

A WORD IN SEASON

Today's Text: Isaiah Chaps 50-52

Extracts:

The Lord God has given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him who is weary. He awakens me morning by morning; He awakens my ear to hear as the learned [Is. 50: 4]

James Frey is the author of a best selling memoir, "A Million Little Pieces" [Doubleday and Anchor Books; 2003].¹ It tells the story of his life as an alcoholic, drug addict and criminal and how he was able to overcome it all. The book attracted the attention of Oprah Winfrey, America's leading talk show host, who picked it for her coveted book club in September 2005. She went on to host Frey on her show on 26 October 2005. Now the book has sold more than 3.5 million copies and topped "The New York Times" nonfiction paperback best-seller list for the past 15 weeks. It was the biggest non-fiction seller of 2005.

Then from nowhere came a controversy over Frey's credibility, following an investigation reported in THE SMOKING GUN.COM web site, which claimed that some of the author's claims of police arrest and imprisonment never happened. On Wednesday, 11 January 2006, Frey appeared with his mother on the famous Larry King Live show on CNN. After one hour of grueling questioning and strenuous defence of his innocence, and with just one minute left, a call came through from Oprah Winfrey! She stood behind James, saying, "The underlying message of redemption in James Frey's memoir still resonates with me, and I know it resonates with millions of other people who have read this book. What is relevant is that he was a drug addict who spent years in turmoil from the time he was 10 years old drinking and tormenting himself and his parents, and stepped out of that history to be the man that he is today and to take that message to save other people and allow them to save themselves." You could see instant relief on the faces of James and his mother. That night, the book topped the best-seller list on Amazon.com!

Why did Oprah speak her word in season at that crucial moment when she had been silent for days? Was her intervention helpful because of her social status or because of her message? What makes a word in season so special? These are some of the issues we shall examine in today's lesson.

¹ Based on the following sources: "CNN LARRY KING LIVE: Interview with James Frey," <http://edition.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0601/11/1kl.01.html>; "Winfrey stands behind 'Pieces' author," <http://edition.cnn.com/2006/SHOWBIZ/01/11/frey.lkl/index.html>; and "Frey to add author's note to memoir," <http://edition.cnn.com/2006/SHOWBIZ/books/01/13/books.disputedmemoir.ap/index.html>

1. How do you recognize a word in season?

It is not every piece of advice we receive or any good word put in on our behalf that constitutes a word in season because “to everything there is a season, a time for everything under the sun” [Eccl. 3: 1]. A season has to be seasonal! In other words, a season means the *right* time [Deut. 11: 14] or the *appointed* time [Num. 9: 2, 3, 7]. That is why the word of God says, “He who gathers in summer is a wise son; he who sleeps in harvest is a son who causes shame” [Prov. 10: 5]. How then can we recognize a word in season?

The following features are associated with the phenomenon:

a) *It may come from unexpected quarters or at unexpected times*

You are battling with a problem and there does not seem to be any respite. You have prayed and fasted. You are tired of worrying. Yet, you still have no solution. Then, all of a sudden, the solution comes from unexpected quarters and/or at a time that you least expect it.

A good example was when Moses had a problem finding time for his own family on account of millions of the children of Israel that he had to personally adjudicate their matters as he led them through the wilderness. His father-in-law, Jethro, had just brought him his wife and children. The old man, a priest of the Midians, observed that every cause came to Moses and that he was wearing himself out. He told Moses, “The thing that you do is not good. Both you and these people who are with you will surely wear yourselves out.” He then went on to show Moses the management principle of delegation. Moses applied his father-in-law’s word in season and it worked [Ex. 18: 1-27]! Could you ever have imagined that Moses, the man that God spoke with “face to face” [Num. 12: 8], would obtain such a profound solution from a human being and from his rural-based father-in-law of all people?

b) *You may be the only one to hear the word in season*

The person who is speaking may be saying one thing but you are reading a different meaning into it. The person who is speaking may not mean it as you understand it. For example, you may be watching a preacher on television or overhearing a discussion between two strangers in a bar or restaurant. All of a sudden, you get the message and jump up! Or, you may be reading the Bible routinely and suddenly, a verse jumps out at you!

