Old Testament literature. An arrogant, unbelieving pagan had been reduced to a position of mental impotence; but when hope of his recovery had been abandoned, a miracle took place. Later, the restored monarch was able to say, "And at the end of the days, I Nebuchadnezzar lifted up mine eyes unto heaven, and mine understanding returned unto me, and I blessed the most High" (Dan. 4: 34). Returning to his palace, the converted king turned his home into a cathedral, and the charm of his testimony reached everybody. Yet the prince, deprived of power by the return of his father, scowled. Thus did he sweep from his path the first fence which God had placed before him. His father's testimony might have led him to happiness.

The Influence of a Noble Lady

This noble Babylonian queen was one of the lesser-known characters of the Scriptures, but she was a great soul. Knowing that her husband's party had become a place of fear, she said, ". . . let not thy thoughts trouble thee, nor let thy countenance be changed: There is a man in thy kingdom in whom is the spirit of the holy gods, and in the days of thy father light and understanding and wisdom, like the wisdom of the gods, was found in him (5: 10-11). Obviously, she had been attentive to Daniel's message when her foolish husband had remained indifferent; she had remembered when he had forgotten. Had that husband been more influenced by his gracious lady, he might have lived longer than he did. Her presence represented God's second fence. Alas, Belshazzar swept it from his pathway.

The Ministry of a Sainly Prophet

That the boastful, evil king had ignored the preaching of the saintly Daniel did not provide him with any excuse. God may provide the preacher, but He never removes the wax from people's ears! If a man prefers to remain deaf, there is little God can do in the matter. All Babylon knew of the great Hebrew prophet, and many admired and respected him. Raised to eminence by Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel had more than justified the confidence placed in him. The prophet represented God's intervention in the affairs of men. Through him came the word of the Highest; yet in foolish arrogance the new king treated this third obstacle as he had treated the first two. Surely his sinful folly surpassed anything previously known in the country.

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The Promptings of a Troubled Conscience

The palace was a scene of resplendent gaiety; the hanging gardens of Babylon were a paradise. From near and far the guests had assembled for the magnificent occasion, and the fact that enemies were encamped at the city gates meant nothing. The high encircling walls of Babylon were insurmountable; the city itself was thought to be impregnable. The wine was flowing freely; the laughter of drunken guests echoed through the night. Then, "Belshazzar, while he tasted the wine, commanded to bring the golden and silver vessels which his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple which 'was in Jerusalem.'" How strange that in the midst of such gaiety the king should suddenly think of God. Surely this was an uprising of conscience? We can only speculate as to the length of time which elapsed before his violent reactions began. Stupid man! God had erected the last fence on the road to the eternal shadows. Belshazzar's stupidity ruthlessly trampled the obstacles beneath his feet when he sent for the consecrated vessels and continued his blasphemy. And "In the same hour came forth fingers of a man's hand, and wrote . . . on the wall of the king's palace.... Thou art weighed in the balances and found wanting." Yet no man is finally rejected until love has done everything possible to save him. God only abandons a man when nothing else remains to be done.

The Red Lights of Danger

The Second World War revealed many tragedies, but none more poignant than the sorrow which overwhelmed one of Britain's greatest families. England was extremely fortunate in possessing great leaders, and among those who assisted Sir Winston Churchill was a man of outstanding ability. His sterling character, unceasing devotion to duty, and exemplary conduct, were qualities which begat confidence. Yet that same eminent man, had he desired, could have listened nightly to his own son broadcasting lies on behalf of a brutal enemy. Probably the son's betrayal of his country only increased the determination of the father to be one of England's most dependable statesmen. Throughout the long and bitter conflict he enjoyed the confidence of the people he represented. If his foolish boy had listened to the wise counsel of his illustrious father, the son's fate would have been less ignominious. When the war ended the traitor was captured, tried, and executed; but all England mourned-not for the son, but for the family whose hearts had been broken.

I shall always remember the lady in Wales who asked if I would be kind enough to take her husband to see a specialist. For many years he had suffered from a chronic complaint, but now it was hoped the famous doctor might be able to suggest an effective remedy. I did as I was requested, and finally accompanied the sufferer into the consulting room of the eminent physician. The place was filled with instruments the like of which I had never seen. The doctor was obviously a man of great capability, and for him at least, time did not even exist. With care and deliberation he examined my friend; he fastened instruments to the arms and legs of the patient, and took readings on various machines. He seemed determined to solve the problem. Finally he replaced his instruments, and cheered us all by saying, "Yes, I can cure you; but you must obey my instructions. You must never smoke again." I recalled how the patient had been a very heavy smoker for many years, and wondered what reactions

BELSHAZZAR ... who knocked down all the fences would follow the giving of this advice. When the doctor's fee had been paid we returned to my car, and within thirty seconds my friend said, " Bust him; what does he know about it? " Then he proceeded to light a cigarette. Not long afterward, I attended his funeral.

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The storm was at its height, and the harbor at Wick, Caithness, had been closed for hours. Very heavy seas had been pounding the breakwater, and the barometer was still falling. Outside, a few vessels were riding out the storm; but suddenly a Dutch vessel began to approach the harbor entrance. The captain was told to stay outside, but disobeying the order and ignoring the warning red lights, brought his vessel through the entrance. The many onlookers were horrified as the ship was swept round the harbor and overturned, with the loss of all hands. The skipper had a date with a Scottish girl, and was anxious to keep his appointment. The prospect of a night's pleasure cost him his life. There are times when God places warning signals within the human conscience. Happy is that soul who reads the signs and stays in safety.

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I knew a man who often passed my church, yet never attended any meeting. He was brutal in his criticism, and professed to be something of an atheist. Most of his free time was spent in the hotel, and most of his money left with the bar-keeper. He was a well-known character, but every attempt to reach his soul with the Gospel seemed doomed to failure. It was 1.30 a.m., when a knock at my door announced a caller. Mr. - was dying. Would I please come at once? I had been ill for days, but responded to the call and went to see the sick man. Yet even as I walked down the street, I wondered why the relatives had not sent for the manager of the hotel-he knew him far more intimately than I did. When I reached the house the man was unconscious, and although I sat, and hoped, and prayed, for a long time, he never regained consciousness. That was the moment of most awful frustration I ever knew. A very needy soul lay within feet of me, yet was beyond my reach! The family had sent for me too late. I had been in the town for eight years, but had never been able to enter that home. Probably Daniel would have appreciated my feelings of frustration. He had ministered in his city for years, but the king never became interested until his opportunities had gone for ever.

" Now is the accepted time; now is the day of salvation."
Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord:
though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow;
though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool"
(Isa. I : 18).
How can I say " Tomorrow," when the Saviour says
Today ? "

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