

BIBLE STUDY GUIDE FOR CITIES CHURCH

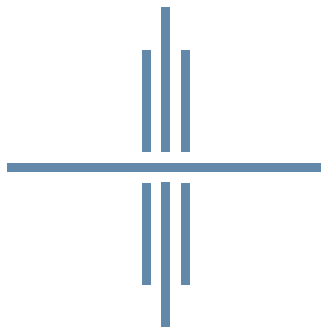
2015 | 1Q | ACTS

BOLD FOR THE CITIES

CITIES

CHURCH

MICHAEL THIEL WITH JONATHAN PARNELL



CITIES CHURCH

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Week 1	January 5, 2015	January 10, 2015	
	Reading	Questions	re: Jesus on the Cross
Day 1	Read Acts 1	Introduction to Acts, Part 1	Luke 23:44-49
Day 2	Read Acts 2	Introduction to Acts, Part 2	John 19:28-30
Day 3	Read Acts 3	Introduction to Acts, Part 3	Mark 15:38-39
Week 2	January 12, 2015	January 17, 2015	
	Reading	Questions	re: Jesus in the Tomb
Day 1	Read Acts 4	In Acts: The Progress of the Word, Part 1	Matthew 27:57-60
Day 2	Read Acts 5	In Acts: The Progress of the Word, Part 2	Matthew 27:61
Day 3	Read Acts 6	In Acts: The Progress of the Word, Part 3	Matthew 27:62-66
Week 3	January 19, 2015	January 24, 2015	
	Reading	Questions	re: Jesus's Resurrection
Day 1	Read Acts 7	In Acts: The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit	Matthew 28:1-3
Day 2	Read Acts 8	In Acts: Salvation, Gospel, and Atonement	Luke 24:4-7
Day 3	Read Acts 9	In Acts: Witness and Mission	John 20:1-10

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Week 4	January 26, 2015	January 31, 2015	
	Reading	Questions	re: Jesus Among Them
Day 1	Read Acts 10	Acts 1:1-5	John 20:11-18
Day 2	Read Acts 11	Acts 1:6-8	John 20:19-23
Day 3	Read Luke 24	Acts 1:9-11	Matthew 28:16-20
Week 5	February 2, 2015	February 7, 2015	
	Reading	Questions	re: Jesus's Ascension
Day 1	Read Acts 12	Acts 1:12-14	Mark 16:19
Day 2	Read John 20	Acts 1:15-20	Luke 24:50-53
Day 3	Read John 21	Acts 1:21-26	Acts 1:8
Week 6	February 9, 2015	February 14, 2015	
	Reading	Questions	re: Acts 2
Day 1	Read Acts 13	Acts 2:1-13	1 Corinthians 6:19-20
Day 2	Read Acts 14	Acts 2:14-41	Acts 2:21
Day 3	Read Acts 15	Acts 2:42-47	Acts 2:42

OVERVIEW

Week 7	February 16, 2015	February 21, 2015	
	Reading	Questions	re: Acts 3
Day 1	Read Acts 16	Acts 3:1-10	Acts 3:4-6
Day 2	Read Acts 17	Acts 3:11-16	Acts 3:16
Day 3	Read Acts 18	Acts 3:17-26	Acts 3:19-20
Week 8	February 23, 2015	February 28, 2015	
	Reading	Questions	re: Acts 4 - Part 1
Day 1	Read Acts 19	Acts 4:1-4	Acts 4:1-2
Day 2	Read Acts 20	Acts 4:5-10	Acts 4:10
Day 3	Read Acts 21	Acts 4:11-12	Acts 4:12
Week 9	March 2, 2015	March 7, 2015	
	Reading	Questions	re: Acts 4 - Part 2
Day 1	Read Acts 22	Acts 4:13-22	Acts 4:19-20
Day 2	Read Acts 23	Acts 4:23-31	Acts 4:31
Day 3	Read Acts 24	Acts 4:32-37	Acts 4:32

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Week 10	March 9, 2015	March 14, 2015	
	Reading	Questions	re: Acts 5 - Part 1
Day 1	Read Acts 25	Acts 5:1-6	Acts 5:3
Day 2	Read Acts 26	Acts 5:7-10	James 1:9-11
Day 3	Read Acts 27	Acts 5:11	James 2:1-13
Week 11	March 16, 2015	March 21, 2015	
	Reading	Questions	re: Acts 5 - Part 2
Day 1	Read Acts 28	Acts 5:12-16	Acts 5:14
Day 2	Read Galatians 1	Acts 5:17-32	Acts 5:29-32
Day 3	Read Galatians 2	Acts 5:33-42	Joshua 7:1-26
Week 12	March 23, 2015	March 28, 2015	
	Reading	Questions	re: Acts 6-7
Day 1	Read Mark 14	Acts 6:1-15	Acts 6:10-12
Day 2	Read Mark 15	Acts 7:1-29	Acts 7:25
Day 3	Read Mark 16	Acts 7:30-60	Acts 7:51

OVERVIEW

PREFACE

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

I am very excited about this guide. It has been a lot of fun working alongside Pastor Jonathan the past month or so developing it. I have written some Bible studies before for the small groups I've led, but I've always wanted to put together a study that would accompany a sermon series. As we dreamed about the place and function of this guide in the life of Cities Church, several features stood out. I mention them now to give you some background to this guide, and to give you an idea for how to use it.

1. Sermon Series

The guide is laid out to complement the sermon series on Acts that starts in February. The length of the guide follows a very simple quarterly schedule, which turns out to be three months at a time. So, when this guide was written we did our best to plan out the sermon passages as well. If this guide and the sermon passages get out of sync, that is okay — we will re-adjust with the second-quarter guide.

We plan to preach through Acts at a moderate pace—between a half chapter and a chapter per week. This should take us into September, just before we start a new series for the fall.

2. Structure

This guide has 12 weeks, which lines up with the first quarter, January to March. Each week is broken down in a three-day layout. Exactly how you use the guide is flexible, though. You may wish to take three days a week to work on it, following the layout in detail, or you might

decide to spread the three-day layout over a full week.

There are three parts per day, each catering to different ways of taking in the Bible. First, there is a chapter of the Bible to read. Second, there is a section of Scripture to look at that accompanies the sermon passage for the week. We've written questions for this section and also included relevant quotes. Third, we suggest a verse or two to reflect on. You can choose the way you want to reflect and mediate on the verses. As one option, I have included an appendix on how to do the inductive Bible study method.

Each week we've added an open page to be a place to take notes on the sermon. We think this will be a nice way to include the sermon notes into your study and have all your notes in one place. We've also included a blank page each week for extra reflection. This would be a good place to journal a prayer or work through some thoughts on an issue or question you have.

Lastly, we've added an article each week. The articles include relevant content to the Book of Acts or to Bible-reading in general. This guide also includes two stories from members of our church. These stories give us a front-row seat to the gospel at work in real lives, and provide another way for us to hear from one another.

3. Consistency

One of our aims with this guide is to provide a means for consistent Bible-intake. We want to equip you for ministry, both for your personal growth in the gospel and in your love for neighbors. This guide is generic enough that you will

have to put in some of your own work to mine the Bible for diamonds. And we wouldn't want it any other way. This guide is sort of like us roping off an area to dig, but you're the one putting the shovel to the ground.

4. Options

Lastly, this guide isn't mandatory for our Life Groups. We offer it with open hands simply as a tool to help. If this guide wouldn't be helpful to you, then don't use it. Our suggestion to you is that you have some plan to get more of God's word into your life in 2015. This guide is one way, but there are many others.

May God bless Cities Church in 2015, and may he help us "hold fast to the word of life" (Phil. 2:16).

Pastor Michael
New Years Day, 2015

CITIES

WEEK

1

CHURCH

DAY 1

Read Acts 1. In what ways do the book's opening verses link back to the Gospel of Luke?

"Luke's Gospel points inescapably to its sequel in which the Christ of volume one remains instrumental through the second: the church exists and thrives only from the 'witness' of the risen-crucified One, empowered by the Holy Spirit. Church and Christ are inseparable; thus Acts is the only book of the New Testament that 'narrates' the ongoing presence of Christ in God's church and world." –David P. Moessner

QUESTIONS: INTRODUCTION TO ACTS, PART 1

1. What do you find interesting about Acts?
2. What are you praying God will do in your life through studying Acts?
3. Why does Acts 1:8 stand as such a central verse in the book?

RE: LUKE 23:44-49

Leading up to Acts: Jesus on the Cross

DAY 2

Read Acts 2. What stands out as important in Peter's sermon at Pentecost?

QUESTIONS: INTRODUCTION TO ACTS, PART 2

1. Explain (like you were telling someone in Life Group) the outline or flow of Acts.
2. Why did Luke write his Gospel and this sequel volume, the Acts of the Apostles?

"Early in the twentieth century a British scholar by the name of William Mitchell Ramsay, a skeptic about Christianity, traced the missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul as recorded in the book of Acts. He looked for evidence in the landscape and ruins and in the titles of the local rulers or magistrates in foreign cities that were not common knowledge to people who lived in Jerusalem. Ramsay started out a skeptic and ended up a believer because he was overwhelmed by the evidence he was able to uncover. The stones were crying out that every title of every magistrate Luke recorded in the book of Acts was verified by the turning over of the shovel. Likewise, the description and accounts of the towns were just as Luke had described them." –R.C. Sproul

3. In what ways is Acts 1:8 a good theme verse to sum up the book of Acts?

RE: JOHN 19:28-30

Leading up to Acts: Jesus on the Cross

DAY 3

Read Acts 3. What stands out in this section as important to the message of Acts?

QUESTIONS: INTRODUCTION TO ACTS, PART 3

1. Describe Jesus's last commission/commandment as seen in Matthew 28:16–20.
2. How do you see Acts being related to the Great Commission?
3. Skim through the book of Acts reading just the headings. What are some of the topics that Luke chooses to write about?

“Although the word ‘church’ occurs only three times in the four Gospels, it appears twenty-three times in Acts. Luke uses the word in the singular to express the unity of the body.”
–Simon Kistemaker

4. What are some similarities between Luke 24:36–53 and Acts 1:1–14?

"These two volumes [Luke and Acts] may be different in genre, structure, and style, but it is necessary to explain the links between them at the level of story, themes, and theology... first the evidence of the two prologues (Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1), linking the works in terms of subject matter and purpose. Secondly, some material in the Gospel appears to have been either adapted or excluded because of what is found in Acts. Thirdly, the overlap between the ending of the Gospel and the beginning of Acts is significant." –David Peterson

RE: MARK 15:38-39

Leading up to Acts: Jesus on the Cross

WHY IS CITIES CHURCH READING ACTS?

BY JONATHAN PARNELL

Who are we and what are we doing here?

This is the crucial question of the church in our generation, and in fact, every generation past. This is the question that Luke has in view in the Book of Acts, and he has written to answer it once and for all.

As we kick things off in 2015, it's important that we don't mistake what we're doing to be something altogether new. Cities Church is a new local church, but we have an ancient, glorious heritage. We are the people of God — a people that God has planned before the foundations of the world, a people with a destiny much bigger than anything we could invent for ourselves. As we assemble in the Twin Cities in the twenty-first

century, we are doing what Jesus has commissioned and equipped his church to do for ages. We are banding together by his Spirit to be witnesses to his person and work. As one theologian puts it, "The vocation of the church is to proclaim the gospel and publish the majesty of Christ, in words of truth and works of love" (Vanhoozer, *Faith Speaking Understanding*, 232).

This vocation is precisely what Acts helps us learn, but not so much as a prescriptive "do this, this, and this," but as a history that connects with us deep in our bones.

Who are we and what are we doing here?

Luke would tell us to pull up a chair. We're saying, "Yes, please."

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2

CHURCH

“The phenomenon or repetition in the mission speeches brings readers back to a common point of reference, namely the main message being communicated by the major characters” – David Peterson

DAY 1

Read Acts 4. What is a repeated idea in this chapter?

