

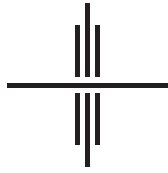
Bible Study Guide

Bold For The Cities

Cities Church



Michael Thiel and Jonathan Parnell



CITIES CHURCH

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OVERVIEW

Week 1—Jun 29	Reading	Questions	Reflection
Day 1	Read Acts 22	Acts 23:1-11	Matthew 28:16-20
Day 2	Read Acts 23	Acts 23:12-22	Matthew 10:28
Day 3	Read Acts 24	Acts 23:23-35	Romans 8:18

Week 2—Jul 6	Reading	Questions	Reflection
Day 1	Read Acts 23	Acts 24:1-4	Luke 21:12-13
Day 2	Read Acts 24	Acts 24:5-9	Colossians 4:2-4
Day 3	Read Acts 25	Acts 24:10-13	Romans 12:1-2

Week 3—Jul 13	Reading	Questions	Reflection
Day 1	Read Luke 22	Acts 24:14-21	1 Peter 1:10-12
Day 2	Read Luke 23	Acts 24:22-23	Colossians 1:24-29
Day 3	Read Luke 24	Acts 24:24-27	Acts 17:2

Week 4—Jul 20	Reading	Questions	Reflection
Day 1	Read Acts 25	Acts 25:1-12	Romans 13:1-2
Day 2	Read Acts 8	Acts 25:13-22	Romans 13:3-4
Day 3	Read Acts 9	Acts 25:23-27	Romans 13:5-7

Week 5—Jul 27	Reading	Questions	Reflection
Day 1	Read Acts 21	re: Community	Romans 13:8
Day 2	Read Acts 22-23	re: Community	Ephesians 4:1-3
Day 3	Read Acts 24-25	re: Community	Romans 12:3-8

Week 6—Aug 3	Reading	Questions	Reflection
Day 1	Read Acts 25	Acts 26:1-11	Philippians 3:2-6
Day 2	Read Acts 26	Acts 26:12-23	Philippians 3:7-11
Day 3	Read Acts 26:24-27:44	Acts 26:24-32	Philippians 3:12-26

Week 7—Aug 10	Reading	Questions	Reflection
Day 1	Read Acts 26:1-27:20	Acts 27:1-20	Matthew 8:23-27
Day 2	Read Acts 27	Acts 27:21-38	Psalms 23:4
Day 3	Read Acts 27:39-28:30	Acts 27:39-44	Proverbs 19:20-23

Week 8—Aug 17	Reading	Questions	Reflection
Day 1	Read Acts 1	Acts 28:1-15	Romans 1:11-16
Day 2	Read Acts 2	Acts 28:16-22	Romans 10:14-17
Day 3	Read Acts 6-7	Acts 28:23-31	Matthew 13:10-17

Week 9—Aug 24	Reading	Questions	Reflection
Day 1	Read Acts 10-11	Read Acts 12	Summarize Acts 1-12
Day 2	Read Acts 13-16	Read Acts 17-20	Summarize Acts 13-20
Day 3	Read Acts 21-24	Read Acts 25-28	Summarize Acts 21-28

Week 10—Aug 31	Reading	Questions	Reflection
Day 1	Read Isaiah 53-56:8	re: Singleness	1 Corinthians 7:7,32-35
Day 2	Read Ephesians 5	re: Marriage	Philippians 2:3-4
Day 3	Read Romans 15-16	re: Hospitality	1 Peter 4:7-11

Week 11—Sep 7	Reading	Questions	Reflection
Day 1	Read 1 Cor. 1:18-31	re: Children	Psalms 127
Day 2	Read Matthew 5-7	re: Parenting	Matthew 6:25-34
Day 3	Read Ephesians 4	re: Teamwork	Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Week 12—Sep 14	Reading	Questions	Reflection
Day 1		re: Work	
Day 2		re: Rest	
Day 3		re: Alcohol	

Week 13—Sep 21	Reading	Questions	Reflection
Day 1		re: Discipleship	
Day 2		re: Friendship	
Day 3		re: Neighboring	

Preface

Michael Thiel

Dear Cities Church,

I am excited about this third and final Bible study for our sermon series through Acts. This Bible study guide follows the sermon schedule closely as we finish out the book before the fall. The last four weeks of this study are topical in nature and also accompany the sermons as we transition from Acts to the next sermon series.

