

Leonard Sheldrake

by John Bjorlie

The sermon recounts the inspiring life of Leonard Sheldrake, highlighting his struggles, faith journey, and impactful ministry work.

Scripture: Acts 9:26, 1 Corinthians 15:58, Philippians 1:20, 1 Thessalonians 5:16, 1 Timothy 3:13, Hebrews 10:23

Topics: "Faith And Doubt", "Christian Service"

Description

John Bjorlie shares the inspiring life story of Leonard Sheldrake (1885-1952), who faced early hardships losing both parents to tuberculosis at a young age. Despite his religious inclinations and immersion baptism, Leonard struggled with doubts about his conversion until a profound realization of Christ's sacrifice for him. He dedicated his life to serving the Lord, spreading the gospel in various places, and eventually becoming a bold preacher, unafraid to share the message of God's love. Leonard's unwavering faith, prayer life, and commitment to the Lord's work led him to impact many lives and establish a legacy of service and dedication to Christ.

Transcript

The cheer that brightened the simple English cottage where he was born fled early for Leonard Sheldrake (1885-1952). He was six, his sister eight, and his brothers four and two when tuberculosis claimed their mother. Never a strong child, he once overheard a neighboring housewife remark, "Poor laddie, he's not long for this world." When he was eleven, his father also died of tuberculosis.

Leonard said, "I remember my father going to church on Sunday once. There was no thanks given at our table. My father never read the Bible. My grandfather (who took care of us when my father died) used to read a chapter out of the Bible on Sundays. Still I had religious inclinations. I used to be scared at the thought of hell."

His Baptist relatives convinced him of the rightness of immersion, so "on the first day of the New Year the ice was broken and I went down into the water a dry sinner and came up a wet sinner."

As superintendent of the Sunday School, he preached when the minister was absent. "I was put on the local platform and spoke in different places. Some of my father's old friends came for miles to hear me preach just because it was me. Still I was troubled because I had no definite experience of conversion. One old lady told the whole story of her conversion every time she visited us. Something said to me again and again, 'There's something wrong; you have no experience like that.' I went to the minister, but he put

me to sleep again. He told me it was just a gradual thing with some people...The Lord had to take me across the Atlantic to save my soul."

Leonard's first months after immigrating to Canada in 1905 were crucial. "For about six weeks I put in a miserable existence on a farm. I used to get in the hayloft and read my Bible with a heavy heart. I felt so alone, no one cared whether I lived or died, and I had no assurance of my soul's salvation."

In Toronto, a clever atheist, armed with Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species*, and *The Descent of Man*, almost persuaded Leonard of his "infidel notions." Meanwhile, another friend, was urging Leonard to delve into Toronto's nightlife. He nearly succeeded. Leonard got as far as the entrance of a theater. "I stopped and then turned back. Had I gone, I might have gotten a taste for it and lost my interest in my soul."

One night his roommate, a Christian, said, "As Jesus lay in the tomb, the question was, 'Was God satisfied?'" That moment the truth of Christ's resurrection connected in his mind. God was satisfied; He raised Him from the dead. Later, Leonard stated, "I could understand what he said. I wondered, 'Can that possibly be true that the Lord Jesus died for me as though there wasn't another soul in the world? Can that possibly be true?' Then he quoted, 'For by grace are ye saved through faith and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works lest any man should boast.' Right away I knew it was true. That was my introduction to the Lord Jesus and ever since I have known Him as mine." The marvel of that introduction was never lost on Leonard. Telling his story years later he could say, "The Lord Jesus is just as precious to me tonight as He was then. I believe He is even more precious than He ever was before."

Soon Leonard discovered the Broadview assembly in Toronto. Two of the elders were not satisfied with Leonard's story because he failed to pinpoint the date of his conversion, but R. T. Telfer acted as a Barnabas on his behalf (Acts 9:26-28). He met there for several weeks before he cast himself into a new work in the east end of the city, now known as Danforth. Assuming the duties of caretaker, he often walked miles on prayer meeting night to open the door, light the fire, and greet the saints.

Of those early days, brother James Gunn said, "He was one of the few men left whom I seemed to have known practically all my life, at least from Sunday School days until the present, and I loved and appreciated him more all the time."

Vacation time was spent distributing gospel leaflets, preaching in the open air and visiting isolated assemblies. On one excursion in 1909 to South River, he met Ada Pearl Clapp, the daughter of a pioneer preacher. Leonard had discovered a gem in that tiny, struggling, assembly.

Shortly after, he was transferred to Winnipeg. Though having a good position with a large mail order house, it was the work of the Lord that took first place in his life. In 1911, the assembly in Winnipeg commended him to the work of the Lord. He came east and married Pearl on September 20 of that year.

The newlyweds' ambition was to serve the Lord in China, but when they saw that they did not have enough money to pay the fare, Leonard took that as the Lord's direction to stay and work on the home field. This of course was hard to explain to the saints in Winnipeg. Leonard had strong convictions about not begging for money, which included not letting his needs be known. The saints wondered, after they commended them to the work in China, why they were not going. Evidently that young Englishman had changed his mind! Strange. Instead, he began to bring the gospel to remote lumber camps in Ontario. Often it involved traveling all day, partly by sleigh, but mostly by foot, sometimes when it was 50 degrees below zero.