Take the example of the rich young businessman in the movie, *Pretty Woman*. He had paid a pretty hooker to be his companion for a week while he was on a business trip. By the end of the week, they both discovered

that they had fallen in love with each other. The lady would not settle for less than a marriage commitment and the man was not ready for that. She moved out of his hotel suite at the end of the week and refused all the monetary inducements to stay longer. As the man was checking out of the hotel the following morning, he implored the front office manager to help him to return the jewelry that he had leased for the girl's use during one of their outings. When the manager opened the box, he commented, "'How sad it is to let go of such a precious thing!'" Apparently, the manager was referring to the jewelry but to the lover, he was referring to his relationship with the pretty lady. So, instead of going to the airport, he went looking for her with a bouquet of flowers!

c) *It addresses your specific/pressing need*

The pressures that you are under are not going away, in spite of all that you have done to deal with them. The credit card bills are growing bigger and your monthly payments are not making a dent. Your job hunt is not yielding any fruits. Your spouse is not responding to your reconciliation gestures but is in fact making things worse. Your intense prayer and fasting over your only son or daughter's riotous living appears to be all in vain. The addiction that you are trying to kick out is actually digging in. Or like James Frey in our opening story, your book that is being used in numerous rehabilitations centres in America is on the verge of being denounced as fake, a development that could tempt you to relapse to alcohol and drugs that you have long given up. A word in season can bring instant relief in all such circumstances.

A good example is the woman caught in adultery who was brought by the scribes and Pharisees before Jesus [**Jn 8: 1-11**]. Let us look at that story from her perspective. She did not do it alone but we are not told what happened to her male accomplice. Under the Law of Moses, both the adulterer and the adulteress had to be stoned to death [**Lev. 20: 10**]. Unless the man had already been killed and not reported in the story, we see a clear case of gender discrimination. It is possible that she had been trying to kick the habit of adultery without success. It did not matter any longer because she had now been caught red-handed and faced instant judgment. Nobody or nothing could save her now. Just then, Jesus asked the accusers, "He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first." What did that word in season do? Her accusers, "being convicted by their conscience, went out *one by one... and Jesus was left alone* (with her)." Can you imagine her relief at that moment?

d) *It makes a permanent change in your life*

The experience will live with you for the rest of your life and you will never want to come back to the status quo ever again. A few days after

Oprah’s phone call to CNN, James Frey and his publishers agreed to add the author’s note (that some parts of the memoir have been embellished to protect people and places) to future editions. That way, he would never again face such an integrity-threatening experience. Jesus asked the adulteress, “Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?” She replied, “Not one, Lord.” Then Jesus cautioned her, “Neither do I condemn you; *go and sin no more*” [Jn 8: 10, 11]. If you were in her place, would you come near another man ever again?

2. So, from where comes a word in season?

What gives a word in season such a ring of credibility? Is it because of the source? That may be true in the cases of Jesus and Oprah Winfrey. However, how about Moses’ father-in-law who did not go to Harvard Business School to study management? How about the slave girl from Israel who was a maid in Naaman’s household whose word in season led him to travel to Israel to receive his miraculous healing from leprosy [2 Kgs 5: 2, 3]? How about a donkey that spoke to Balaam to prevent him from cursing the children of Israel [Num. 22: 28-34]? Apart from children’s movies and cartoons, have you ever heard of animals speaking? Therefore, the speaker’s credibility has nothing to do with it.