The function of this workbook in the life of Cities Church addresses several items:

1) Sermon Series

The workbook is laid out as best as possible to accompany the sermon series. The length of the workbook follows a very simple quarterly schedule, which turns out to be three months at a time. So, when this workbook was written we did our best to plan out the sermon passages as well. The workbook and the sermons won't line up perfectly, but should be close.

The sermon series in third quarter 2015 finishes up Acts. The sermons from week to week will vary from a half a chapter to several chapters.

2) Structure

This workbook has 13 weeks, which lines up with the third quarter, July through September. Each week is broken down in a nominal three day layout. I say nominal because you can choose however you want to use this workbook. You could take parts of the weekly content and divide it up so that you have something to work on each day of the week.

There are three parts per day. We were really shooting for that magical number of three. The three parts cater to different ways of taking in Bible. First, there is a chapter of the Bible to read. Second, there is a section of Scripture to look at that accompanies the Acts sermon series. 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 meditate on the verses. I have included an appendix that lays out one way

to do the inductive Bible study method, as an option.

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.

Lastly, each week we've included an article or story from a member of our church. This content is either relevant for the study, or for the general edification of Cities Church. The stories are also a neat way to have a real life story from our community in the context of the stories we're studying in the Bible.

3) Consistency

One of our aims with this workbook is to help provide a means for consistency in your Bible intake without it being solely passive consumption. This workbook is generic enough that you will have to put in work to mine the Bible for diamonds on your own. And we wouldn't want it any other way. We can't wait to hear what people find and how God moves their hearts as they dig in the Scriptures. This workbook can be viewed as a suggested place to dig on a consistent basis that still requires your own shovel to break the ground.

4) Options

Lastly, we do not consider this workbook to be mandatory or exclusive. We offer it in an open handed manner to simply be a tool to help. We're here to serve, help, and guide. And if this workbook isn't helpful for you, then don't do it. Our suggestion to you is that you talk about your plans within your Life Group for how you aim to take in Bible this spring. If it's not using this workbook, then talk about what you plan to do instead.

May God bless your Bible study this summer and build us up to walk in newness of life.

Much love,
Pastor Michael
June 2015

The Epic of Ordinary

Jonathan Parnell

The Book of Acts is clearly one of the most action-packed segments in the storyline of Scripture. The title, “The Acts of the Apostles,” cues us in on this clue from the start. As many commentators have suggested, a more accurate title would be something to do with the acts of the Holy Spirit, or perhaps “The Action of the Ascended Christ by His Spirit Through His Church.”

The book opens with Jesus ascending as human to the throne of the universe, sending the Spirit, and commissioning his messengers. “You will be my witnesses,” he promises, “in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). And so Luke recounts the movements in that outline — all action and no slush.

There are powerful proclamations, riveting dialogues, and thousands of conversions. There is everything from miracles that disgruntle the white-collar villains to prison sentences that end in wild escape. There is character development — absolute transformation — when Paul is knocked off his horse by a shining light and propelled to play a prominent role thereafter. Then there is religious controversy and political trials and the backstory of Jewish factions and Roman rule. Add in the maritime adventures of suspenseful decision-making and shipwreck to an unknown island of nice natives and venomous snakes.

Sometimes Jesus’s messengers were mistaken as gods, other times they were killed by the sword. Sometimes they were stoned to death, other times they were stoned but survived. There are disputes among the protagonists, ironic encounters, and affectionate goodbyes. The world, honestly and truly, was being turned upside down (Acts 17:6), everywhere from the scruffy blacksmith who lost his business to the highest court of international law. This story has all the pieces for a box-office hit.