QUESTIONS ON STRUCTURE: THE PROGRESS OF THE WORD, PART 1

1. So far, what is the forefront of Luke’s concern in Acts?
2. Acts 1:8. In what ways does Acts 1:8 serve as an outline or overview of the book of Acts?
3. Acts 4:31. What does boldness look like in Peter’s ministry?
4. Acts 6:1–7. The “word of God” is mentioned twice. What do we learn about it here?

5. What is the connection between the Ethiopian's conversion in Acts 8:26–40 and Saul's conversion in the following chapter (see Isaiah 56)?
6. Acts 13:13–52. What is the central theme of Paul's sermon?

RE: MATTHEW 27:57-60

Leading up to Acts: Jesus in the Tomb

“Structurally, Luke’s Gospel provides an episodic series of events punctuated by numerous aphorisms and parables of Jesus, whereas Acts unfolds more smoothly as a continuous narrative featuring extended journeys and developed discourse by Jesus’ followers. After its introductory chapters (1–3), the Gospel focuses on the public ministry of Jesus (4:1–9:50), his final journey to Jerusalem (9:51–19:44), and then the events of his last week in Jerusalem, culminating in his death and resurrection (19:45–24:53). It covers a limited period of time and portrays Jesus moving from Galilee, through Samaria, to Judea and Jerusalem. Acts deals with the expanding geographical and cultural outreach of the world about Jesus, in an outward movement from Jerusalem corresponding to the prediction in 1:8. The gospel is first proclaimed by the apostles Peter and John in Jerusalem (1-5), and then by prophetic figures such as Stephen, Philip, and Paul, in Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (6–20). The final section focuses on the trials of Paul and his journey to Rome as a prisoner (21–28). Acts appears to be a highly selective history, carried forward by a number of significant speeches from some of the main characters, covering a period of thirty or more years after Jesus’s resurrection and ascension. Luke’s innovation is to show that the gospel-story is incomplete without the church-story.” –David Peterson

DAY 2

Read Acts 5. What stands out in this chapter as important to the message of Acts?

QUESTIONS ON STRUCTURE: THE PROGRESS OF THE WORD, PART 2

1. Acts 13:49. Why is Luke telling us this?

2. Acts 19:10. First, how does this verse land on you? Second, how does the reference of time help set the context for what Paul was doing? Third, how might this affect your personal ministry?

“When the gospel is called “the word of God” or “the word of the Lord”, the divine origin and authority of the gospel are being asserted ... the gospel is presented as a dynamic force at work in the world, transforming the lives of those who receive it, as it spreads, and is praised or honored by those who believe it.” –David Peterson

RE: MATTHEW 27:61

Leading up to Acts: Jesus in the Tomb

Four thematic elements characterize the apostolic message: 1) People killed Jesus; 2) God raised Jesus; 3) People can repent and receive forgiveness of sins; and 4) Forgiven people rejoice in God. – Jim Hamilton

DAY 3

Read Acts 6. What do you find most admirable about Stephen's witness?

QUESTIONS ON STRUCTURE: THE PROGRESS OF THE WORD, PART 3

"The leading theme of Acts is neither the history of the Church, nor the activity of the Spirit, but the expansion of the Word. The real hero of the Acts of the Apostles is the logos, the Word." –Daniel Marguerat

"The ascended Lord Jesus is the central figure in the narrative, and that he employs his word and his Spirit to advance his purpose through human agents in the world." –David Peterson

1. Acts 19:20. In what ways is the word of the Lord mighty? (Psalm 33:6–11)

2. Isaiah 55:10-11. Describe and explain the metaphor used for the word. What does the word do?

3. Acts 2:41, 8:14, 11:1, 17:11. Describe the effects of the word on a person who receives it.

4. Read the 8 summaries of church growth in Acts: Acts 2:47, 5:14, 6:7, 11:21, 11:24, 12:24, 16:5, 19:20 and comment on any similarities and differences you may see (e.g. people, geography, message, context, etc).

RE: MATTHEW 27:62-66

Leading up to Acts: Jesus in the Tomb

SERMON NOTES

January 18, 2015

Preacher:

Text:

Sermon Title:

Notes

WHAT IS ACTS ALL ABOUT?

BY JONATHAN PARNELL

One commentator warns readers of trying to find a single, dominant purpose in the Book of Acts. The book is too complex, he says, its theology too rich, and its mission too far-reaching to nail the theme down as just one thing. But that's one commentator — and I'm not so sure he's right.

Do we know exactly what was going through Luke's mind when he had the idea to write his second volume? Of course not. Was it an apologetic to Gentiles in the First Century? Maybe. Was it an attempt to blend Greco-Roman and Jewish historiography to form a remarkably Christian genre? Okay. Was it a book inspired by the Holy Spirit for the good of Jesus's church and our ongoing mission in the world? Absolutely.

The Book of Acts is one of those unique works of literature that, after a while of reading it yourself, it actually begins to read you. It is a narrative, and that's what they do. They draw you in and lead you to envision yourself in the story. But more than just any old story, Acts is written by a theologian with a mission. Sprinkled throughout the action of this good, true tale, Luke shows us speeches chocked full of biblical insight. The speeches, whether spontaneous sermons or calculated disputations, are a break from the story that zero in on what the story is really all about. Oftentimes, they include three pieces: 1) a historical panorama related to Israel; 2) who Jesus is; and 3) a witness to Jesus's resurrection. Over and over we see a kind of reminder coming through—there is where we've been, this is who he is, that is why it matters.

When we read this all together, these three pieces, among other parts, begin

to form an identity of the people of God. We get a deep sense of our history (our place in God's plan), our Savior (an unabashed declaration of Jesus and what he did), and our hope (death is conquered and a new creation is overcoming the old). Acts is certainly rich enough to include several themes and sub-themes, and to have multiple purposes for why it was written. But overall, for sure, the book shows us who we are. The church is able to read its soul, and it becomes clear that far from membership in some static, dusty institution, we are rescued to become members of a movement whose advance knows no end. As Jesus said to Peter, "I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18).

Outline for Acts (from I.H. Marshall, Acts of the Apostles, NTG)

1:1–5:42	Witnesses in Jerusalem
1:1–2:27	The beginning of the church
3:1–5:42	The church and the Jewish authorities
6:1–11:18	Witnesses in Judea and Samaria
6:1–9:31	The church begins to expand
9:32–11:18	The beginning of the Gentile mission

Witness	Jerusalem	all Judea and Samaria	end of the earth
Text	1:12–7:60	8:1–25	8:26–28:31
Character	Peter	Stephen and Philip	Paul
Christology	2:22–36; 3:11–26; 4:8–12; 5:27–32	8:32–35	13:26–43; 26:19–29; (ref. 17:1–3; 18:5, 28; 28:23, 31)

11:19–28:31	Witnesses to the Ends of the Earth
11:19–14:28	The mission from Antioch to Asia Minor
15:1–15:35	The discussion concerning the Gentiles in the church
15:36–18:17	Paul's missionary campaign in Macedonia and Achaia
18:18–20:38	Paul's missionary campaign in Asia Minor
21:1–28:31	Paul's arrest and imprisonment

Major movements in Acts (from Jonathan Parnell)

CITIES

WEEK

3

CHURCH

“Acts was described as a ‘theological history’ in the sense that it records God’s activity in fulfilling his promises and working out his purpose for humanity. At the same time, it was maintained that Luke is a reliable historian, who has not allowed his theological and apologetic agenda to distort the facts.” –David Peterson

DAY 1

Read Acts 7. What verse stands out and why?

QUESTIONS FROM ACTS: THE FATHER, SON, AND HOLY SPIRIT

1. How do the people in Acts describe God in Acts 4:24, 14:15-17, 17:24-25?
2. What do we learn about the plans of God in Acts 2:22-28, Acts 3:19-21, and Luke 12:40?
3. How does Peter refer to Jesus in Acts 2:36? What is Peter getting at with these terms?

4. From Acts 2:38-41, 3:6, 3:16, 4:9-17, 4:30, 5:28-41, and 8:16 describe the power of Jesus's name.

5. What is the Holy Spirit up to in Acts 1:16, 4:25, and 28:25?

"Luke's special interest in the Holy Spirit is indicated by the fifty-seven occurrences of the noun pneuma ('Spirit') in Acts alone." –David Peterson

RE: MATTHEW 28:1-3

Leading up to Acts: Jesus's Resurrection

DAY 2

Read Acts 8. What verse stands out and why?

“Good narrative always elicits a response, as does all literature of value.” – Walter Liefield

QUESTIONS FROM ACTS: SALVATION, THE GOSPEL, AND ATONEMENT

1. In Acts 5:29-32, how does Peter describe this salvation?
2. Note the various times “salvation” is used: Acts 4:12, 7:25, 13:26, 13:47, and 16:17.
3. Note the various times “save” is used: Acts 2:21, 11:14, 15:1, and 16:30-31.

“In contrast with the other Synoptics, Luke does not contain the word ‘gospel’, and this important term only occurs twice in Acts (see question #4). However, the related verb ‘evangelize’, or ‘preach the gospel’, is extensively used throughout Luke-Acts, together with other terms of proclamation and persuasion. This suggests Luke’s concern to highlight the importance of the activity by which God addresses people and draws them to himself. However, the message itself is clearly the key to this divine engagement.” –David Peterson

4. Note the two uses of the word “gospel” in Acts: 15:7 and 20:24.
5. What are some important points about the gospel proclaimed in sermons in Acts?

Acts 2:14-36 (Peter’s Sermon at Pentecost)

Acts 3:11-26 (Peter Speaks in Solomon’s Portico)

Acts 10:34-43 (Peter Preaches at Cornelius’s House)

Acts 13:26-31 (Paul’s Sermon in Antioch)

RE: LUKE 24:4-7

Leading up to Acts: Jesus's Resurrection

DAY 3

Read Acts 9. What verse stands out and why?

QUESTIONS FROM ACTS: WITNESS AND MISSION

1. Luke 1:2, 24:33, 24:48. What is a repeated term with which Luke starts and ends his Gospel?
2. Luke 24:45-48. Regarding witness and mission, what does Jesus say to do?
3. Acts 1:3-8. What does Jesus do with and say to his disciples as he commissions them?
4. What is the connection between the commission in Acts 1:8 and conversion of Saul in Acts 9?

RE: JOHN 20:1-10

Leading up to Acts: Jesus's Resurrection

SERMON NOTES

January 25, 2015

Preacher:

Text:

Sermon Title:

Notes

ADAPTED FROM JOHN FRAME

MIRACLES, PROVIDENCE, AND CREATION

SALVATION BELONGS TO THE LORD

God's activity in and with the natural world can be further divided into miracles, providence, and creation.

Miracle

What is a miracle? People sometimes define miracles as exceptions to natural law, but I don't think that definition is biblical. The Bible doesn't say anything about natural laws, and the biblical writers didn't know enough about natural laws to identify miracles as exceptions to them.

When the biblical writers spoke of miracles, I believe what they had in mind can be summarized in the phrase extraordinary demonstrations of God's lordship. When God made the waters of the sea to separate, so that Israel could pass over dry land, the Israelites probably didn't know much about what natural laws were being suspended or changed – though, interestingly, Exodus 14:21 says that the miracle occurred through the blowing of a 'strong wind'. But they did know that God was at work. They knew that God was working in power, as he had promised, to save his people and to destroy the Egyptian army. God dried the sea so that 'Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord' (14:4). The same was doubtless true when God made an axe head float, or raised the dead, or healed lepers. When Jesus gave to the disciples a miraculous catch of fish, Peter did not comment on any natural laws that were stretched or bent. Rather, he focused on Jesus' lordship revealed in the miracle, saying, 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord' (Luke 5:8).

The biblical vocabulary for miracle, expressed in various Hebrew and Greek

terms, focuses on three ideas: powers, signs, and wonders. These remarkably correspond to the three lordship attributes... Miracles are powers, instances of God's control over his creation. They are signs, authoritative communications about God's intentions. And they are wonders, events that make us wake up and realize that God is really here, now, in his covenant presence, just as Peter realized after the miraculous catch of fish.

