

minds from the spiritual world. Ultimately everything loving comes from God and everything heinous comes from hell, but they come into our minds and hearts in a way that we can't trace the source. God gives us the power to do many positive things, yet it may feel as if we can do them without any assistance from God at all. Yet if we don't recognize the origin of our power and goodness, we can't stay connected to it.

Think of an electric motor in a vacuum cleaner. The motor doesn't have any power of its own. It only works when it is plugged in. We *seem* to have our own power, but in actual fact, we can only work when we are "plugged in" to God.

Often, when our ego is threatened, we respond with deep—sometimes even unconscious—feelings of shame. Yet if we can remember, as Nebuchadnezzar did in the end, that everything heavenly in us is from God, we can overcome shame with genuine humility.

WEEK FIVE

Contentment over Materialism

*You prepare a table before me in the presence
of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil.*

My cup runs over.

—Psalm 23:5

King Nebuchadnezzar's grandson Belshazzar was on the throne of Babylon, the greatest emperor of the most extensive kingdom known to the world. His grandfather had built the empire, conquering neighboring lands, and because of his accomplishments was obsessed with his own power. Belshazzar, on the other hand, inherited all his wealth. He did not have to struggle and overcome, to work or accomplish anything. He just had to wait to inherit the kingdom. And waiting must have been easy, since he had every luxury right at his fingertips.

We don't hear stories of Belshazzar's time as king. The first day we meet him is the last day of his life. If that final day is an indication of the way he spent his time as emperor, we don't hear much of the story because there was nothing to tell; no accomplishments, no laws, no legacy.

On his last day Belshazzar was partying in his palace, feasting and drinking with a thousand upper crust guests. After probably too much wine, he called for the sacred vessels that his father had looted from the temple

at Jerusalem, and he drank from them with his wives, his concubines and his lords. Then he called out praises to his gods—idols made of gold, silver, wood and stone.

WHO WORSHIPS IDOLS?

Today, the old myths have been debunked. Few worship idols any more. Science and reason have taught us the absurdity of attributing supernatural powers to objects we have fashioned with our own hand, so we like to think we live in a more enlightened age. Yet even in ancient times people with humility and wisdom knew how foolish it was to worship idols. The Lord said through Isaiah,

*With whom will you compare me or count me equal?
To whom will you liken me that we may be compared?
Some pour out gold from their bags and weigh out silver
on the scales; they hire a goldsmith to make it into a god,
and they bow down and worship it. They lift it to their
shoulders and carry it; they set it up in its place, and
there it stands. From that spot it cannot move. Even
though someone cries out to it, it cannot answer; it cannot
save them from their troubles.*

—Isaiah 46:5-7

We know how foolish it is to worship objects of gold, silver, wood and stone, yet still our hearts can be captivated by material things. We fashion metal into coins, with images of Caesar or Washington, then we count them up and write down numbers on paper or plastic. Money no longer represents physical value, much less spiritual value. Yet we turn to these imaginary gods of gold and silver, paper and plastic, to solve our problems and bring us happiness.

Belshazzar immersed himself in pleasures, flowing wine, many women. When physical pleasures are our top priority, it is another kind of idolatry. Anytime we look to external things to provide happiness, we are chasing an illusion. The genuine source of happiness is inside us, not outside us. The Lord's life and happiness flows in through our inmost soul, then into our minds and bodies, causing us to feel delight in our experiences and our environment.

We might suppose that someone who could have whatever they wanted might be happy. The problem is that when we are controlled by desire for power, possessions, and pleasure, we can never really have enough. We think those things will give us happiness, and they can in fact give us pleasure for a short time. Soon, though, intense gratifications become commonplace for us. They become boring and we need something more scintillating to excite us.

Power, possessions and pleasure are addictive. Like anything we become addicted to, we become accustomed to them, and then need greater amounts of them to become excited. Yet the consequence of that addiction is that we hurt our values, our work, our family and friends, and our own health in order to chase those temporary pleasures.

TRUE HAPPINESS

Without the Lord's influence that moves us towards service, we can feel pleasure in physical things, but it's not true happiness. Deep satisfaction comes from

benefiting others, seeking to give them happiness, and finding as much joy in delighting them as in delighting ourselves. It comes from love, service, empathy, compassion, and connection, not from physical sensations.

Sensory feelings contain our deeper spiritual emotions and motivations. For example, sitting down for a dinner with people whom you love strengthens and cements the relationships. The pleasure of good food and wine provides a context for the deeper happiness of shared values and purposes, of community and cooperation.

In general the banquets within the Church in ancient times, both midday meals and suppers, were held in order that people might be brought into association with one another and joined together in love, and in order that they might inform one another about matters of love and faith, and so about the things of heaven. . . . People's minds were thereby nourished, and also their bodies in a parallel and corresponding way. As a result they enjoyed good health and long life, they received intelligence and wisdom, and they were also brought into communication with heaven, some into open communication with angels. But as in course of time all internal things disappear and give way to external ones, so it is with the ends to which banquets and feasts are held. At the present day these are held not to draw people together into any spiritual fellowship but to create worldly connections. That is to say, they are held for the sake of material gain, the quest for high office, and mere pleasures. They provide nourishment for the body, but none for the mind.