And then there’s the way it ends.

Throughout the book, the action has ramped up, up, up. Paul’s voyage to Rome has been like a symphonic crescendo. The percussion is blaring louder, louder, louder.

And then the story closes with a bi-vocal leader talking to folks who visit him at his house. All of that action — head-spinning action — leaves us with an old man inviting

everyone into his home to tell them about Jesus.

Plainness As the Peak

The Book of Acts is meant to frame the church’s self-understanding. It has a “formative function,” as it’s been called, which is aimed at answering the identity question: *Who are we, and what are we supposed to do?*

Luke doesn’t answer this question with a bulleted list. Nor does he give us a handbook full of prescriptive lines. Instead, he writes our story, our history, with a theological intentionality we can’t ignore. This kind of approach doesn’t call our plays on the field, it shapes the way we see the game. The whole book is pointing in this direction, and in particular, the way it ends.

The last verses about Paul in Acts 28 are no accident. The nature of what he is doing has huge implications for how we be Christian in our day.

To be sure, it doesn’t prescribe that we all go do house churches, and it isn’t the be-all, end-all of how we interact with culture. But it is important for how we understand our witness in this world, especially when so many churches today can be more allured by the ambition of recreating Pentecost than sharing a meal with neighbors.

As an aside, don’t misunderstand me. I love packed-out arenas of Christ-exalting worshipers. All of Passion’s albums are played over and over in my iTunes. Conferences are great. But the point I’m highlighting is that the biblical vision of the gospel’s advance isn’t bright lights and a great sound system. It looks much more plain. It just does. *No frills Christian mission* — that’s the picture Luke leaves us.

A People of Open Doors

Luke has shown us the miracles. There are those times when the Spirit may send us into the back of a chariot, seated right beside a foreign ambassador who’s reading the Bible. He can do that sort of thing.

But that’s not the inspired author’s last word.

The rhythm to which we should be bob-

bing our heads is the simple, reproducible strategy of opening our doors to whomever will come. Paul “welcomed all who came” into his house where he plainly taught the story of God and who Jesus is. Keep in mind that for us it’s not so much about doing what Paul did — it’s about imbibing the nature of Christian mission that Luke has been narrating all along, building up to this final scene: *Come in, have some coffee, pull up a chair, let me tell you about Jesus.* This is the last thing we see a gospel messenger do in Acts and it’s what we can still do today, whether in Minneapolis or Malaysia.

With summer here in the Northern Hemisphere, it’s the perfect season within the perfect aeon for us to do this.

Men, take a few minutes to sit down with your wife, or gather your friends if you’re single or not-yet-married, to pray and plan how your home can become a center for the gospel’s triumph during the next four months. *What will our hospitality look like this summer?* Try to get at least one event on the calendar — one barbecue or discussion group or prayer meeting with your Community Group connections.

Now, remember, it won’t feel epic, and it will take some energy, but it really is in this setting that the new creation peels into this old world. It’s in those conversations about who Jesus is and what he has done for us, simple as they may be, that we feel the force of his reign through us. It’s at our dinner tables, no less ordinary than any stable in first-century Bethlehem, where lives are transformed from darkness to light, where God’s enemies become his sons and daughters, where his glory shines a little brighter into this planet he will soon make new.

Luke means for us to walk from this book not disillusioned by a distant historical recount, but infused with encouragement to pick up where Paul left off. Because, after all, this book is more accurately “The Action of the Ascended Christ by His Spirit Through His Church” — which now includes you and me, and our homes.

WEEK 1

ACTS 23

Day 1

Read Acts 22. What do you learn about Paul's past and how he came to believe in Jesus? See Acts 9 and Philippians 3.

Questions: Acts 23:1-11

1. Acts 22:30-23:1. Describe how Paul has lived his life after conversion. See 2 Corinthians 1:12. What does it mean to live your life in good conscience?

