

TELL IT LIKE IT IS

Daniel 5:1-28

What does it mean for a person to be “in denial?” Basically, it is when a person or a group refuses to accept the truth of a developing bad situation even when the truth is clearly evident. Some of the things that lead to “being in denial” are typically related to a prideful attitude that shows up in a belief that we are not subject to failure, that nothing can surprise us, if we want something done right do it yourself, we are never at fault, we can find an excuse for everything, everyone else is wrong, and any opposition is one big conspiracy.

One consequence of being in denial is that the bad situation will only become worse until it produces a crisis and drastic action may be needed, and in some cases even drastic action cannot stop the inevitable from happening. This sounds like what all of us have witnessed in the lives of many people we know or have known. Many times “being in denial” is related to various addictions such as smoking, alcoholism, and drug dependence. It can also be found in situations of inappropriate behavior that can lead to marital problems that end in divorce. It shows up in the lives of some who live beyond their means that creates massive debts and ends in bankruptcy. It happened in the decade of the 1930's which led to World War II. The consequence of the rise of fascism in Germany and Italy along with persecution of the Jews was denied until it was too late.

One of the reasons for living in denial is that dealing with the problems are thought to be too difficult or because of ignorance or incompetence we don't have a clue as to what should be done, and we just let it go and “it only gets worse.” On the other hand, if we made the right choices (even though these may be difficult or unpopular), then the present situation could be reversed and the inevitable averted. The wrong choices could be described as errors or missing the mark which the Bible calls sin.

Be Certain: Sin Corrupts – 5:1-4

¹ Belshazzar the king held a great feast for a thousand of his nobles, and he was drinking wine in the presence of the thousand. ² When Belshazzar tasted the wine, he gave orders to bring the gold and silver vessels which Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken out of the temple which was in Jerusalem, so that the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines might drink from them. ³ Then they brought the gold vessels that had been taken out of the temple, the house of God which was in Jerusalem; and the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines drank from them. ⁴ They drank the wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone. Daniel 5:1-4 (NASB95)

Considering the idea of being in denial, Belshazzar would probably have said, “the wine made me do it” in reference to desecrating the sacred vessel of the temple of Jehovah. As is the case with so many things that happen, the misuse of these vessels was just the tip of the iceberg. As Paul Harvey used to say, what is “the rest of the story?”

First of all, the reason for the feast was thought to be one of several possible occasions. It may have been his birthday celebration, it might have been an anniversary of his becoming king or was a celebration related to one of the Babylonian gods. The first two possibilities point toward pride and the third indicates that he and the rest of the nation had a culture of idol worship with no evidence of having learned any of the lessons that his forefather Nebuchadnezzar had discovered regarding the God of the Israelites.

You may be thinking “what's wrong with birthday parties or a national holiday celebration or even a pagan holiday celebration?” After all, we do that all the time in our day and time. To see the folly of what was going on at that particular party, we would have to look beyond the walls of the city and see that the Medes and Persians were attacking Babylon. Was

Belshazzar concerned? Not in the least. The walls of the city were really thick and high and they had accumulated enough supplies to last twenty years of siege. They had plenty of water since the river ran through the city. This was a classic case of false security caused by being in denial regarding the threats and having an exalted opinion of their own greatness. Would it be a stretch to say that our nation is currently being confronted by a multitude of crisis situations and those in positions of leadership are on vacation, playing golf, on vacation, celebrating birthdays, on vacation, playing golf and doing whatever they can to disrespect God by thumbing their collective noses at His word and even the mention of His name?

Be Warned: God Confronts – 5:5-6

⁵ Suddenly the fingers of a man's hand emerged and began writing opposite the lampstand on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace, and the king saw the back of the hand that did the writing. ⁶ Then the king's face grew pale and his thoughts alarmed him, and his hip joints went slack and his knees began knocking together. Daniel 5:5-6 (NASB95)

This incident (the hand writing on the wall) has become part of the way we communicate today. While many use this idiom in reference to being warned of impending danger, it is likely they don't appreciate the deeper lessons that can be found in this account. Usually, this expression is used to describe a series of subtle messages that come along over a period of time as a bad situation develops. Most of the time, we can "see the hand writing on the wall" in our hindsight. We may say something to the effect, "as I look back on what was happening, I should have seen the hand writing on the wall that trouble was coming."

You would think that having an army surrounding your city would have been a not-so-subtle message that there were "problems right there in river city." At least they had a wall that they were counting on to keep out the invaders. At least they had resources saved up to deal with unusual demands. They addressed the physical needs of the moment but had ignored the spiritual and moral aspects of the culture in which they lived. Even though their nation had been founded on pagan principles and their government's foundation was based on a false religion, they had been exposed to the truth that the God of Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah was really in control as opposed to all the "no-gods" they had worshiped. Yet they had either forgotten or deliberately turned away from the truth and gone back to paganism and self exaltation by their leaders.

