

ARE YOU FUNCTIONALLY LITERATE?

Today's Text: Daniel Chap. 5

Extracts:

Belshazzar the king made a great feast for a thousand of his lords... Then they brought the gold vessels that had been taken from the temple of the house of God which had been in Jerusalem, and the king and his lords, his wives and his concubines drank from them. They drank wine, and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze and iron, wood and stone. In the same hour the fingers of a man's hand appeared on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace, and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote.... Now all the king's wise men came, but they could not read the writing, or make known to the king its interpretation [Dan. 5: 1, 3-5, 8]

A man with a big cigar once had an appointment in an office in which they hung behind the secretary's desk a big bold sign that read, "ABSOLUTELY NO SMOKING!" It was a particularly busy day for the official that he had come to see. So the "big" man needed to wait a little longer for his appointment. He stood up and paced around for some time. Then, he pulled out his cigar, lit it and turned toward the secretary, saying, "Do you mind if I smoke?" She answered, "No Sir," and pointing to the no-smoking sign behind her, she added, "That sign is not for illiterates!"

It is possible that the visitor did not see the sign on first coming into that office but he had stayed long enough to look around. It is also possible that even if he had seen the sign, he could not read it because he was actually illiterate! Again, that looks improbable. The likelihood is that he saw it but chose to ignore it.

An illiterate is a person who cannot read and write. What do you call a person who can read and write but does not? Such a person is said to be functionally illiterate. It is by choice, not by chance! By that definition, most of us are illiterate! Otherwise, why would you risk fines for parking your car in prohibited places with bold signs to that effect? Why do you come late to work when the rule book is clear on the penalties for lateness? Is it that we can read but cannot understand? Is it that we are actually blind but pretending to be clear-sighted? If we are so functionally illiterate in worldly affairs, how about our score in spiritual matters? Those and more are the issues that we shall examine in today's lesson.

1. Literacy is measured by use not learning!

In every aspect of human life, we need *information* that will enable us to survive and adjust to changing circumstances. Information is what helps us to reduce our scope of ignorance. Therefore, the more informed we are, the more knowledgeable we get and hence the less ignorant we remain. Those who lack or hate knowledge are bound for destruction [**Hos. 4: 6**].

The ability to read and write helps us to obtain and process information. Therefore, it is in our own paramount interest to be functionally literate. For example, the Ethiopian eunuch, treasurer to Candace the queen of Ethiopia, that came to worship in Jerusalem soon after the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Disciples of Christ found himself struggling to understand the book of Isaiah that he was reading. The Holy Spirit led Philip, one of the newly appointed deacons, to join him in his chariot. Philip asked him, “Do you understand what you are reading?” The Ethiopian replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me.” Philip did and the Ethiopian subsequently gave his life to Christ and received water baptism [**Acts 8: 26-39**]. He willingly put his literacy to work and it worked for him.

Why would people that could read and write choose not to do so? When, for example, a driver saw a road sign that clearly says, ‘NO LEFT TURN,’ and he *chose* to make the left turn, it could mean one of the following:

a) *The driver had problems with his eyes*

Some people cannot see from a distance or when it is getting dark. Therefore, it was quite possible for that driver not to see the road sign if he had problems with his eyes. However, that excuse will not hold before traffic police because you are not supposed to hold a driving permit without clear sight (natural or corrected).

b) *He did not understand the sign*

The sign could have been written in the language that the driver did not understand. For example, in one hotel where I recently stayed, most of the house keeping staff spoke only Spanish. The sign that you can put on the door had on one side, ‘DO NOT DISTURB,’ and on the flip side, ‘SERVICE ROOM NOW.’ It did not matter much because even when you put up a sign not to be disturbed, they still knocked on your door! What if the driver did not understand signs written in English even when he could read it? Again, that excuse will not hold water because road signs are in symbols which can easily be understood in any language.

c) *He made a deliberate choice to ignore the road sign*

It is possible that the driver knew what he was doing. He read the sign, understood what it meant but chose not to obey it. He was functionally illiterate. Therefore, he would be penalized by traffic police should they catch him red-handed. This is the case covered by the bible text that we shall examine today.

2. The Babylonian king was functionally illiterate!

Belshazzar was a direct descendant of King Nebuchadnezzar [Dan. 5: 2]. He was raised in the palace and could have had access to historical documents and records. Therefore, at the time that he made a great feast for a thousand of his lords and began to drink from vessels that his father (or grandfather) Nebuchadnezzar had carted away from the temple in Jerusalem [vv. 1-2], he was behaving like somebody that was functionally illiterate.

Here are illustrations of what he had refused to read or chosen to ignore and the consequences:

a) *The drinking vessels were holy before God*

When on Mount Sinai God gave Moses a description of the structure and furnishing of the tabernacle (which later had full expression in the temple built by Solomon in Jerusalem), He said, “You shall consecrate them, that they may be holy; *whatever touches them must be holy*” [Ex. 30: 29]. Jesus reiterated the point when He told His disciples that the gold inside the house of God is sanctified by the temple because God dwells in it [Matt. 23: 17-22]. The gold and silver vessels that the Babylonian king brought out to be used by his lords, wives and concubines were taken from the temple that Solomon had built in Jerusalem [2 Chron. 36: 10]. Therefore, they were holy and should not be profaned.

A few examples are in order here. When Korah and a few others revolted against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, Moses asked them to put incense in their censers and come before the Lord so as to test who were the genuine messengers of God. The rebels were put on one side and the loyalists on the other side. Suddenly, the ground opened and swallowed up the rebels and their possessions. But God instructed Moses, “Tell Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, to pick up the censers out of the blaze, *for they are holy*, and scatter the fire some distance away” [Num. 16: 1-37].