2. Acts 23:2-5. Describe Paul's interaction with the High Priest. How would you have handled the situation? What does "white washed wall" mean?
 - a. Who is Jesus talking to and what is Jesus' point in Matthew 23:27-28?

 - b. Why do people act hypocritically and how does the gospel change this pattern in the heart?

3. Acts 23:6-8. Why do you think Paul took the debate in the direction he did? Why is the resurrection of the dead so critical to Christianity? See 1 Cor. 15:12-19.

4. Acts 23:9-11. How is v.11 a playing out of the Great Commission in Matthew 28? In what ways have you experienced the Lord standing by you as you shared the gospel?

Matthew 28:16–20

Day 2

Read Acts 23. How do you think Paul felt knowing people were plotting to kill him?

Questions: Acts 23:12-22

1. Acts 23:12-15. Why did these people want to kill Paul so badly? What about the gospel was so offensive?

a. What was the plan to kill Paul?

2. Acts 23:16-18. Does it surprise you that Paul was able to command a centurion like this in prison? How do you think Paul was able to get to this point while in prison?

3. Acts 23:19-20. How do you think the boy found out about the plan and where did he get the courage to do this?

a. Who/what is a tribune?

4. Acts 23:21-22. What emotions would you be feeling at this point? How do you think Paul felt? See Philipians 4:4-7, 11-13

Matthew 10:28

Day 3

Read Acts 24. What charge did they bring against Paul? How does Paul respond? How does Felix respond to, treat, and deal with Paul?

Questions: Acts 23:23-35

1. Acts 23:23-25. Why do you think the tribune acted this way in dealing with Paul?
 - a. What level of power did a governor have in the order of command in the Roman government?

2. Acts 23:26-28. What were the tribune's reasons for sending Paul to the governor?

3. Acts 23:29-30. Why did the Jews want to kill Paul and was this a legitimate reason to do so?

4. Acts 23:31-35. Describe the journey and the various cities Paul goes through.
 - a. Layout the various things that God uses to get Paul from Jerusalem to Rome.

 - b. Acts 23:11. What is God's plan?

Romans 8:18

The Price and the Preciousness of Spiritual Power

John Piper

Sermon on Acts 5:17-21

But the high priest rose up and all who were with him, that is, the party of the Sadducees, and filled with jealousy they arrested the apostles and put them in the common prison. But at night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out and said, “Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.” And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and taught.

The Theme of the Book of Acts

If I had to pick one sentence out of the book of Acts that would state the theme of the book, I think it would be Acts 1:8. Just before Jesus returns to heaven to take his place at the right hand of God, he gives the disciples this word that echoes through the whole book of Acts, “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.”

As we move through the book of Acts in these messages, what we are seeing is the fulfillment of this promise. The Holy Spirit comes upon the disciples again and again with unusual fullness, the result is supernatural power leading to courageous, life-giving witness. Spirit . . . power . . . witness . . . new life—that’s what we see unfolding in the history of the early church.

And the power is not merely the quiet power of preaching that looks natural, but really is supernatural (and we thank God for that!). Again and again, the power that comes with the witness, and helps make it life-changing, is something extraordinary,

something manifestly supernatural—tongues of fire, sound of wind (2:2–3), shaking building (4:31). Or, as we saw in last week’s text, remarkable healings and deliverance, in Acts 5:16, “The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed.” The effect of this demonstration of power is described in verse 14, “And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women.” This is the playing out of Acts 1:8. The Spirit comes upon the church in an unusual way; extraordinary power is manifested; and life-giving testimony brings people into the kingdom.