In 1912, he made trips over the border to help David McClintock in a tent in Negaunee, Michigan. After the final series he located in the American Sault with his wife and daughter. After two years in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, the family moved to Standish, where they spent five years. In November, 1920, they moved back to the Sault. He pioneered in Michigan with many of the Lord's servants including George Shivas, John Govan, Fred W. Mehl, and F. W. Schwartz.

In the Sault, brother Sheldrake bicycled across the city and surrounding country. He was a truly exercised brother, peddling from farmhouse to farmhouse with tracts. A tract enthusiast, he went from giving them out to writing them, and then to publishing them in monthly gospel papers he edited, called Words of Peace and North American Evangelist.

At the Bay City conference he met young William J. Pell, an inexperienced possessor of a primitive hand-operated printing press. Bill Pell offered to print the paper in 1923 and Words of Peace became the first publication of what would be Gospel Folio Press.

In 1927, his contacts with foreign missionaries led to the publication of Look on the Fields. At the end of one year's circulation, a report was given accounting for the stewardship: \$1952.00 had been sent to the Lord's servants in China, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Mexico, Venezuela, Romania, India, Sweden, Italy, Argentina, Africa, Spain, Paraguay, British Guiana, Brazil, and Barbados. He did not travel to China, but his letters could. The man who did not have the money to pay the fare had a ministry of sending generous gifts all through the Depression years. These gifts increased; on some days our brother wrote twenty letters, each with encouragement and a sweet savor of Christ. By his service he purchased "a good degree, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 3:13).

Some of brother Sheldrake's articles in Look on the Fields occasioned severe criticism, such as Causes of Banishment which was written to correct severe tendencies among some assemblies and missionaries. Anything but a literary pugilist, he eschewed controversy for controversy's sake. Early on he passed the editorship to Peter J. Pell and the little publication was changed to The Uplook. In 1933, Dr. H. A. Cameron took over as editor, renaming it Assembly Annals. and merging it with Our Record.

In print and in person Leonard lived out Solomon's statement, "The righteous are bold as a lion." Once Tom Wilkie and Leonard were at a city park, where a band concert played on Saturday nights. The band was done, so Leonard stood up to preach and soon an officer interrupted, "Mister, you have to stop that! You have got to get out of here!"

"What do you mean? Do you want to stop me from preaching the gospel?"

"That is exactly what I mean."

"Officer, I want you to take me to your boss."

"I would be happy to do that." And so the three marched to the police station.

Explaining his case to the chief of police, Leonard said, "Sir, we were not bothering anybody. The concert was over and we were just preaching the gospel of the love of God through Jesus Christ when this officer stopped us."

The chief of police turned and said, "Officer, take this man back to the park, and I want you to see that no one disturbs him. And I want you to stay there and protect him as long as he speaks."

Tom Wilkie once said Leonard was "the boldest man I ever knew."

Doubtless this boldness grew out of his prayer life. One occasion to trust God came after Pearl looked through his wardrobe one Saturday.

"Leo, you can't get up on the platform again until you get a new suit. That suit is a mess. It is a disgrace. It is not honoring to the Lord Jesus to look like that," she said.

Leonard did not disagree, but felt he did not have money to buy a new suit. He had forty dollars and that was just a little more than what he needed to pay the rent. He never bought anything on time or borrowed as a matter of conviction. He reasoned that if he didn't have the money to pay for it, that the Lord did not want him to have it. But with Pearl's persuasion he went to J. C. Penney's and saw one suit for \$23.88. He decided that the Lord would have him buy that suit for the next Sunday.

That day a check came in the mail for \$23.88. Who had ever sent a gift of \$23.88? To Leonard and Pearl's five children, who all came to love and serve the Saviour, these experiences became part of the family folklore. So more than forty years later Leonard's son was relating this story when a man from across the room said, "And would you like the second half of that story?"

"Well, yes, I would."

"Then I'll tell you how your father got that check. A half dozen preachers were invited to the annual conference at Robert's Memorial Hall in Chicago. On the Lord's day an offering was taken, to be distributed to the preachers who had spoken at the conference. We counted the offering and divided it five ways but had \$23.88 left over. Someone asked, 'Now what should we do with \$23.88?' I spoke up and said, 'Let's send it to Leonard Sheldrake; he was invited to come and couldn't make it.'"

In 1940, the family moved to Kansas City, MO, where Leonard helped the Troost Avenue assembly. After he was no longer able to pitch a tent or hold a strenuous series of evangelistic meetings, he loved to minister Christ in the out-of-the-way assemblies.

He suffered a heart attack in Phoenix, on March 10, 1952, having preached four times the previous day. The Lord took him home on May 8, 1952. It was fitting that he received his homecall in the morning. He daily expected the return of Christ as the Morning Star. Years before some saints predicted the Lord's coming at the time of the Jewish feast of Trumpets. The morning after, he said, "Well, the Lord didn't come yesterday," and then turning to the calendar read, "Yet a little while and he that shall come will come and will not tarry." From that time he longingly looked for the Lord's return every day.

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