

Lost in Translation

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“Oh, he’s won that *hands down*” and “hands down” means “clearly, easily.” The phrase “hands down”? It apparently comes from horseracing and when the jockey was so far in front he let go of the reins and went “hands down.” We tucked in our kids and said, “Sleep tight.” Where does that expression come from? It had to do with pulling the ropes on a bed frame when that’s the way they supported the mattress. Sometimes we’ll say to someone, “Don’t fly off the handle.” Did you know that that idiom came from cheap axes and how the axe head was not well fastened to the handle? One more, “Minding your p’s and q’s”? Apparently, this referred to the tallies by the bartender of the pints and quarts drunk by someone.

We’re going to come to a story from which we get a common phrase like the ones I just mentioned, used in our modern culture, centuries and miles removed from the Bible. But this is where it comes from.

Read.

“Handwriting on the wall” is it? It means “the signs are here and what’s going to happen is right around the corner.” In the original setting it had to do with a Babylonian king who would have his kingdom taken from him. He got a message, written spookily by some kind of hand, on the plaster wall of his banquet hall. But it wasn’t such that he could read it. He needed it interpreted – maybe because he didn’t know or maybe it was in a puzzle form or maybe because he was drunk or frightened or maybe all of the above. At any rate, God makes the

message clear through his servant Daniel. It doesn't get lost because of no translation nor does it get lost in translation. What is the message and what does that message mean and can it be translated for you and me here today? I think it can.

Pray.

First, let's consider the story as a whole before looking at the phrase written on the wall in particular. The story means something about lessons. It's a lesson about lessons --- that we sure can ignore them but God wants us to learn from them.

Ed Walthall was a wonderful man, a wonderful pastor. He and I worked together in San Antonio and his and Margaret's house was not far from mine. They had beautiful azaleas lining the front. One day Ed announced, "We're selling the house and moving to USAA Towers (a retirement center)." I was shocked and asked why. "You're not ready for retirement. You have a lovely home. Why???" His answer I have pondered ever since. He said, "We wanted to make the move when it could be our decision." In other words, he didn't want to wait until illness forced them into some hasty move. Or that it would become adult children pressuring confused parents.

Now not all of us would take the same steps as Ed and Margaret and that's fine. But those were the ones they did. What impressed me was not the exact steps they took but that they acted based on what they had seen with others and what they knew to be coming for themselves. They let themselves be schooled and acted accordingly in a timely way. They acted *before* they *felt* ready but before it was actually too late.

I've always been impressed with the grid that has for one axis the words "urgent" and "not urgent." For the other it reads "not important," "important." Cross them and you'll find there is that overlap where something is not urgent and not important. Training pet ants. Not urgent, not important. Or there is that which is urgent and not important. You have to absolutely buy these bananas before they go off sale. No, they'll be on sale again. Or there is that which is urgent and important ... like having a heart attack. But here's the zone to ponder – that which is important but not urgent. Not so much the heart attack but the cholesterol level twenty years before.

Ed and Margaret looked at the important and acted wisely before it became urgent.

Daniel is called upon to interpret the writing on the wall. Before he does so, he interprets something easier—history-- Belshazzar's and his ancestor's Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel pointed out that Belshazzar had an important lesson in King Nebuchadnezzar's biographical lifeline of pride, downfall, repentance, and restoration. He had gotten a swelled head and then went off the rails. He only got back to a normal life when he repented and turned to God. It was an important lesson right there in his backyard that had never been important for, and therefore never learned by, Belshazzar. But that's the way so many lessons are – not *felt* to be important and not *felt* to be urgent. Not realized or felt until it's too late.

Daniel could have gone on to point to himself as a message/messenger from God; he had been in Babylon all that time. No, he'd been put on the shelf (like many a Bible in many a home). Daniel could have pointed to the encroaching foreign armies. These were signposts from

God to follow, early warning systems to give heed to. Near misses. Wake up calls. For some reason, he was too distracted to notice. Maybe they were just circumstances or messages for someone else. (There's someone out there for whom Harvey Weinstein is a message, for whom the next opioid overdose is a message, for whom the next case of lung cancer is a message.) The problem is we say, "Not me. At least, not today."

We, too, have Daniel, literally (in the Bible), and we have Daniel-like ones, and circumstances. We have the Bible and all of us have had a wakeup call or two probably, and it is so characteristic of us sinful humans that we put off so much until tomorrow, even the important, if we'll recognize it as such at all. We hit the snooze alarm again and again. Or we unplug it all together. The Bible, this church, this sermon, this Daniel ... all interesting but ... important?

And the lesson about lessons is that God gives them, in love, and they are often not urgent, but wisdom assesses them as important and gives heed to them, period. God caused this story to be written down, preserved, translated, and preached to you and me. Why? To give us an important lesson about important lessons – heed them while you can, heed them before it is too late. Get right with God today.