Do miracles still happen today? First, it's important to remember that even in the Bible miracles didn't happen every day. They happened on very special occasions, usually to validate the words of a prophet or apostle and especially as the Father's witness to Jesus his Son. We should not expect them as a regular part of the Christian life. God has not promised that. He does miracles only for his own reasons.

On the other hand, there is no guarantee that God won't work miracles today. If I am right to define a miracle as an extraordinary demonstration of God's lordship, I would remind you that "extraordinary" is a relative term. There is no sharp distinction between extraordinary and ordinary, between miracle and providence. The "wonder" terms in Scripture apply to floating axe heads, water to wine, and miraculous feedings, but in Psalm 136:4 and verse 25 they also apply to God's feeding all his creatures. We usually don't think of that as miraculous, but when you think about it, it's pretty wonderful. Feeding a few million Israelites in the wilderness was a wonderful thing; yet, in a way it is even more wonderful that God feeds absolutely every living thing on the earth. So,

perhaps from one perspective, God is doing miracles all the time around us.

Providence

Now let's look at providence. If a miracle is God's extraordinary working, providence is his ordinary working. As we have seen, the line between these two is not sharp. Miracle is wonderful, but providence is wonderful, too.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism defines providence as "his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing of all his creatures and all their actions" (SC 11). Note the use of "all"... God's control of his world is comprehensive. He makes everything happen that does happen. His "preserving" means various things: that the earth could not continue to exist without God's permission; that Jesus holds everything together (Col. 1:17); that God is postponing his devastating judgment until all his elect are saved (2 Peter 3:5-9); and that God preserves his people from death and destruction at many points during our earthly life (Gen. 45:5). Of course, death comes eventually, but even after our death God continues to preserve us. As David said, "You will not abandon my soul to Sheol" (Ps. 16:10). And "governing" means directing the course of nature and history to God's preordained goal (Eph. 1:9-11).

The catechism doesn't mention revelation as an aspect of providence, but it is important for us to know that everything that happens reflects God's wisdom (Ps. 104, especially v.24; Prov. 8:22-36) and that his word directs all things (Pss. 147:15-20; 148:5-8). This is why the heavens declare the glory of God

(Ps. 19) and his invisible nature is clearly seen (Rom. 1). In providence, God makes himself known to us.

Finally, concurrence is God's working with even the tiniest events of nature and history to bring about "the cooperation of the divine power with all subordinate powers, according to the pre-established laws of their operation, causing them to act and to act precisely as they do." We usually think that when plants germinate, they are carrying out natural laws. True enough, but the doctrine of concurrence shows us that God is also working with and through those laws to achieve his purpose. So, not a sparrow falls to the ground apart from God's will (Matt. 10:29), and he numbers all the hairs of our heads (Matt. 10:30). God rules his world not only from above but also from below. He is working both in heaven and in everything that happens.

Providence, then, like miracle, fits our threefold picture. In providence, God controls everything (by government and preservation); he reveals himself authoritatively; and he becomes present to the world he has made.

Creation

Having looked at miracle and providence, let's look at the doctrine of creation. Creation is God's act of bringing everything into being, the events of Genesis 1. While miracle and providence display God's lordship in the temporal world, creation displays his lordship at the beginning of time.

The church has always confessed that God made the world out of nothing, *ex nihilo*. Before "the beginning", when God created the heavens and the earth

(Gen 1:1), there was nothing but God himself. There are two important issues here. First, God did not make the world out of an uncreated stuff. A human artist must have material to work with, such as clay, paint, or a canvas. But God used no material. Why? Because all the material in the world is created by him. It is as if a human artist made not only a statue but the clay and all the elements that make up the clay. God made everything in the heavens, the earth, and the sea. There is nothing God didn't create. So, there was no uncreated substance out of which God created the world.

The second issue is that God did not make the world out of himself, out of his own being. That is to say, the world is not God. The world is not divine. In Scripture, God is the Creator, the world is his creation. So, we worship only God, not anything in the world. Contrary to some forms of Eastern religions and Western New Age thought, we ourselves are not God.

If God didn't make the world out of pre-existing stuff and didn't make the world out of his own nature, what is left? What did he make the world out of? The only possible answer, odd as it seems, is nothing.

The Bible doesn't say directly that God created the world from nothing, but it does say that God created all things (so there is no uncreated stuff) and that the world is not divine (so God didn't create from his own nature).

In Scripture, creation *ex nihilo* is especially important as an analogy of redemption. Salvation is God's new creation. Just as God created the world out of nothing and brought light out of darkness, so he brought his people from

sin to righteousness, from hopelessness to the assurance of his love. Paul says, "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). As with creation, so in redemption everything is of God. Salvation belongs to the Lord.

CITIES

WEEK

4

CHURCH

DAY 1

Read Acts 10. What verse stands out and why?

QUESTIONS: ACTS 1:1-5

1. Read 1:1-5. Why do you think Luke wrote a second book?
2. Acts 1:1-3, 10:39-43. What is it that Jesus commanded the apostles to do?
3. Mark 16:19. What do we learn about Jesus' ascension?
4. Acts 1:5, Romans 5:5, 6:1-4, 14:17, 15:13, 1 Cor. 6:19. What does it mean to be baptized with the Holy Spirit?

RE: JOHN 20:11-18

Leading up to Acts: Jesus Among Them

DAY 2

Read Acts 11. What verse stands out and why?

QUESTIONS: ACTS 1:6-8

1. Read Acts 1:6-8. What would you have asked Jesus in those 40 days when he was with them?
2. Why do you think they asked Jesus the question that they did? What was on their mind? Luke 1:32-33, 46-55, 68-79; 2:29-32, 38.

“Christians have to live with the tension of knowing that the work of the gospel is central to God’s eschatological plan, but never being able to calculate the exact date of the end.” –David Peterson

3. What allusions to Isaiah 43:10-12 and Isaiah 49:6 can you see in Acts 1:8?

“Acts 1:8 is a prediction and promise of the way this divine plan will be fulfilled, rather than a command. The rest of the book shows how it happened, first in Jerusalem (Acts 2-7), then in all Judea and Samaria (Acts 8-12), and then to the ends of the earth (Acts 13-28).” –David Peterson

RE: JOHN 20:19-23

Leading up to Acts: Jesus Among Them

DAY 3

Read Luke 24. What verse stands out and why?

QUESTIONS: ACTS 1:9-11

1. What do you think the apostles were thinking would happen next? What were they thinking as they gazed into heaven? What would you be thinking?
2. Describe where angels have shown up before in Luke's Gospel (Luke 1:11-19, 1:26-38, 2:9-13, 22:43).
3. Describe the epic transition that is happening in redemptive history in Acts 1:1-11.

RE: MATTHEW 28:16-20

Leading up to Acts: Jesus Among Them

SERMON NOTES

February 1

Preacher:

Text:

Sermon Title:

Notes

WHERE IS JESUS?

BY JONATHAN PARNELL

“But I believe in Jesus too,” my five-year-old said, unconvinced by my explanation why she couldn’t have some of the bread and juice.

We had slipped out of the service after I received the elements because she became rowdy with questions. I led her a little ways from the crowd and knelt down to meet her eye to eye. My hands were on her shoulders, posturing to seize the moment, until my unsatisfactory answer quickly led to a bigger talk as she continued her case.

Now staring off in her own thoughts, she replied, “Dad, I believe in Jesus, but I mean, I’ve never seen him before. I’ve never heard how he talks.”

This wasn’t a crisis. She was just stating a fact. It actually came off a little bashfully, as if her faith might not be as credible as mine because she’s never seen Jesus or heard his voice. She was thinking out in the open, not realizing that her uninhibited inquiry actually gets at the heart of what we are doing here, of what it means to be Christian in this world. What was fresh to a five-year-old mind is something, I think, too few of us stop to consider. It’s the fact that we love and talk about a person with a blaring dissimilarity to everyone else we love and talk about, and that is, he’s not here. We’ve never seen Jesus.

Jesus Is Not Here

This is not a problem and it’s nothing new. Believing in the Jesus we have not seen is an early-established staple of the Christian life (1 Peter 1:8). But what occurred to me in that conversation with my daughter was how this truth is much more obvious to a little girl than to me,

to many of us, I would guess. The reality strikes her that our lives revolve around a real person who is alive but unreachable. She doesn’t dismiss the fact he’s not here. Right now, Jesus really is away (John 14:28) — and that’s important.

Jesus is also with us, as he said, in the sense of his Spirit (Matthew 28:20). He has not left us or forsaken us (Hebrews 13:5). But the ministry of the Spirit isn’t the physical presence of Jesus. And this has the tendency to grip a child more than us adults. Why? I think it is probably because she hasn’t encountered the truth of God’s triune-ness like we have, and therefore, she is free from some of the glitches that can slip into our functional understanding of how the Trinity works.

I wonder if we (myself at least), because of the Spirit, assume Jesus is around in the wrong ways. That’s why we’re okay with illustrations of Jesus sitting in the pews of our churches. Or with paintings of Jesus hugging a strung-out 20-something with holes in his jeans. But these images are wrong. At best, it’s wrong because we have a glitch that blends the person of Jesus with the person of the Spirit. At worst, it’s wrong because we have turned Jesus into some disembodied human who is more like a bearded phantom than the enthroned God-Man. The truth for us to remember is the doctrinal byword that Jesus is God and the Spirit is God, but Jesus is not the Spirit and the Spirit is not Jesus. And that means, at least for the past 2,000 years, Jesus doesn’t make footprints in the sand.

Seated in the Heavenly Places

So if not here, where? Where is Jesus? The Bible tells us that Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father in the heavenly places (Ephesians 1:20; Luke 22:69; Acts 2:33; 5:31; Romans 8:34; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 1:3). And his being there is good news.

In fact, the ascension of Jesus to the Father's right hand is an indispensable aspect of the gospel. Which means, we aren't saved unless Jesus is seated at the Father's right hand. Which means, we aren't saved unless Jesus is not here. Why?

In their new book, *The Ascension: Humanity in the Presence of God*, Tim Chester and Jonny Woodrow give three crucial truths about Jesus's ascension. He is the ascended priest, completing a perfect sacrifice. He is our ascended king, reigning over all. And he is the ascended man, fulfilling the glory of humanity for which we were created. The ascension matters for our salvation because if Jesus's sacrifice is to be effective and his kingship is to be real and his humanity is to be glorified, he must be ascended.

Each of these aspects of Jesus's ascension is glorious. But I want to focus here mainly on the kingship aspect. That's the theme of Paul's amazing description in Ephesians 1:20–23. And I think that's the simplest to explain to my five-year-old, who, remember, got us into this.

Paul tells us that the Father powerfully raised Jesus and seated him at his right hand. The raising and seating are fundamentally one work. When Paul tells us in Romans that the Father declared Jesus to be the Son of God by

his resurrection (Romans 1:4), he doesn't mean this vindication comes by merely being brought back to life. The resurrection is one part of this great vindicating act — an act that also involved being highly exalted and bestowed a name that is above every name, which is the route Paul takes in Philippians 2:10 and mentions in Ephesians 1:21.

Jesus is seated above all rule and authority and power and dominion because that's what it means to be the king of everything. That's what it means to be the true Son of Man that Daniel speaks of in Daniel 7:13–14. And that's the only reason someone can say: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18). Jesus is raised and seated to have all things put under his feet, which is the vision of the Messianic king in Psalm 110:1. Jesus is ascended! Ascended!

And here's the part that's literally out of this world: we are ascended with him. Just a few verses later, in Ephesians 2:6, Paul tells us that when God saved us in Christ he actually raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places. Right now, united to Jesus by faith, we are spiritually seated with him at the Father's right hand. That's why we seek the things that are above (Colossians 3:1). Spiritually, it's our home. This new creation dimension of reality where Jesus is, this is where we're from (Philippians 3:20).