Perhaps the answer may lie in the message itself. Again, this may not hold water because the word in season may actually favour our enemy over us. For example, the Jewish council was desirous to stop the disciples from spreading the gospel of Christ’s resurrection, especially following the miracles through them soon after the day of Pentecost. You would expect that the only word in season for that council would help them to deal with the *immediate* Christian threat to their power and way of life. Gamaliel was a teacher of law and a highly respected member of that council. Hear the advice that he gave to his colleagues, “Keep away from these men and *let them alone*; for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it-lest you even be found to fight against God” [Acts 5: 33-39]. Did that message not favour the disciples of Jesus more than Gamaliel and his council colleagues? But what was their reaction? They agreed with him and set the apostles free from detention [v. 40]! Therefore, a word in season does not come from the speaker. It comes from a higher source. *Whether it is Jesus or Oprah or Moses’ father-in-law or Naaman’s maid or the donkey, it is God who spoke through them all.* This was the point underlined by Jesus when He told His disciples, “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. *The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life*” [Jn 6: 63].

That is the point made in the book of Isaiah, Chapter 50 and Verse 4 that we shall examine today. It says:

The Lord has given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him who is weary. He awakens me morning by morning; He awakens my ear to hear as the learned.

From that verse, the following issues need to be underlined:

a) *Who is the learned?*

I have often heard lawyers being called “learned gentlemen” (and ladies, of course!). Somebody who is highly educated is also said to be learned [pronounced: LEHNED]. To be highly educated is to have higher university degrees, such as the Master’s or the Ph.D. By that definition, Jesus and His disciples were not learned!

After Jesus had given the Sermon on the Mount, “the people were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes” [Matt. 7: 28-29]. On the other hand, the so-called learned people, the scribes and Pharisees, looked down on Jesus, saying, “How does this man know letters, *having never studied*” [Jn 7: 15]. Peter and John, mere fishermen, stood before the Jewish council to speak authoritatively the word of God. When the captains of the temple “saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that *they were uneducated and untrained men*, they marveled. And *they realized that they had been with Jesus*” [Acts 4: 13].

Therefore, as we are told in the book of Isaiah under examination, it is God that gives us “the tongue of the learned” and the “ear to hear as the learned” [Is. 50: 4]. He is the one who has put His words in our mouths [Is. 51: 10], and adds, “Let him who glories glory in this, *that he understands and knows Me*” [Jer. 9: 24]. Jesus Himself reinforced this when He told His disciples, “My doctrine is not Mine, but His who sent Me. If anyone wills to do His will, *he shall know* concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority” [Jn 7: 16, 17]. *When you know God and His purpose for your life, then you are learned and a candidate through whom He will give a word in season to others.* That is why “the heart of the prudent acquires knowledge, and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge” [Prov. 18: 15]. It is instructive that in recent years, Oprah Winfrey has shifted the emphasis of her show to spiritually uplifting themes.

b) *A word in season is for the weary*

God’s sole purpose for giving a word in season through people is to enable them to bring comfort to the weary [Is. 51: 4; 51: 16]. Since it comes from God, it sanctifies [Jn 17: 17] and cleanses [Jn 15: 3]. It gives life [Jn 6: 63] and “the tongue of the wise promotes health” [Prov. 12: 18]. Ask the

adulteress brought before Jesus. Ask Naaman the leper. Ask Moses the judge. Ask James Frey the author.

3. Conclusion: Jesus is the Word in season!

When we are in distress, God speaks a word in season to us in various ways. He speaks to us through our family members, friends and enemies, teachers, mentors, and ministers, and so many others. He speaks to us through His word, the Bible, which “is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for *correction, for instruction in righteousness*” [2 Tim. 3: 16]. The Word of God came in flesh and dwelt among us as Jesus the Christ [Jn 1: 14]. In fact, the verse of Isaiah discussed in today’s lesson is referring to the coming Messiah. Therefore, Jesus is the best example of a word in season! This Word in season has assured all those who are weary or in distress of any kind, “Come to Me ... and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and *learn from Me*, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, *and you will find rest for your souls*” [Matt. 11: 28, 29].

What an assurance! Stop running and start listening to and learning from Him. With the tongue of the learned, you will have the true knowledge of life. With the ears of the learned, you will acquire obedience and humility. Then, just as you become blessed with a word in season from others, God will begin to use you as a word in season to bless other people in distress.

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