

The Writing on the Wall

... for Personal Religion

We have looked at the true story of Belshazzar's feast in **Daniel 5** and drawn some parallels with present-day organised Christianity. Are there lessons here for our personal spiritual life?

Belshazzar's own failings are obvious. Instead of learning from the history of his ancestor Nebuchadnezzar, he ignored and insulted the living God by not only using the gold and silver cups from the Jerusalem temple for his enormous wild party, but also by using them to drink toasts to man-made idols of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood and stone.

We may not be in danger of such obvious idolatry, but where do we look for our spiritual fulfilment?

In **Jeremiah 2**, the LORD takes issue with the people of Israel for deserting him and going after false gods. Even though their own gods were idols, no other nation had exchanged their idols for someone else's. He uses the graphic image of adultery to depict Israel's unfaithfulness but also describes himself as a spring of 'living' water which his people have forsaken, preferring to rely on their own man-made water tanks (**Jeremiah 2:9-13**). That was bad enough, but even those tanks were flawed and could not hold water.

Again in **Jeremiah 17:5-8**, the LORD points out the difference between the man who "*trusts in mankind*" and the one "*whose trust is in the LORD*". A bush in the desert and a tree by a stream. Both are ready for times of adversity but only one will see prosperity. Have you seen bushes which grow in the desert? They are hardy, self-reliant, well adapted to use the minimum of water. The tree is dependent on the

stream and can fearlessly face any sort of drought as long as the water is there. It will even be fruitful in those barren times!

That, says the LORD, is what it is like to be one who trusts him.

Of course, if you live in an area with unpredictable rainfall, it seems logical and prudent to have some means of storing water. Perhaps the spring or stream will not be 100% reliable, so wouldn't it seem like a good idea to take the precaution of digging a storage pond or installing a tank? No, says the LORD in **Jeremiah 2**, you need to rely on the constant flow of water from me as the spring, the source. Any tanks you build won't be able to hold the water, anyway. They will be like stone troughs with a crack in them - any water you put in them will soon leak away.

Jesus takes up the same theme when he talks to the Samaritan woman in **John 4**. Again 'living water' refers to a spring. No well is any use without water flowing into it, usually from an underground spring. Perhaps in this well outside the town of Sychar, as with many, you could see the water welling up at the bottom of the shaft. No wonder the woman wondered how Jesus could get hold of 'living water' without a bucket and a rope!

This is a different sort of well-spring, says Jesus. This one is inside a person and goes on bubbling up with not just *living* water but *ever-living* water! This is a supply that doesn't fail, one that feeds a life which flows on into eternity. (See **John 4:10-14**.)

It is obvious from reading on in this passage that, up till now, the woman had been concerned about religious practice. It was important for her to get it right. Should people worship here on Mount Gerizim or over there on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem?

Although Jesus changes the picture, he is teaching her the same truth. Here in Sychar or over there in Jerusalem, it makes no difference. Worship of the Father needs to be real, honest, internal, living and spiritual, not bound by religious tradition and practice.

Jesus was surrounded by religious tradition and it was the traditionalists who were irritated by his reality and authority, became jealous and arranged to get him executed. They emphasised their own traditions rather than the word of God. In **Matthew 15:1-20** (parallel passage **Mark 7:1-23**), Jesus quotes from **Isaiah 29:13**, a passage which goes on to say that *because* the people honour God with empty words and dead tradition, God himself will take away wisdom and discernment from them.

When John's disciples and the Pharisees observed the traditions of fasting and noticed that Jesus' own disciples just went on eating normally, they asked why it was. Jesus replied that the bridegroom's friends couldn't fast in the bridegroom's company and that what he was saying and doing was like new wine - yeasty, active and alive. It could not possibly be confined by the tough old leather of old forms and traditions. (**Mark 2:21-22**)

Living water, active new wine, ever-bubbling springs, ever-flowing streams, spiritual reality. In **John 7:37-39**, Jesus even says that the spring of living water inside someone who trusts in him is designed to flow right out as rivers of living water. Notice the plural! Not just one little trickle, but rivers! This, John explains, refers to the Holy Spirit. Writing after the Holy Spirit had been poured out on him with all the others at Pentecost, he was able to say from experience that the rivers of living water had indeed started to flow.

So how can we experience this sort of living reality? It is certainly very different from religious observance. *“A man can receive nothing”* says John the Baptist, *“unless it has been given him from heaven”* (**John 3:27**). Jesus says much the same: *“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day.”* (**John 6:44**)

That does sound rather as though only a selected few are able to draw near to Jesus, but we know that, in fact, the Father is **actively** seeking worshippers (**John 4:23**) and that the whole purpose of Jesus coming to this world was *“to seek and to save that which was lost”* (**Luke 19:10**). All are invited, all are actively wanted!

When we begin to experience living reality, any act of faith that we make is a response to what God has already done. Our faith itself is an acknowledgement of the truth and reality which he has already put in place. The Holy Spirit shines light on that truth, and we experience a ‘light bulb moment’ – what the Bible calls revelation.

We can no more ‘have faith’ on its own than we can fly! You would think it rather strange if you entered a room and someone came straight up to you and said ‘I believe you’. Surely you would need to have said something first? So it is with faith. We need to ‘see’ or ‘hear’ first – then we can believe.

This is the purpose of declaring truth – ‘preaching the gospel’, if you like – simply setting out the facts so that the Lord can take hold of them and make them real to the listeners, providing the opportunity for the ‘hearing of faith’ which Paul talks about in **Galatians 3:1-5**.

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