So when my little girl admits she hasn't ever seen Jesus, and that she hasn't heard his voice, I say, "Me neither."

I haven't seen Jesus because part of his saving us — part of his coming and living and dying and being raised — is

his being ascended and seated at the Father's right hand where he rules over everything. I haven't seen Jesus because he is our king from another world, a better one. And actually, it's the world I'm from. It's the world of God's endless, uninhibited presence for which all of creation longs. It's the world that Jesus himself will bring into this present one, the world that will come down from heaven and make all things new (Revelation 21:1-5). We haven't seen Jesus, but we will see him then.

CITIES

WEEK

5

CHURCH

DAY 1

Read Acts 12. What verse stands out and why?

QUESTIONS: ACTS 1:12-14

1. Describe the team (1:12-14) and what they are up to (Ref. Acts 1:4-5 and Luke 24:50-53).
2. Compare the second commissioning of the apostles with the first in Luke 6:12-16. What's changed between the two? What has all happened? How do you think the team dynamics have changed?

"The names of the apostles are repeated, with a slight variation in order from Luke 6:14-16, and without Judas Iscariot. The list thus forms a link with the account of their initial commissioning by Jesus. In both contexts, those whom he designated apostles have a particular mandate from Jesus to fulfill. Since only eleven are listed here, this prepares for the next section of the narrative, where the need for a twelfth is explained (1:15-26). From Acts 1:12-15 it is clear that these men formed the nucleus of a larger community that Jesus had gathered to himself. Only Peter, James, and John are mentioned again by name." –David Peterson.

3. Luke 8:2-3, 23:55-24:10. Describe the significance of these women.

4. What do we find mentioned alongside major turning points in God's redemptive plan (Acts 1:14, 1:24, 8:14-17, 9:11-12, 10:4, 9, 30, 13:2-3)? What are the implications of this for you?

RE: MARK 16:19

Leading up to Acts: Jesus's Ascension

DAY 2

Read John 20. What verse stands out and why?

QUESTIONS: ACTS 1:15-20

1. Read Acts 1:15-20. Describe the context of this early church. Who stands up as the leader?
2. According to Acts, what do you think should be the first order of business for Cities Church as a new church plant?

RE: LUKE 24:50-53

Leading up to Acts: Jesus's Ascension

DAY 3

Read John 21. What verse stands out and why?

QUESTIONS: ACTS 1:21-26

1. Read Acts 1:21–26. What’s Peter leading the church in doing? What’s going on?
2. What are the qualifications that Peter lays out for the twelfth apostle?
3. How do the people pray in 1:24? What do we learn about God in this verse?
4. Why do you think the resurrection was the critical item the 12th apostle needed to witness?

RE: ACTS 1:8

SERMON NOTES

February 8, 2015

Preacher:

Text:

Sermon Title:

Notes

**RICK
AND
LIZZIE'S
STORY**

Lizzie

I grew up in a Lutheran household in the northern suburbs of St. Paul. We were very involved in our church where my parents taught Sunday school and my dad was the church president for a term. Around middle school I became aware that my parents did not actually believe that Jesus was real. I found that when I asked them or even my pastor hard questions, the answers I got were unsatisfactory and often confusing. I concluded that there was no God, or at most, the god they believed in was small.

Also, during this time I really struggled in school with being bullied for my body size and feeling like I didn't fit in. I had nowhere to turn with my feelings and so I began starving myself. I became caught in a vicious cycle of obsession with food and exercise and I found myself completely hopeless and void of joy. My parents sought help for me and the week I started high school I was admitted to the hospital for anorexia. I was admitted repeatedly, for over a year and a half. I could not let my eating disorder go because at that point, it was my only coping mechanism for my anxiety, hopelessness, and pain. Finally, I was discharged from the program for noncompliance. I felt victorious, but I had no idea if I would survive. I felt that I was at a crossroads. If I went one way it was completely hopeless and I would surely die. I was sure if I went the other way there was hope but I had no idea what that hope was. I held on to that tiny glimmer of hope that there could be some meaning in life.

Soon after this, a friend asked me to go to youth group with him. I don't even

remember what church it was, but at that meeting I saw kids my age leading worship, and talking about God like he was real. It was amazing — they really trusted him and their lives had the hope that I longed for. On the way home my friend asked me if I believed in Jesus as my personal savior and friend. I think I stammered some stupid reply, but I knew I didn't know Jesus like that. At that moment I did ask Jesus to come into my heart, and for the first time he was beautiful to me. There was more hope and peace in my heart at that moment than I had ever felt from anything before. I began getting interested in church and in reading the Bible — anything where I could learn more about the real Jesus. God brought several friends and their families into my life where I could see him working and changing them. I started going to Bethlehem with them. I remember distinctly, after one service, driving home with my friend and her parents and asking about how the curtain tore in two at the temple after Jesus died. I had always thought God tore the curtain because he was mad at us, but I understood for the first time that it was because Jesus had made a way between God and us. It was unbelievable to me — such good news!

Now the gospel is even more precious to me. I have been through some awesome times, some heartbreaking times, and many unexciting days since I gave my life to Jesus, but he has remained constant through them all. I need to remember that Jesus died for my sins, yesterday, today and tomorrow, and he will carry me home. He is the only hope in the world and the only thing that satisfies my soul.

Rick

Growing up, I attended a Catholic church somewhat regularly though it was never a focal point for my family. However, I can see that even at a young age God had been drawing me to himself. I remember reading my Children's Bible from time to time. I also remember a few times when I was scared that I would pray to God and ask him for his help. One particular night I asked my mom, to some effect, how people go to heaven or how to have God protect you. I don't remember her answer, but I do remember praying with her. After that night, I don't have many more memories of my belief in God until High School. It seemed that I only cared about God when I needed something from him.

About ten years later, as I was going through confirmation, I remember that I started to believe in God a little more. I don't think I was actually trusting in God for salvation, but I believed he existed and that he was for me. It seemed that there were a few moments growing up that I was drawn nearer to him, but I always became distracted or got too busy to pay much attention. Again, I only cared about God when I felt like I needed something from him.

Through my experiences at church and home, I was familiar with the stories of the Bible and Jesus. But I never really connected those stories to my own life. I just had a general sense that God was good and meant well toward me. I can't say for sure, but I would expect I would say it was because I was a good person.

Fast forward about five years when I was in college. One night I was talking to my girlfriend at the time and she said

something that just didn't sit right with me. She had said that God hated her, and I think she believed it. Of course, I tried to convince her otherwise, but I didn't know how. The stories I had heard growing up informed me that God loved me, but how? Why? How could I convince her that God was good? How could I convince myself? I went to the one place anyone would go, to your fraternity brother. Mike had recently come back to school that fall and wasn't the same. He was reading his Bible, and he was acting differently. So I thought he would be perfect. I explained my predicament, and he replied with "I think you should read your Bible." So I did. The next day I drove to my parents place and picked up my Bible and started reading Matthew. Suddenly, the stories of Jesus were a little more real than they used to be and they had implications for my life! I learned that I actually was separated from God because of my desire to be my own god. Up until this point, my world was all about me. What could I gain for myself? What was good for me? What did I want and how do I get it? When I realized what sin was, and that I actually wasn't good at all, then I needed help! At the same time I also learned, or finally understood, that Jesus died on the cross for all of my sins. The story of Jesus's death became real to me—it meant that I could be saved, and that I could be reconciled to God.

It is hard to explain how God has changed me in the past decade because I'm still in the midst of this fight. But I can say now that I am reminded often that I am not a "good person" like I once thought I was. I am increasingly convinced that I am a sinner. Now my

relationship with God is continuous. It's daily and personal. I am no longer the center of the universe—he is.

CITIES

WEEK

6

CHURCH

DAY 1

Read Acts 13. What verse stands out and why?

QUESTIONS - ACTS 2:1-13

1. Read Acts 2:1-13. List out and describe everything the Holy Spirit did. Then look at the cross references to learn more about the Holy Spirit.

Romans 5:5.

Romans 7:6.

1 Corinthians 2:10-16.

Galatians 5:16-26.

2. What are the two types of reactions from the people?
3. Acts 2:12 includes a very good question. How would you answer it?

RE: 1 CORINTHIANS 6:19-20

DAY 2

Read Acts 14. What verse stands out and why?

QUESTIONS - ACTS 2:14-41

1. 2:14. What do we know about Peter's spiritual journey? John 1:40-42, Mt 4:18-20, Luke 9:28-36, 22:31-34, 22:54-62.
2. Read Acts 2:14-21 and read Joel 2. Why do you think Peter chose this text in his first sermon?

Romans 10:9-13.

Acts 16:29-32.

3. Read Acts 2:22-28. How is God the Father involved in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus?

See Psalm 16. Why do you think Peter brings this text into his sermon?

4. Read Acts 2:29-41. In vv.29-36, what aspects of the gospel does Peter focus on?
What does it mean that Jesus is both Lord and Christ? (2:36)?

How do the people respond (vv.37-41)? Describe what it looks like to be “cut to the heart”.

RE: ACTS 2:21

DAY 3

Read Acts 15. What verse stands out and why?

QUESTIONS - ACTS 2:42-47

1. Read Acts 2:42-47. Describe what comes before this passage and what comes after. How does this passage fit into the book of Acts?
2. Acts 2:42-44. What seems to be central to the early church?
3. Acts 2:45. If we look through this verse, what type of heart is behind these believers? What do you think God is after at the heart level?
4. What are some attributes of this early church?

Hebrews 10:24-25.

Acts 1:14.

Acts 20:7.

RE: ACTS 2:42

SERMON NOTES

February 15, 2015

Preacher:

Text:

Sermon Title:

Notes

**SHAPE
YOUR LIFE
WITH THE
WORDS
OF LIFE**

BY DAVID MATHIS

The Christian life, from start to finish, is utterly dependent on the grace of God.

Not only do we come into spiritual life by sheer grace (Act 18:27; Romans 3:24; Ephesians 2:5), but it is in divine grace that we continue on (Acts 13:43). It is by God's grace that our soul survives through many trials (2 Corinthians 12:9; Hebrews 4:16), is strengthened for everyday life (2 Timothy 2:1; Hebrews 13:9), and grows into greater maturity and health (2 Peter 3:18).

And it is by God's grace that we are enabled to make choices and expend effort to seek more of God (1 Corinthians 15:10). It is a gift that we would have the desire and take action to avail ourselves of the means of God's grace — his voice (the word), his ear (prayer), and his people (fellowship) — with the most basic principle of grace being the enveloping of our lives in his word.

The Word Original

Before we identify the presence of God's voice in our lives to be the many good habits of taking in his word — whether morning Bible reading, hearing sermons, Scripture meditation and memorization, Bible studies, and much more — first let's see his word as a general principle, rather than the specific practices.

Before printing it and binding it and covering it with leather, consider the concept of God's word. That God speaks. He reveals himself to us. He communicates himself for us. His word, as John Frame says, is "his powerful, authoritative self-expression." Just as the words of a friend are central in revealing his person to us, so it is with God.

The one who created us — and sustains us moment by moment — has expressed himself to us in human words, and it is vital that we listen. The other principal means of his grace (prayer and fellowship), while equally essential, are not as fundamental as this one. It all begins, creation (Genesis 1:3) and new creation (2 Corinthians 4:6), with the voice of God. And this self-expression of God is so deep and rich and full that it is not just personal, but a person.

The Word Incarnate

The complete and climactic self-revelation of God to man is the God-man, his Son (Hebrews 1:1–2). Jesus is "the Word" (John 1:1), and "the Word became flesh" (John 1:14). As such, he is the one who most fully and finally "has made [the Father] known" (John 1:18). Jesus is God's culminating self-expression, and says without shame, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

Jesus is the Word of God embodied, and the grace of God incarnate (Titus 2:11). So full and complete is his revealing of God that he is not a word-thing, but a Word-person. He fulfilled the destiny of humanity in his perfect life and sacrificial death (Hebrews 2:9), and rose again in triumph over sin and death, and now sits at the Father's right hand, with all things being put in subjection to him (1 Corinthians 15:25–28). He is the divine-human Word our souls need for survival and strength and growth. But how do we access this Word now that he is stationed in heaven?