If we were to seek to learn from their mistakes, then we could see similar evidences today of invaders on the border and we don't even have a wall. The Babylonians had a stockpile of resources that could help them and we have exactly the opposite and it is called the national debt that is being ignored. We are not told if there were other warning signs that had been given to the Babylonians over the past five or six decades that lead up to their present situation, but we can see a multitude of warnings that are going on around us that should be telling us that things are getting worse. We have major cities that are in ruin, morality has been abandoned by the majority of people, natural disasters are happening on the east coast, the west coast and in the heartland and we want to blame it on carbon dioxide rather than see these as warning from God that we need to repent. We are "in denial" and we cannot see the hand writing on the wall.

Eventually, in the situation in Babylon, God had waited and waited and finally the cup of their iniquity had become full and a proclamation of impending disaster (not a warning) was given by "the hand writing on the wall." When the leaders finally came to the point that they could no longer deny what was happening, it was too late and they were literally shaking in their sandals. When God's judgment finally comes, then even those who are in a drunken stupor will take notice that will interrupt the party.

Be Prepared: Seek Wise Advisers – 5:7-16

⁷ The king called aloud to bring in the conjurers, the Chaldeans and the diviners. The king spoke and said to the wise men of Babylon, “Any man who can read this inscription and explain its interpretation to me shall be clothed with purple and have a necklace of gold around his neck, and have authority as third ruler in the kingdom.” ⁸ Then all the king’s wise men came in, but they could not read the inscription or make known its interpretation to the king. ⁹ Then King Belshazzar was greatly alarmed, his face grew even paler, and his nobles were perplexed. ¹⁰ The queen entered the banquet hall because of the words of the king and his nobles; the queen spoke and said, “O king, live forever! Do not let your thoughts alarm you or your face be pale. ¹¹ “There is a man in your kingdom in whom is a spirit of the holy gods; and in the days of your father, illumination, insight and wisdom like the wisdom of the gods were found in him. And King Nebuchadnezzar, your father, your father the king, appointed him chief of the magicians, conjurers, Chaldeans and diviners. ¹² “This was because an extraordinary spirit, knowledge and insight, interpretation of dreams, explanation of enigmas and solving of difficult problems were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Belteshazzar. Let Daniel now be summoned and he will declare the interpretation.” ¹³ Then Daniel was brought in before the king. The king spoke and said to Daniel, “Are you that Daniel who is one of the exiles from Judah, whom my father the king brought from Judah? ¹⁴ “Now I have heard about you that a spirit of the gods is in you, and that illumination, insight and extraordinary wisdom have been found in you. ¹⁵ “Just now the wise men and the conjurers were brought in before me that they might read this inscription and make its interpretation known to me, but they could not declare the interpretation of the message. ¹⁶ “But I personally have heard about you, that you are able to give interpretations and solve difficult problems. Now if you are able to read the inscription and make its interpretation known to me, you will be clothed with purple and wear a necklace of gold around your neck, and you will have authority as the third ruler in the kingdom.” Daniel 5:7–16 (NASB95)

Obviously, Belshazzar was NOT prepared with wise advisers. If he had surrounded himself with people of wisdom as did his forefather Nebuchadnezzar, then he might have avoided the disaster that was about to happen to him and the nation. Many times a leader will seek advice from those who have the same ideas about things as he does and who will not oppose him or offer any criticism. Such an approach to governing can lead to significant problems since there are no alternatives except those that are forced upon the system because of prior bad choices.

Belshazzar discovered a costly lesson: It probably doesn’t make a lot of difference in the short term outcome if we operate from false assumptions and ignorance about how things really work. The difference comes when a true crisis arises and truth, profound knowledge, and wisdom are the only way to implement workable alternatives. As it turned out, Belshazzar was deluded into thinking that he and his advisers were so competent that nothing could surprise them. Eventually, everyone will find their limits and the truth and wisdom of Proverbs 3:5 to “trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding and He will direct your paths” is proven.

Speaking of cost, Belshazzar was willing to elevate whoever could solve the mystery to the third highest position in all of Babylon. This sounds similar to what happened to Joseph in Egypt when he was given the second highest position in the government. Belshazzar had to limit his offer to “third” since he was actually the subordinate coregent along with his father Nabonidus who was apparently residing in Borsippa another city in the Babylonian empire. It almost sounds as if Nabonidus was on permanent vacation and not paying any attention to what was happening to his nation.