— *Secrets of Heaven* 7996

God gave us food for the sacred purpose of giving us health that we may work to serve others in love. Food literally contains the energy we need to make our corner of the world a better place. But if we eat only for pleasure, it gives us lethargy, not strength.

Ultimately, every physical pleasure is the same way. Every pleasure, whether it is food, sex, entertainment, adventure, or relaxation, is best when it is an expression of love. When all we want is the pleasurable feeling, love will wither and die.

King Belshazzar was devoted to personal pleasure. He called for his women, his wine and his food, thinking only of himself, and not at all of usefulness or service. Then he called for the sacred vessels stolen from the temple in Jerusalem, symbolizing his theft of the precious vessels of food, drink, sex, and power from their Divine purposes to satisfy his lust.

CONTENTMENT OVER MATERIALISM

Then the hand appeared writing on the wall. Belshazzar was terrified and called for his wisemen and advisors to read and explain the writing, but they could not. Belshazzar's Queen told him to call for Daniel instead, because Daniel had helped his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel came, and Belshazzar offered him a high position. These were the sort of rewards that Belshazzar himself valued.

Yet Daniel did not care for those things, but only that he might be of use. He said to 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.” Then Daniel reminded Belshazzar what happened to his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar. “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” (Daniel 5:20-21).

Belshazzar was like this description of people who worry about what is to come:

They are not content with their situation, do not trust in God but in themselves, and have solely worldly and earthly things in view, not heavenly ones. These people are ruled completely by anxiety over the future, and by the desire to possess all things and exercise control over all other people. That desire is kindled and grows greater and greater, till at length it is beyond all measure. They grieve if they do not realize the objects of their desires, and they are distressed at the loss of them. Nor can they find consolation, for in times of loss they are angry with the Divine. They reject Him together with all belief, and curse themselves.

— *Secrets of Heaven* 8478

Daniel, on the other hand, was more like those who are content with what God provides:

Though concerned about the future, yet are they unconcerned, in that they are not anxious, let alone worried, when they give thought to the future. They remain even-tempered whether or not they realize desires, and they do not grieve over loss; they are content with their lot. If they become wealthy they do not become infat-

uated with wealth; if they are promoted to important positions they do not consider themselves worthier than others. If they become poor they are not made miserable either; if lowly in status they do not feel downcast. They know that for those who trust in the Divine all things are moving towards an everlasting state of happiness, and that no matter what happens at any time to them, it contributes to that state.

— *Secrets of Heaven* 8478

Daniel’s contentment with life is expressed in the Psalm: “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over” (Psalm 23:5). This is very different from the revelry that Belshazzar prepared for himself and his friends.

Belshazzar knew of his grandfather’s humiliating loss of his kingdom and his sanity, but did not learn from it, and now his story is memorialized in the common phrase, “The handwriting is on the wall.” MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN. Numbered, numbered, weighed, and divided. Daniel explained, “God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end. You have been weighed in the balance and found wanting. Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.” (Daniel 5:26)

There was another time when handwriting miraculously appeared. At the top of Mount Sinai, the Lord gave Moses the Ten Commandments written on two tablets of stone by the finger of God (Exodus 31:18). We say that something is “written in stone” when it is the last word, finally decided. The Ten Commandments essentially tell us the same as the Two Commandments—that

we should love God and love our neighbor.

In the Ten Commandments we find those truths expressed in a way that helps us understand what genuine love is: To love God we must believe in the one God, respect and obey Him. To love others we must especially take care not to do anything that would hurt them, such as lying, stealing, committing adultery or breaking promises, killing others or seeking to make them suffer.

WHAT TIPS THE SCALE

The Lord does not judge us by His Commandments and His Word. Rather, we judge ourselves by our own actions and choices. When we live in this world we are in equilibrium between heaven and hell. This is the balance in which our lives are weighed. The scale tips toward whatever we value the most. If we put the greatest weight on our ego, our own pleasure and pain, then the scale tips towards hell. If we put the greatest weight on love and service, offering compassion and sharing others joy, then the scale tips towards heaven.

Something inside us has to die, because selfish ego and compassionate integrity cannot coexist. If we fail to understand the judgment on us, that is, the consequences of our selfishness and addictions, then we, like Belshazzar will suffer a loss of our spiritual life. Yet if we choose, we can recognize the truths in what God has written on our wall (His Word and His Tables of Stone). These truths let us judge our ego's addictions. Our ego will perish, and we can live on and continue our journey to heaven.

WEEK SIX **Love Wins**

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life; and I will dwell in
the house of the Lord forever.*
— Psalm 23:6

MANIPULATING OUR EGO

King Darius had set up his empire with three presidents and 120 governors to rule the kingdom. Daniel was one of those three presidents, and he did his job so faithfully and skillfully that the king was thinking about having him preside over the whole empire. This instilled jealousy in the other governors, and they began looking for some way to discredit Daniel. But he was so faithful at his job and of such integrity that they could find nothing to use against him. They knew that he was honest in his worship of God, so they decided to use this against him.

King Darius seems to have liked Daniel and not wanted to cause him any harm, yet he was easily manipulated by the satraps and governors who were jealous of David. People who are caught up in their own ego tend to imagine that they are good at decisions. The reality is that the bigger our ego is the more easily we are manipulated. It is common for powerful leaders to be surrounded by hypocrites and pretenders who promise anything and say what they want to hear.

What we cherish the most of all is the king within us, governing our mind as a ruler governs a country. There