The Word Evangelical

The most frequent use of “word” in the New Testament is in reference to the message of the gospel — the word evangelical, you might call it — the message about Jesus, or “the word of Christ” (Colossians 3:16). For Paul, the terms “preach Christ” and “proclaim Christ” and “speak the word” are synonymous (Philippians 1:14–17). The mission of his life, he says, is “to testify to the gospel of the grace of God” (Act 20:24), which is “the word of his grace” (Acts 20:32).

It is “the word of truth, the gospel” which not only comes to a people for conversion, but also bears fruit and grows (Colossians 1:5). It is “the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation” that changed everything for the Ephesians (1:13), and “the word of life” to which the Philippians must hold fast in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation (2:15–16). And so, in the Christian fight for joy, John Piper writes,

The central strategy is to preach the gospel to yourself. . . . Hearing the word of the cross, and preaching it to ourselves, is the central strategy for sinners in the fight for joy. (*When I Don’t Desire God*, 81, 91)

And as this gospel-word passes from mouth to mouth, from person to person, from people to people, from nation to nation, how will the message about Jesus stay on message? What will keep the spoken word faithful and true and life-changing?

The Word Written

Having spied the pinnacle of God’s Word in the person and work of Jesus, and the prominence of God’s word in his gospel, now we come to the essential

place, this side of heaven, for God’s word written. As crucial as it is for spiritual life that we have God in his Word Jesus, and that we have Jesus in his word the gospel, so we need the Scriptures as God’s inspired, inerrant, and infallible revelation of himself.

Without the Bible, we will soon lose the genuine gospel and the real Jesus and the true God. For now, if we are to saturate our lives with the words of life, we must be people of the Book. Which is no necessary prescription for certain practices. But it is a summons to the principle of soaking our lives in the voice of God, and diversifying the portfolio of media. Before pondering the many and wonderful practices that are best for you, in your context and season of life, put this rock in place: Fashion rhythms of life that help you revolve around having God’s incarnate Word, by God’s gospel word, through God’s written word.

The Word Pervasive

And then countless creative routines may follow, whether it’s reading through the Bible in a year, or memorizing whole books, or meditating on single verses, or aggressively identifying and pursuing applications, or listening to sermon podcasts, or reading biblically rich content online, or taking Bible classes, or consuming Christian books, and on and on — and changing it all up from time to time. The potential practices are limitless, but the principle beneath the practices is this: The fundamental means of God’s ongoing grace, through his Spirit, in the life of the Christian, and the life of the church, is God’s self-expression in his Word, in the gospel, perfectly kept

for us and on display in the external written word of the Scriptures.

May God give us intentionality to shape our weeks with his word, ingenuity to shower our days with his voice, and creativity to punctuate our lives, and the lives of those around us, with dozens of fresh routines for regularly availing ourselves of his life-giving words.

CITIES

WEEK

7

CHURCH

DAY 1

Read Acts 16. What verse stands out and why?

QUESTIONS - ACTS 3:1-10

1. What was the beggar seeking and how did Peter handle the situation?
2. How does the beggar respond to the healing?
3. What is the attitude and emotion behind the instances where we see people “praising God”:

Luke 2:13.

Luke 2:20.

Luke 17:15.

Acts 2:47.

Acts 4:21

RE: ACTS 3:4-6

DAY 2

Read Acts 17. What stands out in this passage and why?

QUESTIONS - ACTS 3:11-16

1. How do Peter and John respond to the crowd that forms? What does this say about their focus?
2. What do we learn about Jesus in these verses? What is Peter getting at by calling Jesus the “Author of Life” (similar to Acts 5:31)?

“By virtue of his death and resurrection, Jesus is the originator of new life for others, as the argument in vv.16-21 goes on to suggest. His life-giving power has just been powerfully illustrated in the restoration of life to the lame man’s limbs. Although Peter accuses his audience of putting to death the one sent to bring them new life, he proclaims that ‘God raised him from the dead’. God stands in strong contrast to ‘you’ in v.14. God’s saving purposes were not frustrated by Israel’s rebellion but were fully established!” –David Peterson

RE: ACTS 3:16

DAY 3

Read Acts 18. What verse stands out and why?

QUESTIONS - ACTS 3:17-26

1. What is repentance? What does it look like when it happens?
2. What do you think counterfeit repentance looks like?
3. Acts 3:24. What does it mean that all the prophets proclaimed these days? Is that possible?
4. Acts 4:26. What was Jesus's mission?

"Repentance is a grace of God's Spirit whereby a sinner is inwardly humbled and visibly reformed." —Thomas Watson

RE: ACTS 3:19-20

**A CLOSER
LOOK AT
CHRISTIAN
BOLDNESS**

BY JONATHAN PARNELL

To live Christianly in a culture of confusion is to live boldly.

There is some explaining to do here. On one hand, the above sentence is simple and agreeable at face-value. On the other hand, there's a sense in which it will resonate with certain personalities while alienating others. Does our culture really need Christians to live boldly? What does that even mean?

The answer hangs on our understanding of "bold." And if we'd learn from the Book of Acts, the answer is yes — the call of Christian living is to live boldly the way Luke shows us. It's not so much because our culture needs it, but because "boldness" is an identity-shaping element of the church.

How'd They Do That?

It started when Peter and John said some annoying things in the Jerusalem of AD 30.

After Peter's sermon in Acts 3, after healing a man at the temple, Luke tells us that the Jewish leaders were fed up with Peter and John "because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead" (Acts 4:2). The leaders didn't like this for more than one reason. In one case, the Sadducees (who were part of the leadership) disputed the resurrection in general. But at the same time, and more significantly, the issue is what the "resurrection of the dead" signified for the history of the world. This was the real deal. This was what really disturbed the leaders, Sadducees and Pharisees alike. In essence, when Peter and John proclaimed "in Jesus the resurrection of the dead," they were saying that the end-time blessings

of the resurrection age had intruded the present age for the sake of everyone who believed in Jesus (Alan Thompson, *The Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus*, 79–81).

This is important to wrap our heads around. These end-time blessings of the resurrection age were the hope of Israel, as Paul calls them in Acts 28:20. These Jewish leaders knew all about them — about the pouring out of the Spirit and the triumph of God's salvation and the defeat of his enemies. They had read Joel 2:28–32 and Isaiah 12:3–6 and Jeremiah 51:24. They understood what the resurrection age meant. And now these fishermen-turned-preachers were walking around "their" temple saying that this age had arrived in Jesus, the guy they killed. Peter and John were telling the Jewish people that Jesus had launched a new and long-awaited epoch in the history of humanity. This didn't sit too well with "the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees" in Acts 4:1, nor with the whole Sanhedrin gathered in Acts 4:5–6.

But it gets worse.

Peter and John were arrested and escorted to stand trial before the same court that condemned Jesus. These were the "rulers and elders and scribes," or we might say, the professionals of Old Testament interpretation in that day. So they asked Peter and John how they did what they did (Acts 4:7). How did Peter heal the man at the temple? Where did they get this teaching on the arrival of the resurrection age?

Astonishing Boldness

The profound answer to their questions is Jesus, which is precisely what Pe-

ter says. “Hear me loud and clear,” he explains, “Jesus is behind this work.” He speaks with meticulous care, Galilean accent and all, as he continues, “This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:11–12).

The response of the leaders reveals something crucial. Luke tells us that they took note of Peter and John’s “boldness” (Acts 4:13). The leaders saw their “boldness” and “perceived that they were uneducated, common men.” That last bit means that Peter and John weren’t trained in the rabbinical schools of their scribal accusers (David Peterson, *Acts of the Apostles*, 194). Peter and John were not skilled interpreters of Scripture. They didn’t travel down the long educational path to be groomed for Jewish leadership, and yet they had this “boldness.” How could they be both unschooled and so bold? This was absolutely astonishing to the leaders.

But why was it astonishing? It has everything to do with what “boldness” means. It’s more than a general confidence. It doesn’t mean zeal enough to holler. Peter and John’s “boldness” was in what they said about Jesus. Or more specifically, their boldness was in how they were so outspoken about the identity of Jesus in their use of the Old Testament. That is what is happening in Acts 4:11. Peter quotes Psalm 118:22 to tell the Jewish leaders about the world-transforming significance of Jesus. He says that Jesus is the “stone” rejected by the leaders who has now become the “cornerstone.” Indeed, a new day had

dawned — a day that the LORD had made (Psalm 118:24) — all because of this Jesus who was crucified, dead, buried, who is now raised and ascended.

And this blew the minds of the Jewish leaders. How in the world do these untrained fisherman know how to read the Scriptures like this? How can they be so frank and open about who this Jesus is? So the Jewish leaders were astonished. Astonished, that is, until they recognized that Peter and John had been with Jesus (Acts 4:13).

Because Jesus Taught Them

So that explains it. Jesus had taught them how to read the Bible. Peter and John had been around Jesus, who, as we saw in Luke 24, said the whole thing was about him (Luke 24:44–48). Boldness, then, at least in this instance, is not red-faced passion or impenetrable extroversion. Rather, it has to do with speaking — which is not so much about how we speak, but in what we say about Jesus, even when we presume our hearers won’t be happy with it.

That’s how Peter and John disturbed the peace in Acts 4. Now, as modern readers, we could simply observe what’s happening here and move on. But I think there’s more.

Later in Acts 4, after Peter and John are released from Jewish custody, they gather with their friends for a prayer meeting (Acts 4:23). Luke actually gives us the insider glimpse of what they pray. It is more Old Testament interpretation centered on Jesus (Acts 4:24–27). And then, well, we see “boldness” again. These believers ask the Father “to grant to your servants to continue to speak

your word with all boldness” (Acts 4:29). Then Luke shows us that God answers their prayer: “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:31). Notice again that boldness has to do with speaking, and this time the whole church is getting in on it.

The Greek word behind “boldness” (*parresia*) shows up throughout the New Testament. Its range of meaning includes courage or fearlessness, which is in mind in places like Hebrews 4:16. It also can mean outspokenness or frankness — “a use of speech that conceals nothing.” And interestingly, right along with the several verb-uses, each of the five occurrences of *parresia* in Acts is connected to speaking (Acts 2:29; 4:13, 29, 31; 28:31). F. F. Bruce actually translates it “freedom of speech” in Acts 4:13 (The Book of Acts, 94–95). The two uses outside of chapter 4 are in Peter’s first sermon when he explains that Psalm 16 is about Jesus (Acts 2:29–30); and then in the very last verse of the Book of Acts that describes Paul’s ministry: “[He] welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance” (Acts 28:30–31). So the two bookends to apostolic proclamation in Acts include “boldness,” which, if I might be so bold, means to be outspoken about the identity and significance of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And this is the “boldness” to which we’re called.

Christian in a Confusing Culture

Luke, the theologian-historian, is writing for us. He intends to answer big

questions in the minds of his Christian audience, in part to assure us of the “continued outworking of God’s saving purposes” (Thompson, 19); and to form a “coherent theological perspective” that tells us who we are (Thiselton, “Hermeneutical Dynamics,” 13). While the book is historical, and therefore, mainly descriptive, it can take on a prescriptive function when Luke emphasizes things through repetition or key placements throughout the storyline — which is the case in how the apostles spoke so openly about Jesus.

Luke wants the church-for-all-time to imbibe this kind of boldness — to know Jesus and what his gospel work means for the world. To know Jesus and speak clearly about who he is. This is being Christian in a confusing culture. This is how we’re called to live.

SERMON NOTES

February 22, 2015

Preacher:

Text:

Sermon Title:

Notes

CITIES

WEEK

8

CHURCH

DAY 1

Read Acts 19. What stands out in this passage and why?