Another example is taken from the days of Samuel. The Philistines were at war with Israel. They seized the Ark of God from the Israelites and put it in the house of Dagon, their idol [1 Sam. 5 & 6]. From that point on, the Philistines faced one plague after another that decimated the population of man and beast. When they consulted their priests and diviners, they were told to quickly return the Ark of God to Israel because it was God’s property!

King Belshazzar and his rowdy company drank from holy vessels of God and “praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze and iron, wood and stone” **[Dan. 5: 4]** that were the works of men’s hands. Is that not what we also do? Do some of us not profane the temple of God in the way we administer Holy Communion, dispense church ranks and positions or use church property? When we set up churches primarily for monetary gains, are we not profaning God’s temple? Have we not read God’s word that says “cursed is he who does the work of the Lord deceitfully” **[Jer. 48: 10]**?

- b) *Nebuchadnezzar’s encounters with the God of the Jews were in the palace chronicles and the nation’s folklore*

As Belshazzar and his company reveled in profaning God’s holy vessels, a hand suddenly appeared to the king and scribbled something on the wall. His countenance changed, his lips hung loose and “his knees knocked against each other.” He called his wise men but they could neither read the writing nor interpret it **[Dan. 5: 5-8]**. At that stage, the queen reminded the king of a man (Daniel) in his kingdom “in whom is the Spirit of the Holy God” that Nebuchadnezzar the king’s father had heavily relied on for interpreting his dreams **[vv. 10-15]**.

If the queen knew of Nebuchadnezzar’s encounters with the God of Daniel and of the Jews, his son Belshazzar could not claim ignorance of it. He would have heard of how his father tried to burn Meshach, Shadrach and Abed-Nego alive for not bowing to his golden image and how God had delivered them unharmed **[Dan. 3]**. He would have read how Nebuchadnezzar had lost his sanity and lived among beasts for seven years because he had arrogated to his own effort the honour that God had granted him **[Dan. 4]**. Did he not read his father’s advice that those who walk in pride, God is able to put down **[v. 37]**? Well, Belshazzar chose not to know!

The lesson of history is that we do not learn from history. We have read the word of God in the Bible and what happened in the past to those that had disobeyed Him. We study history books and know what has happened to evil people. Yet, every new day, we repeat their mistakes and continue in their wicked ways. For example, the sin of sodomy that led God to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah is paraded today as a civil right! Are we really literate?

- c) *The king could not ignore the handwriting on the wall!*

Following his queen’s recommendation, the king invited Daniel to read and interpret to him the handwriting on the wall. Before doing so, Daniel

reminded the king of his father's history, how God had blessed him, how he had through pride squandered his blessings and how God had humbled him [Dan. 5: 17-21]. In concluding the historical survey, Daniel said [vv. 22-23]:

But you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, although you knew all this. And you have lifted yourself up against the Lord of heaven. They have brought the vessels of His house before you and your lords, your wives and your concubines, have drunk wine with them. And you have praised the gods of silver and gold, bronze and iron, wood and stone, which do not see or hear or know; and the God who holds your breath in His hand and owns all your ways, you have not glorified.

Having chosen to be functionally illiterate, God wrote something on the king's wall which he could not ignore! The words were: "MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN" [V. 25] that Daniel interpreted as follows:

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" [vv. 26-28].

That very night, Belshazzar was killed and Darius the Mede took over his kingdom [vv. 31-32].

Belshazzar's story teaches us the following:

- The word of God is all over the place- in His creations [Ps. 19: 1] and in the Book [Josh. 1: 8] and in our conscience. It is given by God's inspiration and profitable "for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" [2 Tim. 3: 16]. When we choose not to read God's word or ignore its message, we have chosen to be functionally illiterate in matters of life and death.
- To know how to do what is right and refuse to do it is sin [Jam. 4:17]. When we read the word of God but refuse to follow its precepts, we put at risk our spiritual relationship with God. The wages of sin is spiritual death [Rom. 6: 23]. The only writing that God puts on the wall of the unrepentant sinner is judgment as in the case of Belshazzar.
- In law, ignorance is not a defence. If his queen knew the truth, Belshazzar could not plead any ignorance for profaning holy vessels and giving praise to idols. God punished him all the same. In like manner, we are individually accountable to God for our actions.

3. Conclusion: to be functionally literate is to obey God!

As Joshua was about to enter the Promised Land, God instructed him as follows [Josh. 1: 8]:

This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.

From the forgoing quote, the only evidence of literacy for the reader of God's word is to obey what it says. To do otherwise is to deliberately choose ignorance which can limit our prosperity and good success. Shall we not then hear the knock of Christ on the door of our hearts and open to Him so that He may come in and dine with us and us with Him [Rev. 3: 18]?

Functional literacy, especially in spiritual matters, can be enhanced through the following steps:

- Ask God to grant you wisdom because “wisdom is the principal thing; therefore, get wisdom, and in all your getting, get understanding” [Prov. 4: 7]. Wisdom is germinated in you if you have the fear of the Lord [Prov. 15: 33]. With wisdom comes understanding and understanding produces knowledge. Instructively, wisdom and knowledge are gifts of the Holy Spirit [1 Cor. 12: 8].
- Choose to follow and obey God *totally*, not selectively. You cannot serve God and the god of this world at the same time.

Certainly, you *can* read God's word. So, read and act on it!