So this is why we keep talking about power in these messages on the book of Acts—because Acts 1:8 is the theme of the book. The book is about Spirit and power and witness and the new life gathered into churches spreading out from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the ends of the earth. And the reason that this is so relevant for us is that you and I still live in Acts 1:8—the witness to Jesus Christ has not yet been completed at the ends of the earth. And therefore the story of the book of Acts—the coming-upon of the Holy Spirit and the receiving of power and the bearing of life-giving witness—is still happening where people open themselves to it and ask for it and wait in faith to be “clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49).

What I see in today’s text is a lesson concerning the price and the preciousness of this spiritual power.

1. The Price of Spiritual Power

Verse 16 describes extraordinary power flowing through the hands of the apostles (cf. v. 12). All who came were being healed. The next two verses describe the price they had to pay for this power in three ways: “The high priest rose up and all who were with him, that is, the party of the Sadducees, and filled with jealousy they arrested the apostles, and put them in the common prison.” The price of spiritual power is suffering. Three kinds: jealousy; accusation of false teaching; and what we might call carnal counter-power.

1.1. Jealousy

First, there was jealousy. Verse 17b: “filled with jealousy they arrested them.” Power is a very dangerous thing both for those who have it, and for those who don’t but wish they did. The danger if you have it is pride and the danger if you don’t is jealousy. And both are based on bad mistakes.

Pride is based on the mistake that the power is ours or that we in our own strength fulfilled the conditions to get it. But in fact the power is God’s, and if we fulfilled any conditions to get it—like faith or prayer or purity—it was not us but the grace of God in us (1 Corinthians 15:1). This is why a strong commitment to the sovereignty of grace is so crucial in this whole matter of power. Arminian theology, with its affirmation of man’s self-determination, is ill-equipped to protect us from the temptations of power. What we need in this matter are strong doses of conviction about the inability of sinful man and the all-sufficiency of sovereign grace. This is the antidote to pride.

And it’s the antidote to jealousy too. Jealousy is not just the passion to have the power that someone else has. In itself there may be nothing wrong with that—to want God’s power in your life that you see in the life of another. Jealousy is the anger and the resentment that they have it and you don’t. Jealousy doesn’t just want to have what another has; it wants them to not have it.

What is the root of this jealousy? Three things. First, lovelessness (1 Corinthians 13:4): if you love another person, you will rejoice if God gives them power, even if he doesn’t give it to you. Second, faithlessness: if you have faith in the sovereign grace of God to give power according to his own divine wisdom, then you will praise him for the times and ways of his outpouring, not question him and resent his choices. Again it is the strong dose of God’s sovereignty that would keep us back from the sin of jealousy. God knows what he is doing, and he is wise and good in giving the Spirit in power wherever he pleases. Faith may cry for it to come; but faith does not criticize God for when and where it comes.

But there is a third root of jealousy. Not just lovelessness and faithlessness, but also

false doctrine—false teaching. Take the Sadducees for example (here in v. 17). They would have said: “The issue is not love and faith, the issue is doctrine: these Christians are teaching the resurrection of Jesus and of his followers and this is false. There is no resurrection (Acts 23:6–8). The reason we are angry that these Christians are doing works of power is that they are deceiving the people to believe what is not true. There is no resurrection and these magic tricks (or whatever it is they are doing) are only leading the people astray.”

1.2. Accusations of False Doctrine

The second kind of suffering you will pay if God gives you spiritual power is accusations of false doctrine. You can see the reason the Sadducees are so worked up about the power of the Christians by looking at Acts 4:1–2: “The priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead.”

The Sadducees denied the resurrection of the dead (Acts 23:6–8). So when the Christians not only taught it, but did signs and wonders to back it up, you can imagine the opposition. This does not mean that charges of false doctrine are unimportant. It just means that even if your doctrine is right, you will probably be charged with false teaching, because this is one way of discrediting your experience of power. It is part of the price you will pay: jealousy and accusations of false doctrine.

