

THE HANDWRITING ON YOUR WALL

“Then they brought the golden vessels that were taken out of the temple of the house of God which was at Jerusalem; and the king and his princes, his wives and his concubines, drank in them. They drank wine and praised the gods of gold and of silver, of brass, of iron, of wood, and of stone. In that same hour came forth fingers of a man’s hand and wrote over against the candlestick upon the plaster of the wall of the king’s palace, and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote it” [Dan. 5: 3-5]

Any one who is familiar with the New York Subway (or, in fact, the underground rail system of any major city around the world) will notice how the trains and stations are sprayed with inscriptions or drawings, popularly known as graffiti. Graffiti are done by different kinds of people and for different purposes. For example, high school students spray messages on their school walls while politicians paint their party symbols and slogans on high ways and public walls. Some of the messages are readable and some don’t make sense. But, generally, they convey the frustration of a marginalized segment of society against state authorities. It may cost the mass transit authorities a great deal of money every year to paint out the ugly sight or to pay security personnel to keep watch. What I don’t know is whether the government ever cares to read the message and understand what the disadvantaged people are trying to say. Do state officials learn the right lessons so as to reduce the incidence of the handwriting on their walls?

The Babylonian authorities faced a similar situation about 2,600 years ago when the children of Israel were in exile there. They had brought some sacred vessels from Solomon’s temple in Jerusalem with which they feasted in honour of idols. It was during one of such excesses that a hand appeared on the wall and wrote a message [Dan. 5:5] Neither the king nor his magicians/diviners could understand it. It took Daniel, an exile and the man of God, to explain it. It was bad news!

We face a similar situation ourselves. God made us in His image and likeness and gave us dominion over our earthly environment. But what have we done with our worldly achievements? Instead of giving the glory to God, we are drinking and feasting in honour of the gods of this world: immorality, materialism, self-reliance, etc. In reaction, God has written something on our walls. Do you know the handwriting on your wall?

That is the subject of today’s lesson.

1. The Background

The empire of Babylon was the world's superpower at the time. Its capital, Babylon, was the home of the Hanging Gardens, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

Around 586 BC, during the reign of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar sacked Jerusalem and raided the temple that Solomon had built [Dan. 1:1]. He carried away all the valuable treasures of silver and gold (among other things) found in God's house. On arrival in Babylon, he put these sacred items in Shinar where he housed his idol [Dan. 1:2].

The Empire's arrogance reached its peak during the reign of Belshazzar, Nebuchadnezzar's grandson¹ [Dan. 5:11]. Instead of glorifying God for giving the pagan empire victory and prosperity, even to the detriment of His chosen people, Israel, Belshazzar desecrated the sanctified vessels. He and his immoral crowd used them to drink in honour and praise of pagan gods, "the gods of gold and of silver, of brass, of iron, of wood, and of stone" [Dan. 5:4]. In deed, the "love of money is the root of all evil" [1 Tim. 6:10].

But for the sins of the children of Israel, the Babylonians should have no chance against them. "Fear thou not, O Jacob My servant, saith the Lord, for I am with thee, for I will make a full end of all the nations wither I have driven thee but I will not make a full end of thee but *correct thee in measure*, yet will I not leave thee *wholly unpunished*" [Jer. 47:28]. Therefore, Babylon was merely a "battle axe and weapon of war, for with thee will I break in pieces the nations and with thee will I destroy kingdoms" [Jer. 51:20]. So, judgement was bound to come sooner than later.

While they were revelling in sin, a hand appeared and wrote the following on the wall: *MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN* [Dan. 5:25] which Daniel interpreted as follows:

MENE – The kingdom is finished and its days numbered [v.26]

TEKEL- The king is weighed and found wanting [v. 27]

PERES – The kingdom is divided to the Medes and Persians [v.28]

The sum total of the message was *the day of reckoning has arrived!* That night, Belshazzar was murdered and Darius, a Median, became king at the age of 62 [Dan. 5:31].

2. How does that apply to me?

¹ In Dan. 5:11, Nebuchadnezzar is called his father, just as David is called the father of Asa, the father of Jehosaphat in 1 Kgs 15:11 whereas David was his great great grand father [Matt. 1:6-8].

As earlier stated, God made us in His image and likeness. He told Jeremiah, “before I formed you in the belly I knew thee and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations” [Jer. 1:5]. David knew that there was no where to hide from the Spirit of God. So, he gave up trying and acknowledged, “how precious are Thy thoughts unto me, O God! How great is the sum of them! If I should count them, they are more in number than the sand” [Ps. 139: 7, 13, 17-18]. So, from the cradle to the grave, God has kept watch over us, even when we don’t know or serve Him. We enjoy *unmerited grace*, just as the Babylonians did. But have we done differently with the gift of life?

We have made meticulous plans for family members and ourselves. We have invested (or are investing) in valuable assets and pension schemes. We are looking forward to someday in the future when we can retire, take life easy and say, “soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, drink and be merry” [Lk 12:19]. We dance and drink at “shrines” dedicated to immorality [we call them exclusive clubs!] and beat our chests that we are having a swell time. Did Belshazzar do anything different? Do we have similar plans for our spiritual nourishment?

Those of us who are still struggling are running around. We are in a hurry to succeed and time is running out [Prov. 28:22]. We are ready to kill, steal or destroy [Jn 10:10]. Did the Babylonians do any worse?