QUESTIONS - ACTS 4:1-22

1. Describe the scene. Who's involved and where are they?
2. Describe the contrast Luke makes as denoted by the "but" in Acts 4:4.
3. What message were the people teaching and proclaiming? (Luke 20:27, Acts 23:7-8)

"The 'people' is a distinctive term for Israel, deeply rooted in the covenant theology of the OT. Although the priests had a responsibility to protect God's people from the corrupting effect of false teaching, they are later described as being driven by jealousy in opposing the apostles and their ministry. What disturbed them most about the apostolic message was their 'proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead'. The Sadducean party, which was made up of chief priests and elders, the priestly and the lay nobility, denied that on the last day there would be a general resurrection from the dead." –David Peterson.

RE: ACTS 4:1-2

DAY 2

Read Acts 20. What verse stands out and why?

QUESTIONS - ACTS 4:5-10

1. Describe the trial scene. What is this trial about? Who's involved?
2. Is there any significance that Peter is the one doing the talking?
3. What is Peter's point in his response to the Jewish leaders?
4. Given that this court setting is almost identical to Jesus's court setting the night he was tried and condemned, contrast Peter's experience between our passage and Luke 22:47-71.

"In essence, when Peter and John proclaimed 'in Jesus the resurrection of the dead,' they were saying that the end-time blessings of the resurrection age had intruded the present age for the sake of everyone who believed in Jesus." –Alan Thompson

RE: ACTS 4:31

DAY 3

Read Acts 21. What verse stands out and why?

QUESTIONS - ACTS 4:11-12

1. Acts 4:11. Where does Peter get this metaphor? Where else do we see it?
2. Define "salvation".

Hebrews 2:1-4.

1 Timothy 2:3-6.

Luke 24:45-47.

3. What are the implications that salvation is only found in Jesus?

“Members of the Sanhedrin would have agreed that the God of Israel is humanity’s only true saviour (cf. Ex. 15:1-11; Is. 43:11-12; 45:22; Ps. 96:1-5). But Peter now insists that the name of Jesus is the exclusive means by which God’s saving power can be invoked and experienced. God’s ultimate act of salvation, in preparation for the ‘coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord’, has been accomplished through Jesus, so that he is now the exalted Lord upon whom to call for that salvation (2:20-21, 33-36). —David Peterson

RE: ACTS 4:32

**BRING
THE BIBLE
HOME
TO YOUR
HEART**

BY DAVID MATHIS

We all want to be “doers of the word, and not hearers only” (James 1:22).

Who wants to feel the failure or share in the shame of being pegged like one “who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror . . . and goes away and at once forgets what he was like” (James 1:23–24)? It would seem like Bible application is an essential spiritual discipline to consciously pursue every time we encounter God’s word — but that depends on how we define “application.”

The key question we need to answer is what effect should regular Bible intake have on our hearts and lives — and how does it happen?

God’s Word Is for You

For starters, we should be clear that aiming to apply God’s words to our lives is grounded in the good instinct that the Bible is for us. Optimism about life application makes good on these amazing claims that all the Scriptures are for Christians:

- “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16–17).
- “Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. . . . [T]hey were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come” (1 Corinthians 10:6, 11).
- “Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction,

that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Romans 15:4).

The whole Bible is for the whole church. We have good Scriptural warrant to come to God’s words expecting them to be understandable and applicable. We should make good on Puritan preacher Thomas Watson’s counsel,

Take every word as spoken to yourselves. When the word thunders against sin, think thus: “God means my sins;” when it presseth any duty, “God intends me in this.” Many put off Scripture from themselves, as if it only concerned those who lived in the time when it was written; but if you intend to profit by the word, bring it home to yourselves: a medicine will do no good, unless it be applied. (*Spiritual Disciplines*, 57)

Yes, take every word as spoken to yourself, with this essential anchor in place: Seek to understand first how God’s words fell on the original hearers, and how it relates to Jesus’s person and work, and then bring them home to yourself. Expect application to your life as God speaks to us today through the Spirit-illuminated understanding of what the inspired human author said to his original readers in the biblical text.

Specific Applications for Every Day?

So then, is it right to think of “application” as an everyday means of God’s grace? Is this a spiritual discipline to be pursued with every Bible encounter? The answer is yes and no, depending on what we mean by application.

Some good teachers have claimed that every encounter with God’s word

should include at least one specific application to our lives — some particular addition, however small, to our daily to-do list. There is a wise intention in this: pressing ourselves not just to be hearers of God's word, but doers. But such a simplistic approach to application overlooks the more complex nature of the Christian life — and how true and lasting change happens in a less straightforward way than we may be prone to think.

It helps to acknowledge that the vast majority of our lives are lived spontaneously. More than 99% of our daily decisions about this and that happen without any immediate reflection. We just act. Our lives flow from the kind of person we are — the kind of person we have become — rather than some succession of timeouts for reflection.

And this is precisely the line along which the apostle prays for his converts. He asks not that God give us simple obedience to a clear to-do list of commands, but that he give us wisdom to discern his will as we encounter life's many choices coming at us without pause. Paul prays

- that we would be “transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2).
- that our love may “abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent” (Philippians 1:9–10).
- that we “may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual

wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God” (Colossians 1:9–10).

Rather than dictating specific actions, he wants to see us formed into the kind of persons who are able to “discern what is pleasing to the Lord” (Ephesians 5:10).

God's Word Is for Seeing

And so, as John Piper says, “A godly life is lived out of an astonished heart — a heart that is astonished at grace. We go to the Bible to be astonished, to be amazed at God and Christ and the cross and grace and the gospel.” The kind of application most important to pursue in encountering God's word is such astonishment. Press the Scriptures to your soul. Pray for the awakening of your affections. Bring the Bible home to your heart.

As we're freshly captivated by the grandeur of our God and his gospel, we become what we behold: “we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Corinthians 3:18). And so we come away from our Bible intake with a more satisfied soul, which imparts a flavor and demeanor to our lives and decision-making that affects everything.

Meditating on God's words shapes our soul. Sometimes it yields immediate and specific points of applications — embrace them when they come. But be careful not to let the drive for specific actions alter the focus of our devotions from

astonishment and seeking, as George Mueller did, “to have my soul happy in the Lord.” Coming to the Scriptures to see can make for a drastically different approach than primarily coming to do.

The Bible is gloriously for us, but it is not mainly about us. We come most deeply because of who we will see, not for what we must do. “Become a kind of person,” counsels Piper, “don’t amass a long list.”

The Blessing of Bringing It Home

This is the pathway to flourishing we catch a glimpse of in the old covenant in Joshua 1:8 — meditation, then application, then blessing:

This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.

When Bible reading first aims at astonishment (meditation and worship), it works first on our hearts and changes our person, which then prepares us for application, and application to God’s blessing: “your way [will be] prosperous, and then you will have good success.” So applying God’s words to our lives is not only an effect of his grace to us, but also a means of his ongoing grace.

Jesus says in John 13:17, “If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.” So also James 1:25 promises that someone who is not a hearer only but “a doer who acts . . . will be blessed in his doing.”

When we bring God’s words home to our hearts, and then apply them to our

lives through an amazed and changed heart, it is a great means of his grace to us. He loves to bless the true application of his word to our lives.

SERMON NOTES

March 1, 2015

Preacher:

Text:

Sermon Title:

Notes

CITIES

WEEK

9

CHURCH

DAY 1

Read Acts 22. What verse stands out and why?

QUESTIONS - ACTS 5:1-11

1. What is significant about the story of Ananias and Sapphira? What part might this story have in the larger narrative of Acts?
2. What was the sin of Ananias and Sapphira?
3. Acts 5:4. Who is described as the object of their deceit?

God intended to bring fear on everyone through punishing one person, in order to encourage them to reverently refrain from all deceit. What Luke says about their fear applies to us as well. God wanted to give a general warning to successive generations at that time, so that everyone would learn to be upright with God. —John Calvin

RE: ACTS 5:3

DAY 2

Read Acts 23. What verse stands out and why?

QUESTIONS - ACTS 5:12-16

1. What was the purpose of the signs and wonders performed by the apostles? What effect did it have on the people?
2. What is the significance of the people holding the apostles in high esteem, say, instead of the existing Jewish leadership?
3. What might the Jewish leaders be jealous of regarding the apostles' ministry?

"The Jewish leaders' rejection of Jesus's apostles shows that they are disconnected with the current movement of God. The apostles are emerging to be the leaders of the 'new Israel,' whereas the influence of the old leaders is severely diminishing."

RE: ACTS 5:14

DAY 3

Read Acts 24. What verse stands out and why?

QUESTIONS - ACTS 5:17-42

1. Acts 5:30-31. What does Peter say the Father did to Jesus? What is the connection between these two events?
2. How did the Pharisees respond to Peter's sermon?
3. What do the apostles continue to do at the close of chapter 5? Where are they doing this?

RE: ACTS 5:29-32

**MORE
THAN
JUST
RAKING**

BY DAVID MATHIS

I'll take a rake over a shovel any day.

Raking is relatively easy work and can make the yard look better in a short time. It's easy enough that even our twin three-year-olds helped this fall, thanks to a pair of kids' rakes from the neighborhood hardware store.

Raking may make my back a little sore the next day, but it's nothing like the digging we did earlier in the year to prepare the front yard for a small retaining wall. Raking, even a lot of it, is reasonably painless. Digging, however, even just a small amount, can be back-breaking.

But moving earth can be gloriously rewarding. It can do a lot more to improve a yard than just collecting the leaves, though my soft side still would take the rake anytime.

Digging in Divine Words

Which is why I need to periodically remind myself to slow down, bore in, and go deep when reading the Bible. No doubt, some Christians naturally incline to a slower gear, and they need the reminder to press for breadth, keep the larger context in view, and reflect on the big picture, not just individual verses as little lozenges for the soul.

But others of us tend to coast toward raking. It takes less energy, especially early in the morning before the coffee is kicking in, to just keep reading, skimming along the surface of the text, rather than slowing down, asking questions, and perhaps even capturing reflections in words or diagrams. In a minute flat, we can be done with another chapter and ready to check the box. It feels more challenging to pick up a pencil, or to

open a laptop and go straight to an empty page for recording thoughts without getting sidetracked into email or social media.

Getting Better at Bible Study

For the Christian seeking to develop the ability to feed his soul with God's words, there is simply no replacement for diving in daily. Yes, you can pick up some skills and techniques here or there, in a classroom or in a book on Bible study. But you don't need seminary to feast regularly on the Scriptures. Most of the world's best Bible readers and appliers have little formal training, if any.

It's like any sport. There's no substitute for getting yourself on the field, and in the game. You can only talk about it so long until the only way to really improve is to actually play. Listening to gifted, insightful preachers and teachers is critical. Using good references — like a good Study Bible, or Carson and Moo on the New Testament, or Longman and Dillard on the Old — provides important aid. But there is simply no stand-in for reading the Scriptures for ourselves, and doing so for the long haul.

Don't Forget Your Shovel

And as we aim to feed ourselves daily from the inexhaustible pantry, we need a diet of both breadth and depth. There's a place for reading the Bible in a year and a place for going deep in half a verse. It takes both an increasing sense of the big picture of Jesus's rescue of sinners as well as a growing depth in the little pieces that make up that big picture for

us to stay fresh in applying the gospel to our lives.

Without raking, we won't have enough sense of the landscape to dig in the right places. And without digging, and making sure the banner of our theology is securely tethered to specific biblical sentences and paragraphs, our resources will soon dry up for feeding our souls with various textures and tastes.

Discover the Diamonds

In the introduction to *Future Grace*, John Piper celebrates the place of "unrushed reflection," and asks the reader to make space for it.

O the riches of understanding that come from lingering in thought over a new idea — or a new expression of an old idea! I would like this book to be read in the same way that the apostle Paul wanted his letters to be read by Timothy: "Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything" (2 Timothy 2:7).

Every book worth reading beckons with the words, "Think over what I say." . . . When my sons complain that a book is too hard to read, I say, "Raking is easy, but all you get is leaves; digging is hard, but you might find diamonds."