Secondly, it means something about human folly. The grand ballroom filled with who's who, drink, concubines, and mocking (using the sacred goblets from the Jews' temple) is often regarded as something between hedonism and pride. The thought is that the Persians didn't just materialize overnight outside of Babylon but had been encroaching for some time. Very recently

Belshazzar's co-regent had been defeated by them. And yet these circumstances, another warning system given by God, led not to desperate prayer but to decadent partying.¹ Why? Because Babylon is ... 300 feet high walls, 250 towers that stretch hundreds of feet more above that, 80 feet thick, with a river providing water running through it, and a 30 foot moat around it. In other words, "We're good." Maybe so convinced they didn't even notice the threat. Maybe so convinced they were revved up to say, "Bring it on."²

Some, at this point, bring up youth and the feeling of invincibility until the clock marches on. Others note in this the mocking hubris of "I'm self-sufficient, I know it all, I've got this, I'm in charge of my destiny, God's just out there on the sidelines someplace if at all." That is, it's about an arrogant humanity. So they say. And they'll point out, people like Romanian leader Ceausescu, in 1989 after years of killing all potential threats to his power, commissioned the National Opera of Romania to produce a song in his honor, which included the words Ceausescu, is good, righteous, and holy. He wanted it premiered on his birthday, January 26, 1990. But on December 25, 1989, he was executed.

And I agree with all that. It is a good lesson for us with our pride to learn. And I'm sure I'm more arrogant than I am willing to realize but I don't, and perhaps you

¹ There was a somewhat analogous case with the King of Nineveh. Jonah said to him, "This is it." Belshazzar feasted. The King of Nineveh fasted.

² I wonder if in the face of decay, they, as others have, say, "Eat, drink, and be cynically merry for (and to xxx with God if there is one... what good is he?!) tomorrow we die."

don't either, identify with those who out and out simply mock heaven and dare all comers. Rather than vaunt myself against the heavens, I simply find that I deceive myself into thinking I can sow selfishness and the thought God will do nothing and that I won't really reap that, that which I am sowing ...that I can coddle this little sin or that ... and that there won't be any real consequences. That's why I think of this chapter as a lesson in folly.

Ecclesiastes 12:14 says, "Pay attention with great respect to God being careful to do what he instructs for He will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil". In other words, when I am thinking how I am being sinful is not a real problem with real consequences, it is.

Someone asked funnily, "If a man speaks his mind in the woods where there are no women to hear him, is he still wrong?" How about if God speaks and no one will give him heed, is he still irrelevant? No, a thousand times no. Folly considers otherwise.

This passage asks first, will you learn the important in the limited number of days you have? Second, will you recognize our human tendency to simply not take God as relevant really?

There's a third lesson – about Christ. I've been in situations where I have spoken with a translator beside me. There can be something unnerving about it – this: when I have said three words in three seconds and the translator went on for five minutes. Or I would get animated for 5 minutes and he would say flatly three words over in three seconds. I would feel like something was getting lost in translation.

The words seen and then translated by Daniel for the King came out pretty straightforwardly, “You have been tried in the balance and found wanting.” It has to do with weights and measures. Simply put it means you have not met the standard. When I have a toaster and it doesn’t turn on when its plugged in and it doesn’t toast the bread, it hasn’t met the standard for a toaster. And I get rid of it.

None of us has met the standard for a right human being. All of us have been found wanting.

Someone pointed out that it seems the finger of God gave us the Ten Commandments and we have lived into those fully if at all. Then the finger of God wrote this world to Belshazzar and all of us about the seriousness of our life spans and our condition. Then there was one more time of God writing, when he was as Jesus kneeling beside a woman caught in adultery and he wrote in the dust. Those with rocks and the woman in the middle hadn’t lived up to the standard. We don’t know what Jesus wrote there – but we know that he was God’s word become flesh full of grace and truth. And he met the standard so you and I don’t need to be found wanting – that is, if we will consciously put our lives in his and take his into ours.³

That very night of the banquet, the Persians diverted the river that ran under the walls of the great Babylon. They entered the city through the river bed and Belshazzar’s kingdom was no more.

Friends, there will be a Sunday that you will not be here. It is just a matter of when. None of us knows if it is

³ If I don’t meet the standard for typical human travel speed because of my condition, I can be “in car” and find myself going better than I normally could. So we are invited to be “in Christ.”

next year or next week. Get right with God. Don't turn to your neighbor and say, "I think this message is for you ... tomorrow." You're here this day with this passage and this message today because God is speaking to you ... and to me.

If you'd like to talk with someone about this message or your spiritual life, or to have someone pray with you, the pastors & elders of the church would welcome your call. revjeffwood@gmail.com

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