There was such an alarm that happened when the so-called wise men could not explain the meaning of the warning on the wall that the “queen mother” who may have been Belshazzar’s grandmother came to the banquet hall to find out what was causing all the commotion. She remembered Daniel and the help he had been to Nebuchadnezzar and, in his desperation, the king had this man of God brought to the banquet hall.

Listen to the words of Belshazzar in the initial part of verse sixteen. He said, “I

personally have heard of you and that you are able to give interpretations and solve difficult problems.” His own words provide the indictment and convicting evidence of his totally foolish approach. If he knew of Daniel and his capability, then why was he not using him as his chief adviser? This could be considered to be malfeasance in the way he was governing.

There are probably lessons for each of us as we face decisions in life. Most of the time, we either try to figure out what to do or we take the advice of someone we overheard in the barber shop or the beauty parlor rather than go to someone whom we know has been successful in situations similar to the one we are facing. The obvious application to what is occurring in the national realm of our government should be easy to make.

Be Humble: Learn from Others – 5:17-21

¹⁷ Then Daniel answered and said before the king, “Keep your gifts for yourself or give your rewards to someone else; however, I will read the inscription to the king and make the interpretation known to him.” ¹⁸ “O king, the Most High God granted sovereignty, grandeur, glory and majesty to Nebuchadnezzar your father. ¹⁹ “Because of the grandeur which He bestowed on him, all the peoples, nations and men of every language feared and trembled before him; whomever he wished he killed and whomever he wished he spared alive; and whomever he wished he elevated and whomever he wished he humbled. ²⁰ “But when his heart was lifted up and his spirit became so proud that he behaved arrogantly, he was deposed from his royal throne and his glory was taken away from him. ²¹ “He was also driven away from mankind, and his heart was made like that of beasts, and his dwelling place was with the wild donkeys. He was given grass to eat like cattle, and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven until he recognized that the Most High God is ruler over the realm of mankind and that He sets over it whomever He wishes. Daniel 5:17–21 (NASB95)

Daniel was about eighty years old at this time and he was not intimidated by the position of this man who was a poor excuse for a king. After agreeing to “make the interpretation known” he then reminded Belshazzar of the history that he had been ignoring and had not learned the lesson of that history. At the same time, Daniel connected the vertical (spiritual) reality with the horizontal (physical) reality to put everything in proper perspective.

That reality was that God was in control. God had caused his forefather Nebuchadnezzar to become powerful and when pride had overtaken him, God took it all away until Nebuchadnezzar came to realize that Jehovah God was really in charge.

Be Judged: Consequences of Bad Choices – 5:22-28

²² “Yet you, his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, even though you knew all this, ²³ but you have exalted yourself against the Lord of heaven; and they have brought the vessels of His house before you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines have been drinking wine from them; and you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which do not see, hear or understand. But the God in whose hand are your life-breath and all your ways, you have not glorified. ²⁴ “Then the hand was sent from Him and this inscription was written out. ²⁵ “Now this is the inscription that was written out: ‘MENĒ, MENĒ, TEKĒL, UPHARSIN.’ ²⁶ “This is the interpretation of the message: ‘MENĒ’—God has numbered your kingdom and put an end to it. ²⁷ “ ‘TEKĒL’—you have been weighed on the scales and found deficient. ²⁸ “ ‘PERĒS’—your kingdom has been divided and given over to the Medes and Persians.” Daniel 5:22–28 (NASB95)

When we fail to learn the lessons of history, then we are doomed to repeat the folly and pay the price for such foolishness. If we repeat this cycle too many times, then the price becomes so high that we find that we are totally bankrupt and unable to recover. This is what had happened to Belshazzar who did not have even a smidgen of humility even though (by his own admission) he knew the history of what had happened before.

The “in your face” desecration of the sacred vessel from the temple of God that had been in Jerusalem was the critical point at which the cup of iniquity had become full and the judgment of God was about to be poured out.

At what point will our nation be at that critical point of ignoring God and His word by

choosing to glorify things that He has declared to be abominations so that the cup of iniquity becomes full and He send the message that we have been weighed in the balances and found wanting and this nation is divided up and given to those who are surrounding and attempting to invade.

The inscription was mene, mene, tekel, upharsin. The repeat of the first word was an indication that the kingdom of the Chaldean had been weighed and re-weighed. It was like they had been given a second chance and they still came up short. They had been found to be lacking in substance since they had abandoned truth and their whole society was functioning on vanity and lies. The consequence of this abandoning of their values was that they were no longer of any value in the eternal purposes that God was bringing about in the ongoing history of the world.

We sometimes hear or read that we don't see any mention of the presence or influence of our nation in the end time writings of the Bible. It is like we will have fallen from being one of the most powerful influences in the world to being insignificant.

Have we seen "the hand writing on the wall?"