And if this is true for every book worth reading, how much more so God's Book.

SERMON NOTES

March 8, 2015

Preacher:

Text:

Sermon Title:

Notes

CITIES

WEEK

10

CHURCH

DAY 1

Read Acts 25. What stands out in this passage and why?

QUESTIONS - ACTS 6:1-15

1. Why are deacons appointed?
2. What are the qualifications for deacons? See also 1 Timothy 3:8-13.
3. What is the situation described in summary in Acts 6:7?

RE: ACTS 6:10-12

DAY 2

Read Acts 26. What verse stands out in this passage and why?

QUESTIONS - ACTS 7:1-53

1. What is a central theme in Stephen's speech?
2. What might have been the reason behind Stephen's emphasis on Moses? Note the repeated "This Moses," "this man," "This is the Moses" (Acts 7:35-40).
3. What charge does Stephen bring against the Jewish leaders? What is the irony of this event?

Stephen is a model disciple, a personification of 'faith speaking understanding.' His martyrdom, too, is paradigmatic: present-day disciples must boldly proclaim the gospel and display the same patient endurance. Stephen's example helps us grasp the importance of acknowledging the climax of the drama of redemption even while persevering to the drama's end.
—Kevin Vanhoozer

RE: ACTS 7:25

DAY 3

Read Acts 27. What stands out in this passage and why?

QUESTIONS - ACTS 7:54-60

1. What does Stephen see after he finishes his defense?
2. Why does Stephen's vision enrage the Jewish leaders?
3. What important character in the greater narrative is introduced in this passage?
What might be Luke's design in introducing him here?

"Jesus now sits at the right hand of God. We are no longer in the realm of history but in now time, which is also new time: the end time inaugurated by the drama of Christ. That Jesus is at the right hand of the Father means that the climax has been reached: all the other events pertaining to Jesus lie in the past, but his ruling from on high is present and ongoing." — Kevin Vanhoozer

RE: ACTS 7:51

**WARM
YOURSELF
AT THE
FIRES OF
MEDITATION**

BY DAVID MATHIS

We were made to meditate. God designed us with the capacity to pause and ponder. He means for us to not just hear him, but to reflect on what he says.

It is a distinctively human trait to stop and consider, to chew on something with the teeth of our minds and hearts, to roll some reality around in our thoughts and press it deeply into our feelings, to look from different angles and seek to get a better sense of its significance.

The biblical name for this art is meditation, which Don Whitney defines as “deep thinking on the truths and spiritual realities revealed in Scripture for the purposes of understanding, application, and prayer” (*Spiritual Disciplines*, 48). And it is a marvelous means of God’s grace in the Christian life.

Meditation Made Christian

Since we were made to meditate, we shouldn’t be surprised to find that world religions have seized upon the activity, and new schools try to make use of its practical effects, whether to cultivate brain health and lower blood pressure. Christian meditation, however, is fundamentally different than the “meditation” popularly co-opted in various non-Christian systems. It doesn’t entail emptying our minds, but rather filling them with biblical and theological substance — truth outside of ourselves — and then chewing on that content.

For the Christian, meditation means having “the word of Christ dwell in you richly” (Colossians 3:16). It is not, like secular meditation, “doing nothing and being tuned in to your own mind at the same time,” but it is feeding our minds

on the words of God and digesting them slowly, savoring the texture, enjoying the juices, cherishing the flavor of such rich fare. Meditation that is truly Christian is guided by the gospel, shaped by the Scriptures, reliant upon the Holy Spirit, and exercised in faith.

Man does not live by bread alone, and meditation is slowly relishing the meal.

Meditation Day and Night

Maybe it’s the multiplied distractions of modern life, and the increased impairments of sin’s corruption, but meditation is more the lost art today than it was for our fathers in the faith. We are told, “Isaac went out to meditate in the field toward evening” (Genesis 24:63), and three of the more important texts in the Hebrew Scriptures, among others, call for meditation in such a way that we should sit up and take notice — or better, slow down, block out distractions, and give it some serious consideration.

The first is Joshua 1:8. At a key juncture in redemptive history, following the death of Moses, God himself speaks to Joshua, and three times gives the clear directive, “Be strong and courageous” (Joshua 1:6, 7, 9). How is he to do this? Where will he fill his tank with such strength and courage? Meditation. “This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall *meditate on it day and night*” (Joshua 1:8).

God means not for Joshua to be merely familiar with the Book, or that he read through sections of it quickly in the morning, but that he be captivated by it and build his life on its truths. His spare thoughts should go there, his idle mind gravitate there. God’s words of

instruction are to saturate his life, give him direction, shape his mind, form his patterns, fuel his affections, and inspire his actions.

Meditation in the Psalms

Then, two more key texts come in the first Psalm and the longest. Psalm 1:1–2 echoes the language of Joshua 1 — “Blessed is the man [whose] delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.” The blessed one, the happy one, who delights in God’s word, doesn’t avail himself of the words of life with some quick breadth reading, but “meditates day and night.”

And meditation nearly dominates Psalm 119 and its celebration of the words of God, as the psalmist says he meditates “on your precepts” (Psalms 119:15, 78), “on your statutes” (Psalm 119:23; 48), “on your wondrous works” (Psalm 119:27). He claims, “Your testimonies are my meditation” (Psalm 119:99) and exclaims, “O how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day” (Psalm 119:97). If God’s old-covenant instruction could be so precious to the psalmist, how much more should the new-covenant gospel captivate our meditation.

Meditation Is the Missing Link

And so meditation on the Scriptures has occupied a deep and enduring place in the history of the church as one of the most enjoyed means of God’s grace for his people. In particular, the Puritans celebrated the gift of meditation as much as any, and drew attention to its vital relationship with hearing God’s voice (Bible intake) and having his ear (prayer).

Whitney quotes several prominent Puritans to the effect that meditation is “the missing link between Bible intake and prayer” (71–76), and in doing so, he moves us into some practical counsel for Christian meditation:

- “Begin with reading or hearing. Go on with meditation; end in prayer.” (William Bridge)
- “The word feedeth meditation, and meditation feedeth prayer. . . . [M]editation must follow hearing and precede prayer. . . . What we take in by the word we digest by meditation and let out by prayer.” (Thomas Manton)
- “The reason we come away so cold from reading the word is, because we do not warm ourselves at the fires of meditation.” (Thomas Watson)
- “The great reason why our prayers are ineffectual, is because we do not meditate before them.” (William Bates)

Meditation, then, for the Christian, is a discipline that has a certain function related to the other disciplines. It doesn’t stand alone, hermetically sealed from God’s revelation of himself in the Bible and our reverential response to him in prayer. Rather, meditation bridges the gap between hearing from God and speaking to him.

In meditation, we pause and reflect over his words. We roll them over in our minds and let them ignite our hearts — we “warm ourselves at the fires of meditation.” We pose questions and seek

answers. We go deep in God's revelation, take it into our very souls, and as we are being changed by his truth, we respond to him in prayer. As Matthew Henry says, "As meditation is the best preparation for prayer, so prayer is the best issue of meditation."

True Healing

Christian meditation is less about the posture of our bodies, and more about the posture of our souls. Our main pointers aren't, sit on the floor with your legs crossed, or sit on a chair with both feet on the floor and your back straight, palms facing upward. Christian meditation begins with our eyes in the Book, or ears open to the word, or a mind stocked with memorized Scripture.

Perhaps we start with some broader Bible reading from which we select a particular verse or phrase that caught our attention, and carve out several minutes to go deep in it. Then, with intentionality and focus — often best with pen in hand, or fingers on the keys — we seek to better understand God's words and warm our soul at his fire, and let it lead us into prayer and then into the day.

In our restless and stressed-out society, it very well may strengthen our brain and lower our blood-pressure to practice the art of Christian meditation. But even more significant will be the good that it does for our souls.

SERMON NOTES

March 15, 2015

Preacher:

Text:

Sermon Title:

Notes

CITIES

WEEK

11

CHURCH

DAY 1

Read Acts 28. What stands out in this passage and why?

QUESTIONS - ACTS 8:1-8

1. What was one providential effect of the persecution that broke out against the church?
2. What is an important shift in the narrative of Acts that takes place in chapter 8?
3. What effect did Phillip's ministry have in Samaria?
4. Like Stephen, what is Phillip's office in the church? Why might that be significant?

"The hallmark of our faith is the joy we have in the resurrection life of Christ. This joy is what attracted people to the early Christian communities described in the Acts narrative, and it is joy that should make our church communities attractive to others today (Acts 2: 42-47). The good news is really and truly wonderful news. It is a deep-seated joy, both now and forever."
—Christopher Smith and John Pattison

RE: ACTS 8:6

DAY 2

Read Galatians 1. What stands out in this chapter and why?

QUESTIONS - ACTS 8:9-25

1. What is Simon the Magician trying to gain through preaching the gospel? What is the contrast between how the church views possessions and others in society? (see Acts 2:42)
2. What is the significance of Luke's summary statement in Acts 8:25?
3. What important shift of the book should be coming next? When does that shift occur?

Simon the Magician actually had a sin named after him—"simony." This word was used by the early church to describe the sin of trying to pay for power and influence among God's people.

RE: ACTS 8:20-22

DAY 3

Read Galatians 2. What stands out in this chapter and why?

QUESTIONS - ACTS 8:26-40

1. What important Old Testament passage is central to Phillip's interaction with the Ethiopian eunuch?
2. Compare this story to Isaiah 56. What are the similarities? What might Luke be using this story to signify?
3. What was the Ethiopian's response after this conversion and baptism?

"Since Jesus is the Messiah of Israel, and the savior for one and all, and since he is attested by the Scriptures and eyewitnesses as well as faithful preachers such as Paul, the audience must not make the same mistake the Jews of Jerusalem made. Just as Israel and David were God's chosen ones, so, too, is Jesus, and this must be recognized, for the promises of God are fulfilled in Him." —Joseph Fitzmyer

RE: ACTS 8:30-31

**PUTTING
YOUR
CITY
IN ITS
PLACE**

BY JONATHAN PARNELL

A few years ago, before starting a routine read through the Book of Acts, I picked up a green colored pencil to highlight every mention of cities and regions I might come across. Each occurrence of a geographical name was to be softly shaded. Beginning with “Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria” (Acts 1:8) to “Cyprus and Cyrene” (Acts 11:20) to Seleucia, Perga, Lystra, Attalia, Neapolis, and so forth, whole pages became sprinkled with green. The highlighting forced me to pay attention to names that I commonly overlooked, names that were, of course, ancillary to the book’s message. Or so I thought.

One of the basics of good reading is to understand that repetition signifies importance. But interestingly enough, the importance of location had never caught on for me in the Book of Acts, even though it’s everywhere.

Place Matters

Maybe it was because Luke only cites a few cities twice, or maybe because I dismissed the geography as something expected in a historical narrative, but either way, the frequency of location didn’t stand out to me until I saw the green. That’s when it became clear: Luke cares about these places.

Once you keep your eyes peeled for it, the centrality of location becomes hard to miss in this story about the gospel’s advance. Every turned page means more discoveries, sometimes even dozens, of the church expanding into new pockets, crossing new borders, turning the world upside down, one locale at a time.

The advance of the gospel in these places is why geography is important to

Luke. Each mention of a city or region is telling us how far the gospel has gone, how far it can go. Its advance, after all, is a real advance. The gospel isn’t an ideological movement for abstract, amorphous peoples; it’s the good news proclaimed to people who are surrounded by the concreteness of somewhere, some place. The where-ness of it all matters in the Book of Acts, and it matters for the mission of the church.

And we should be careful that this doesn’t get overlooked.

Ethne Who Are En

One of the biggest contributions to the modern missions movement occurred in 1974 when Ralph Winter pointed out the “people blindness” that characterized Western missionary strategies. Addressing the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization, Winter explained that the distinctions of unreached peoples based on political and territorial borders were insufficient. The real barriers to the gospel, he explained, were cultural and linguistic, not geographic. John Piper says, “Winter’s message was a powerful call for the church of Christ to reorient its thinking so that missions would be seen as the task of evangelizing unreached peoples, not the task of merely evangelizing more territories” (Let the Nations Be Glad, 180).

