

Scriptural Truths

E-Mail Meditations

The Lord May Come . . . Perhaps Today . . . Behold, I Come Quickly . . . Rev. 22:7

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Lessons From The World's First Gospel Tract

A Question

Every year thousands of Gospel tracts are printed and distributed and there can be no doubt thousands have been saved through the printed page. One of the more notable was Hudson Taylor, a mighty man of God through whose work 800 missionaries went to China, 125 schools were opened, and 18,000 people were saved. Which of us would not have loved to have been the individual who gave Hudson that gospel tract? Speaking of tracts leads to an interesting question. "When was the first gospel tract written?" or "When was the first story of conversion written for others to read and learn?"

In the 1300's the teachings of John Wycliffe were distributed in written form, and we know they were used for both religious and political purposes in the 1200's. In the 1800's Charles Spurgeon wrote tracts called his little "Penny Sermons". The American Tract Society has been publishing tracts since 1825. The problem with the earliest of these is they are some 1800 years too late, in other words, the first gospel tract was written some 2700 years ago! It was written six hundred years before Christ, and I have seen it and read it!

I would suspect that the vast majority of those who read this have also read it, although without recognizing it as the first gospel tract. The first gospel tract was written by a king of ancient Babylon whose name was Nebuchadnezzar, and he records his conversion in Daniel chapter four. By telling others how the Lord dealt with him, Nebuchadnezzar recalls his spiritual journey. As he does this the Holy Spirit caused him to give truths relevant for any presenter of the gospel.

The Story of God's Dealings

It is clear Nebuchadnezzar was living a very comfortable life (Dan. 4:4) having in his court the intellectuals of the conquered nations, as well as all those who worked in every aspect of the fine arts (Dan. 1:3-4). Babylon was a magnificent city having one of the wonders of the ancient world, its amazing hanging gardens. This was not a dirty dusty little outcrop but a city which in beauty and art equalling any today, and Nebuchadnezzar was King. However, God meant nothing to him, life was too good to think about meeting God.

One night he had a dream that so troubled him he called for the soothsayers to tell what it meant. Richly trained, as they all were, they could not tell the meaning of the dream. In time Daniel was brought in, and with great solemnity he told Nebuchadnezzar that his dream was a message from God to repent or else judgment would fall (Dan. 4:27). Though he was clearly warned, Nebuchadnezzar did not repent, and one year later in a single hour the judgment fell. It was to be seven more years before he would be made conscious of God again, and this time he repented.

Nebuchadnezzar begins his written testimony by praising God (Dan. 4:2, 37), writing it for all to read and know (Dan. 4:1) so that God will be glorified by it, and finished by giving a warning (Dan. 4:37).

The Major Features

In reading Nebuchadnezzar's tract there is seen a number of truths, but one main feature is it was approximately 1000 words and that includes the introduction and conclusion. He told the story of his conversion in approximately five minutes! Below are some of the other features which a preacher could develop, however, in this paper only four will be considered.

- a) The carelessness of Nebuchadnezzar concerning his relationship with God (Dan. 4:4)
- b) God spoke to Nebuchadnezzar in a dream, and by the understanding of the meaning (Dan. 4:5)
- c) None of the religious leaders could tell the message from God (Dan. 4:6-7)
- d) Only a man who had the Spirit of God could tell the true meaning from God. (Dan. 4:18-32; 5:8, 23-28)
- e) Such was the solemnity of the message, Daniel was to tell that He sat astonished for one hour. This was not a light communication, nor just without passive conveying a message from God, it was a great weight upon him. (Dan. 4:19)
- f) The messenger from God reiterated that which Nebuchadnezzar knew in his heart, and applied the truths. (Dan. 4:20-26)
- g) Judgement would come if he did not change, there was room to repent. (Dan. 4:27)
- h) He not only refused but became more boastful. (Dan. 4:28-30)
- i) There was a time lapsed before God ever spoke again (Dan. 4:25, 34)
- j) He refused to hear and repent (Dan. 4:30)
- k) The solemn message was fulfilled (Dan. 4:31-33) and judgment fell.
- l) Nebuchadnezzar's conversion (Dan. 4:34-36)

1) God spoke to Nebuchadnezzar in a dream and by the understanding of the meaning

Herein lies a number of truths, among them being: "God speaketh once, yea twice" (Job 33:14). God spoke to Nebuchadnezzar in the dream and its troubling him, and in giving him the meaning of it. Despite the spiritually careless lifestyle of this man, God was deeply interested in him and sought to warn him of approaching judgment. He did the same to Pharaoh who had the message of God revealed to him by Joseph (Gen. 41:14-36). Sadly, Pharaoh refused to repent despite multiple warnings, and will pay the price for his disobedience throughout eternity. Belshazzar knew of this experience of his grandfather but he refused to submit to the warnings of God, and by the time God spoke forcefully to him it was too late (Dan. 5:5, 24-30). Can God still speak through dreams? We must never determine what God can do, or try to put limits on His prerogatives. Of course God can still speak in dreams. I am sure we all could think of a testimony heard, or even our own, when God used an expression not in the scriptures, an accident, a death, a word of a hymn, a single word. He can save, has saved, and does save people in any way He desires. He has saved people in cinemas, through various translations, in many different sorts of churches. There is no church that can say, "only people saved in our churches are saved", for God cannot be limited in His sovereignty.