3. Behold the handwriting on the wall!

That same hand that wrote on Belshazzar’s wall has written on ours. Have you seen it? I have seen mine!

Two thousand years ago, Jesus Christ wrote [by the hand of His disciples] the following warning on our walls:

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth where moth and rust doth corrupt and where thieves break through and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt and where thieves do not break through nor steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also [Matt. 6:19-21]

To make sure that we cannot miss the message, God has tattooed it on our physical bodies although we don’t want to admit it. Here is how we fight it:

- i. We all want to live long but nobody wants to grow old.
- ii. Most of us want to go to heaven but nobody wants to die.

(a) Aging

“And the Lord said, My Spirit shall not always strive with man for that he also is flesh; yet his days shall be an hundred and twenty years” [**Gen. 6:3**].

It is very rare these days to meet somebody who can live up to 120 years. Long life is God’s gift for children who honour their parents [**Ex. 20:12**] and those who fear and obey Him [**1 Kgs 3:14**]. Nevertheless, Jesus lived for only 33 years and He has changed the course of human history *permanently*. Therefore, longevity is not how long but how well we live. And from the day that we are born, the aging process has begun. That is why we count age by “how old”, not “how young” we are.

Human behaviour towards aging is a theatre of its own. Behind the façade of exercising for fitness is the desire to stay and look young. So is our attitude to fashion, child bearing and the like. Cosmetic surgery [to make people look younger than their true age] is a billion dollar industry. But we are only deceiving ourselves. You can dye your hair but not your age! Handsome David was the toast of the young ladies of Israel soon after he had killed Goliath [**1Sam. 18:6-7**]. He loved women so much that he married so many of them. But at age 70, close to his death, he was “old and stricken in years and they covered him with clothes but he got no heat” [**1 Kgs 1:1**]. Then, they married him Abishag, a Shunammite beauty. “The damsel was very fair and cherished the king and ministered to him *but the king knew her not*” [**1 Kgs 1:3-4**]. Sooner than later, we shall all tell the truth!

(b) Death

According to the Preacher, “ever the silver cord be loosed or the golden bowl be broken or the pitcher be broken at the fountain or the wheel broken at the cistern, then shall the dust return to the earth as it was and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it” [**Ecc. 12:6-7**]. In other words, *death is inevitable* because “dust thou art and unto dust shalt you return” [**Gen. 3:19**].

With the exception of Enoch [**Gen. 5:24**] and Elijah [**2 Kgs 2:11**], no human being has escaped bodily death since the creation of man. Therefore, the chances that we can avoid it are quite remote [**1 Thes. 4:17**]. *We are sure to die but we don’t know when, where or how*. So, why then do we make long term plans for our earthly treasures which won’t last but don’t bother to make short term plans for our life after life which could happen any moment? “Today, if ye will hear His voice, harden not your heart” [**Ps. 95:7-8**].

If you believe in the theory of evolution (that man evolved from animals), then, you don’t need to worry about death because animals don’t! But, if you believe in heaven and hell, then, you may need to spare some time each day to plan for your

permanent place of abode “because strait is the gate and narrow is the way which leadeth unto life and few there be that findeth it” [Matt. 7:14].

Remarkably, God’s people are never afraid to die because they know where they are going. Jacob knew that he was about to die. He called his twelve sons, gave them his blessings and “gathered up his feet into the bed and yielded up the ghost” [Gen. 49:33]. Look at the state of David’s heart on his death bed, “now these be the last words of David, ...the anointed of the God of Jacob said, the Spirit of the Lord spake by me and His word was in my tongue” [2 Sam. 23:1-2].

Jesus openly discussed His death plans with His disciples. When Peter took Him aside to rebuke Him for speaking that way, Jesus replied him, “get thee behind Me, Satan, for *thou savourest not the things that be of God* but those that be of men” [Matt. 16:21-23]. Paul walked with confidence towards Jerusalem and his death in Rome as the Lord had revealed to him, even when the churches tried to stop him [Acts 21:7-14]. He was ready to give up “our earthly house” (the physical body) in order to move on to “our house which is from heaven” (the spiritual body) [2 Cor. 5:1-2]. Writing to Timothy, elderly Paul said, “I am now ready to be offered and the time of my departure [death] is at hand” [2 Tim. 4:6].

Can we so speak with certainty about our death, or are we still afraid? The handwriting is on our wall!

4. Conclusion

It is a question of knowing our priorities. We are all taking reckless risks to live the way we do now. When we are young, we think that there is time, even when we know that death does not follow a chronological sequence (first-born-first-to-die). When we are in this world, we don’t plan for heaven the way we plan for earthly retirement, even when we know that death is inevitable (can’t be stopped).

My brothers and sisters, *there is life after death*. It is only in this life that you can plan for heaven. *There is no Purgatory for “it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment”* [Heb. 9:27]. The handwriting is on our wall. It is not graffiti that you can wipe off. It is a clear warning that Belshazzar ignored to his destruction. Plan your salvation today, right now through Christ Jesus who has reserved a permanent mansion for you in His Father’s house in heaven [Jn 14:2-3]. Today is the beginning of the rest of your life. Who knows? Tonight could be death and judgment. Can you afford to go to bed tonight without accepting Jesus as your Lord and Saviour? *The handwriting is on your wall.*