1.3. Carnal Counter-Power

You will suffer what we can call carnal counter-power. I see this in the fact that they were thrown in jail. The high priest and the Sadducees did not use spiritual counter-power to demonstrate that God was truly on their side; they used carnal counter-power—the power of politics and the power of the sword. It may take all kinds of forms. Short of violence, the two most common forms are probably ostracism and slander. If I am threatened by another person’s experience of God’s power, and yet I have no true experience of that

power myself to counter with, one great temptation is to try to vindicate myself by holding the other person at a distance and slandering him with half-truths and exaggerations and innuendos and sarcasm and falsehoods.

So you can count on it: if the Spirit comes upon you, and you receive power to minister blessing and healing in these extraordinary ways, there will be a price to pay: the suffering of jealousy and accusations of false doctrine and carnal counter-power.

2. The Preciousness of Spiritual Power

But it will be worth it, because spiritual power not only has its price, it also has its preciousness.

Preciousness Not Solely Because of Deliverance

Here we could focus on the apostles' escape from prison in verse 19—the angel of the Lord lets them out during the night. But I don't want to focus on the preciousness of such wonderful deliverances by itself, because they are not promised for every trouble (cf. Luke 21:12–16), and we could fall into a triumphalist way of thinking about power that would be very harmful—in Acts 7:58 Stephen is stoned to death even though he is filled with the Spirit and spoke with power. In Acts 12:1 James, the apostle, is killed by Herod. No angel came to rescue them. It is precious when he comes. But it is also precious when he doesn't.

Precious Because It Is God's Power Not Ours

That's what I want you to see. The preciousness of spiritual power is that it is God's power and not ours. The preciousness of spiritual power is that it is finally in God's control, not ours. It comes—or does not come—according to God's sovereign will. The angel of the Lord came to rescue the apostles—this time. But he did not come for Stephen. He did not come for James. He came again and again for Paul and for Peter. But there were many times when he did not stop the beatings and lashings and stoning and shipwrecks. And there was one last time when he did not stop

the sword. The extraordinary spiritual power of God is precious because it is God's and it comes—or does not come—according to his free choice. It is a precious thing for such great power to be in the hands of an all-wise, loving God.

Giving Life and Living Life

When it comes and we are empowered to serve others, the purpose is that we give LIFE. And when it does not come and we are left in our suffering, the purpose is that we might live LIFE. Do you see this wonderful word LIFE in verse 20? “Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.” If you are delivered from distress by the power of God, the purpose of God is that you give life to other people—true life, eternal life, the forgiveness of sins and personal relationship with the ever-living God. And that is precious. It is a precious thing to be empowered to give life to others.

But if you are not delivered, if the angel does not come to open the door, what then? Well, then the time may have come to simply live the “Life.” There may be nobody else to give it to. The days of giving may be over. They will be over for each of us sooner or later. But this too is precious: When God withholds delivering power, he gives dying power.

Peter said, in his first letter, that when you suffer for the name of Christ, “the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you” (1 Peter 4:14). That's what happens to Stephen when he is stoned to death. No angel comes to rescue him. But Acts 7:55 says, “Full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.” When God withholds delivering power, he gives dying power. And that too is precious beyond words.

Jesus said in Luke 21, “They will lay their hands on you and deliver you to prisons . . . and some of you they will put to death . . . but not a hair of your head will perish” (vv. 12–18). Why? Because you will enter into Life. You will be raised with new resurrection bodies (no matter what the Sadducees say). In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

Humbly Seek the Power of the Holy Spirit

So I call you to humbly seek the fullness of the power of the Holy Spirit in your life. But do it with your eyes open. There will be a price: jealousy and accusation of false doctrine and carnal counter-power. But it will be worth it. Because the power of God is precious. It is a precious thing to know that the angel of the Lord comes—or does not come—according to the sovereign grace and wisdom of God. And if he comes, then we go on giving the Life of God to others. And if he does not, then we go on living that Life right into heaven as the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon us.

So with your eyes open to the price and the preciousness of spiritual power, I invite you to seek its fullness from the Lord.