2) Only a man who had the Spirit of God could tell the truth from God

The world had thousands of religions, but there is only one true message from God. Whither it is accepted or not, atheism, agnosticism, and evolution are all religions, for they are all beliefs regarding God, man, and eternity. All must face the question: "How can I get right with God?" The soothsayers could not give Nebuchadnezzar an answer of truth, and neither can the religions of man give an individual the assurance of going to Heaven. The message preached in thousands of pulpits is: "Turn over a new leaf"; "Do the best you can"; "Be faithful to the religion of your parents".

One day I met two young men who wanted to speak about God and the conversation went something like this. They said: "*Sir we would like to speak to you about God*" to which I replied: "I know I am going to Heaven, I know my sins are all forgiven, and I have peace with God". Continuing, I asked them two questions: "Do you have those assurances and what do you have I don't have?" They had no answer for either.

Paul wrote to the Galatians warning of those who present a false gospel, so what is the message from God? (Gal. 1:8). What then is the gospel? It is the message of the total helplessness and enmity of man toward God (Rom. 3:9-20); the sufficiency of the sacrifice for all (1 Jn. 2:2); to be received without works and by faith (Eph. 2:8-9). Or, to repeat the triplet from years past:

- a) Man's ruin - man is a guilty sinner
- b) God's remedy - the Sufferings of Christ at the hand of God, His death, burial, and resurrection
- c) Man's responsibility - to accept or reject.

3) **The message came from a man exercised of its solemnity before he ever delivered the message**

As one who has had the responsibility of preaching the gospel for some fifty-four years, I can attest that the preparation is vital, however, there are two preparations needed.

- a) There is the preparation of the material for one is to speak as the oracles of God (1 Pet. 4:11). That is speaking God's message and not just God's truth. That which is said could be the truth, but it is not God's message for that meeting. Thus, there must be personal preparation for the individual to make sure that the message is the Lord's message.
- b) Again there must be preparation of the individual spiritually, that is to be sure they are in clean fellowship with God. It is not enough to get together with the saints 30 minutes before the meeting to pray, nor is it sufficient to get perspiration mixed with inspiration. Gospel preaching necessitates a lifestyle of living the reality of Heaven and Hell and not preaching it for 30 minutes at a meeting, then with the audience afterward turning around and speaking about sports, weather, etc. Unwittingly we are working with Satan to take away the good seed (Matt. 13:19). Such behavior indicates there has been no reality of souls hanging in the balance.

Daniel was deeply exercised before God for his message had serious consequences. There needs to be the remembering that at the Judgment Seat this message will be reviewed by God, and how it was delivered.

Daniel the preacher told the message of warning, he explained clearly what Nebuchadnezzar had to do, but he did not use emotionalism. Speakers must be careful they are not casual with the responsibility and finish by a: "May you do so for the glory of the Lord", or similar words which is a cop out for pressing the issue. The Lord said: "Compel them to come in" (Lk. 14:23). On the other hand, they must not try to do the work of the Holy Spirit. When dealing with one desiring to be saved there are times when the best thing is to be silent, and leave the work to God.

4) **His conversion**

God brought Nebuchadnezzar to his senses. It had been eight years since he heard the first warning, and for seven years God had been silent. It is always frightening when God is silent. Nebuchadnezzar became like an animal, God was not in his thoughts and he lived only for the moment, and thought nothing of eternity. Then one day the Lord brought his mind back, and this time there was no preacher, but he recalled that which he had heard eight years previous. This time He turned to God acknowledging that God was God. Seed sown may take years to develop but that which God has sown will be recalled. Jonah and Adam learnt that it was impossible to run and hide from God.

As preachers of the gospel, it becomes a frightening realization to know when an individual is preaching that someone in the audience could be hearing the voice of God for years, and perhaps for the last time. I know God made me aware of the need of salvation when I was nine years of age and it was put off. It was four more years before I ever came under conviction of sin again. Like Nebuchadnezzar, this time I responded in minutes.

In Summary

Standing on a platform to speak to saints or sinners is one of the most frightening responsibilities that can ever be placed on any individual. Many years ago I had the responsibility of speaking in an assembly in Belfast. There was a family and one son was unsaved. He knew the gospel but wanted nothing of it. The following Saturday he was killed in the riots and died unsaved. I shall never forget the wails of that mother as the cortege moved down the street knowing her son was in hell for eternity. May the Lord help us to learn or re-apply lessons from the world's first gospel tract.

. . . . Rowan Jennings

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