This recovery of *ethnē* (Greek for nations) as “people groups,” not World Cup countries, has made a tremendous impact on missionary efforts, giving the church a clear picture of what’s left to accomplish the Great Commission. And at the same time, while *ethnē* refers to ethnolinguistic peoples, we

should not forget that these peoples are always *ethnē* who are also *en* (Greek for in) somewhere. The *ethnē* are always peoples in a certain place, whether indigenous lands or foreign cities. If we were to lose sight of the *ethnē en*, of the real flesh and blood in real contexts behind the ethnolinguistic graphs, then it could distort our strategies to prioritize translation over going, to be more about shipping books than crossing borders, even though we actually need both.

Perhaps worst is that a shriveled sense of locale might lead us to abstract lostness, to make it all math, all about numbers and percentages, which, when coupled with globalization, could truncate our efforts to become a mere transmission of information to faceless blocks of the world population. This could happen — if we lose touch with the tangibility of our mission. It turns out, even if by a different form, we might not be immune to “people blindness.”

The Here-ness of Humanity

We must remember that people are always people in a place — a place, as one author says, is “not just any place, not just a location marked on a road map, but on a topo, a topographic map — with named mountains and rivers, identified wildflowers and forests, elevation above sea level and annual rainfall” (Peterson, *The Pastor*, 7). The point is the “here-ness” of humanity — that we understand the actual, material, physical existence of the people Jesus commissions us to reach.

People are always in a place, and therefore, our mission must mean, at some point, that one of us steps into that

place. For how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how will they hear unless someone goes to these ethnolinguistic peoples where they are, where they live, with rolled-up sleeves and dusty feet, to preach the gospel — just like it happened in the Book of Acts, in Seleucia, Perga, Lystra, Attalia, Neapolis, and more.

Our mission is a tangible one. Be going, Jesus says — somewhere, some place — and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18–20). And therefore, sooner or later, we must ask, “What where? What place?” If we’re commissioned to make disciples of all nations, where in the world, literally, do we start?

Limitation and Responsibility

This brings us to two complementing factors of our mission that we’re prone to overlook. It’s what authors Sparks, Soerens, and Friesen call “limitation and responsibility” — two realities that serve as anchors to our mission and help to clarify our focus.

On the one hand, limitation reminds us that one local church, or person, can’t reach everyone alone. There are limits to our particular abilities to make disciples of all nations because we are rooted in one place at a time. And the place in which we’re rooted happens to be wherever we are right now, or where God is sending us. Whether it is a neighborhood in the upper Midwest or a village in the hills of southeast Asia, the fact that we are somewhere — not everywhere — means that there are limits to our discipling. If we choose to live, say, in Baghdad, we are effectively saying that Baghdad is the ground of our

ministry, not Boston. There might be furloughs and travels, but we can only live one place at a time, and that place draws lines on what we're able to do.

On the other hand, though, the lines drawn also add a responsibility on what we should do. Limitation reminds us that we can't reach everyone, but responsibility reminds us that we should reach someone. And that someone, if we're wondering, is most likely the person who lives and works nearby — even if that person is not an urban professional born after 1970. Responsibility leads us to take a step back and consider that God's providence might determine more than our spouses and careers, that it might actually have something to do with the people who live, work, and recreate around us, with the place we call home, with those who need to hear us tell them about Jesus.

Here or There for Somebody

This is because place matters. And when we recover its importance, it will only boost our mission, not hinder it.

When we know that place matters, that all nations live on the ground somewhere, it keeps us from the nebulous goal of trying to reach everybody on our own, and most importantly, it hones our focus on reaching somebody. Whether that is in the northeast of America or among a tribe in West Africa, we are here or sending there, trying to reach somebody, until the day when somebody becomes everybody, and the whole earth is filled with those green highlights.

SERMON NOTES

March 22, 2015

Preacher:

Text:

Sermon Title:

Notes

CITIES

WEEK

12

CHURCH

DAY 1

Read Mark 14. What stands out in this passage and why?

QUESTIONS - ACTS 9:1-19

1. Saul has been persecuting the church. What is significant about what Jesus says to him in Acts 9:5?
2. Acts 9:15. What did the Lord say to Ananias about Paul? Why is this key at this point in the narrative?

“Ananias [swiftly] enters and leaves the narrative, and we know nothing more of him. But as Saul’s first friend after this conversion, the first Christian to greet him as a brother, as well as the one who faithfully bore the Lord’s commission to him, he has an honored place in sacred history, and a special claim upon the gratitude of all who in one way or another have entered into the blessing that stems from the life and work of the great apostle.” —E.F. Bruce

3. How might Ananias be a faithful example to us in our ministry?

RE: ACTS 9:16

DAY 2

Read Mark 15. What stands out to you in this passage and why?

QUESTIONS - ACTS 9:20-31

1. What does Paul immediately begin doing after his conversion? What does Luke clearly tell us that Paul is saying?
2. What does it mean that Paul was “proving that Jesus was the Christ”? What would have played a key role in his argumentation, which we’ve seen so much already?
3. What is the manner of Paul’s preaching in Jerusalem? (Acts 9:27-28)
4. What does Luke’s summary statement in Acts 9:31 tell us about where we are in the narrative?

RE: ACTS 9:31

DAY 3

Read Mark 16. What stands out in this passage and why?

QUESTIONS - ACTS 9:32-43

1. Which character reappears in this important hinge point in the narrative?
2. What role do Peter's miracles have in his ministry at this point?
3. What was the effect of the miracles Peter performed in Joppa?

RE: ACTS 9:34

**KEVIN
AND
BROOK'S
STORY**

Brook

If you had asked 15-year-old Brook Kleiman what I believed, I would have replied: "Jesus died for my sin so that I can live with him forever." Growing up in church, and attending a Christian school meant I had all the "right" answers, but they weren't a true reflection of what I believed. Deep down I thought I was good enough. I wasn't drinking or swearing like the other kids at school, and therefore, I didn't need Jesus to die for my sin. It wasn't until I came to college that I saw myself for what I truly was, a sinner in need of saving.

I attended the University of Minnesota where I became involved in Campus Outreach (a college ministry). During my sophomore year I began studying the Bible with a group of girls, and saw that their understanding of Jesus was very different from mine. They taught me that sin is not just outward actions but also inward thoughts. Over the course of that year I began to see myself as truly sinful; that all the "good things" I was doing were not able to outweigh the bad (Isaiah 64:6). God showed me that because of my sin He had to kill his one and only Son so that I could live with him forever.

Since my sophomore year of college, my circumstances have changed drastically, but the truths of the gospel have remained the same. As I have become more aware of my sin, I find myself amazed that God would even desire a relationship with me. A verse that has been very comforting to me over the years is Hosea 2:14: "Behold, I will allure her and bring her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her." This verse occurs

in response to Israel's continual, faithless betrayal of their Maker and King. God's response to us is always faithful, always full of mercy. He gives us what we don't deserve, a life forever worshiping and enjoying him.

Kevin

I grew up in a classic suburban family — two kids, heavily involved in sports and activities, minivans — the whole deal. We were culturally religious, went to church every week and prayed before meals. My brother and I went to Christian school through high school. I was fine on the outside, but inside I understood God to be somewhat of a cosmic killjoy — if you followed the list of "do's and don't's" well enough, he'd let you go to heaven. I knew about Jesus, and I had heard that he died for my sins, but that just meant I owed him and had to pay him back. However, I was more interested in my own success, my own popularity, my looks, my grades, my girlfriend, my points-per-game average. I desperately needed people to like me. Through high school and early in college, I pursued worldly happiness through academic achievement, sports success, and relationships with the opposite sex. And I was somewhat successful, but I felt empty, and a guilt loomed over me that I couldn't place.

At the University of Minnesota, the first true secular public school that I had attended, my safe cultural Christian upbringing came into serious conflict with an onslaught of atheism, humanism, and cynicism. Brook (my girlfriend at the time) asked me one day if I really thought that I was a believer. Thinking

about it seriously, I replied “maybe not.” I didn’t truly have a foundation to stand on, and I knew that a shaky mental assertion that Jesus lived and died wasn’t the ticket. The death and funeral of a high school friend accelerated my questions. God led me to his word searching for answers. I started in Romans, and God graciously opened my eyes to the preciousness of the gospel for the first time. I realized that I was more wicked than I ever knew — “None is righteous ... All have turned aside ... There is no fear of God before their eyes” (Romans 3:10–18) — but in Christ, I was more loved and accepted than I ever thought possible — “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly ... God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:6, 8). Following that season, Jesus became the most intriguing and impressive person in the world. I recognized that he was the hero, the main character of the story — not me.

So my life began to change. With Jesus as my substitute, the guilt and the need to perform were gone. And with Christ as my new treasure and deepest source of joy, my desperate need for others and worldly happiness slowly dissipated and a deeper peace started to flow in. I began to enjoy church and love singing praises to the God who saved me. God placed me in several deep relationships through Campus Outreach and Bethlehem Baptist Church that bore fruit in turning from sin and enjoying Jesus more. As the years go by, I have definitely not attained perfection. I still sin, a lot, and I still need the gospel every day. Now that God has blessed me with a beautiful wife and two kids, I must rely

on and apply Jesus’s death and resurrection to my stumbling service of others above myself. My identity is not in being the perfect father or husband. My identity, my life is “hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is [my] life appears, then [I] also will appear with him in glory” (Colossians 3:3–4). True life, true joy, true peace is found in Jesus Christ, the God-man who laid down his life for me.

SERMON NOTES

March 29, 2015

Preacher:

Text:

Sermon Title:

Notes

APPENDIX A: METHOD FOR REFLECTION

BY MICHAEL THIEL

Observation:

1. CONTEXT – Make observations about where the passage falls in the flow of the text
2. Biblical definitions, and Dictionary definitions of key words
3. Linking words (because, if, since, then, therefore, but, and)
4. Who's writing? To whom? Who else is involved?
5. Culture/Personalities/Locations of people involved
6. Language, repeated words, emphasis
7. Purpose of verse (admonition, exhortation, rebuke, command); what is the passage about?
8. Metaphor, simile, cause/effect, comparison
9. Ask yourself basic questions about things in the verse and answer them? What is this? What is that? When does this take place?
10. Why does the writer use certain words to convey his point?
11. Make some objective conclusions (observations) on the text
12. When with respect to Jesus (before? after? during?)
13. Time of day? Or year? Verse surrounded by any major events?
14. Attitudes of people involved

Interpretation:

1. Content
 - a. Look at observations and start to dig into what they mean.
2. CONTEXT, CONTEXT, CONTEXT!
 - a. Read verse before
 - b. Read paragraph it is in
 - c. Read chapter it is in
 - d. Read book it is in (if not too big)
3. Comparison
 - a. Read other versions
 - b. Use cross reference verses and a concordance
4. Culture
 - a. Use "Content" and use observations of culture to interpret how the writer uses words in light of the culture
 - b. What was the original meaning of the author?
5. Consultation
 - a. Commentaries
 - b. Study bible
 - c. Godly people

Application:

S.P.E.C.K.

1. **SIN** to confess
 - a. Look inward for a moment for self-inspection (only for a little while)
2. **PROMISE** to claim
 - a. What do the verses say that is a promise from God?
 - b. How will this promise change you?
3. **EXAMPLE** to follow
 - a. How do you want to model your life after the verses you studied?
 - b. How do you NOT want your life to be modeled after reading the verses?
4. **COMMAND** to obey
 - a. What do the verses command you to do?
 - b. How will you start to obey in your beginning steps of faith to accomplish the command
5. **KNOWLEDGE** to gain
 - a. What important doctrinal truths must be memorized and taken away from the verses?

NOTE: Scripture cannot mean now, what it couldn't mean when it was written. Remember to use lots of other verses... let Scripture interpret Scripture!