July 5, 2015 Sermon Notes

Preacher:

Text:

Sermon Title:

Notes:

Prayer

WEEK 2

ACTS 24, PART 1

Day 1

Read Acts 23. If you were preparing in your mind your meeting with the governor, what would you plan on saying to him?

Questions: Acts 24:1-4

1. Acts 24:1. Describe the Jewish team sent to accuse Paul. What case do they bring against Paul?

a. What is the timing of events and what all took place? Acts 21:17, 21:27, 23:2, 23:24, 23:35, 24:11.

2. Acts 24:2-4. Who is Tertullus? Describe the court scene and how this hearing begins.

3. Was Tertullus accurate in his opening statement or just using flattering words for the governor? How would you have handled listening to this if you were Paul?

4. Describe a time when you were questioned about an action or situation in which you were involved. How did you feel and what did you turn to for strength?

“Lysias’ decision to send Paul to Caesarea under armed guard rescues him from the assassination plot but not from legal jeopardy, Paul’s case is transferred to the highest Roman official of the province, Governor Felix.” –R.C. Tannehill.

“This trial scene has a threefold purpose: Paul has the opportunity to defend himself against false charges before the highest authority in the province, to continue his defense of Christianity before Jewish opponents, and to bear witness to Christ before the governor, thus continuing to fulfill Jesus’ prophecy in Luke 21:12-13.” –David Peterson.

Luke 21:12-13

Colossians 4:2-4

Day 3

Read Acts 25. How is it possible to maintain peace in your heart when people charge you falsely?

Questions: Acts 24:10-13

1. Describe the difference in flavor between Paul's defense and the Jewish accusations?

2. Define "worship".
 - a. What are things that you tend to worship?

 - b. Philippians 3:3.

3. What does Paul say was his purpose in going to Jerusalem and why do you think this is important in Paul's opening defense?
 - a. What's the difference between Paul's worship and Jewish worship? Note the various uses of worship: Luke 4:7; 24:52; Acts 8:27.

4. Was the event in the temple in Jerusalem a recent event? How does this impact the validity of Paul's defense?

Romans 12:1-2

“Two theological themes are central to Acts 24: worship and saving faith. Worship terminology has not been widely employed by Luke in his second volume, and so the prominence of two key terms in Paul’s defense before Felix is noteworthy. Paul proclaims his continuing piety as a Jew when he speaks about going up ‘to worship’ in Jerusalem (v.11). He later explains that this involved the bringing of alms, the offering of sacrifices, and ritual purification (vv.17-18). However, using another term that is employed in Scripture for the service of God more widely (v.14), he describes his life and ministry as a Christian, ‘according to the Way’. This worship involves a belief structure that is wholly biblical but specifically focused on the hope of a general resurrection from the dead and daily expressed in seeking to have a clear conscience ‘before God and all people’ (vv.15-16). Thus Paul defends his way of worship as authentically Jewish, at the same time identifying implicitly with the Pharisaic interpretation of Scripture in terms of fundamental beliefs (cf. 23:6-9).”
—David Peterson.

**10,000
Reasons:
Worship in
the Good
and Bad**

David Mathis

I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. (Philippians 4:12)

He is not just the God of our good times. He is the God of all times. Which means he's also the God of our worst times.

He is not just God when we abound, as Paul writes in Philippians 4:12, but also when we are brought low. He is God when we have plenty to eat and when we experience hunger. He is God in our abundance and God in our need. He is God in any and every circumstance, and this is wonderfully good news — because life is so much more than just the good times.

Even and Especially the Bad Things

When Paul says in Romans 8:28 that “for those who love God, all things work together for good,” his point is not to persuade us that all the good things in our lives work for our good. We already believe that. It's easy to imagine that the good things work for good.

The point is that even and especially “the bad things” in our lives, and our hardest of times, are being worked for our eternal good by our almighty and merciful Father.

To make sure we get the point, the next few verses list some of the worst possible things: tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword (Romans 8:35), even being put to death for the faith (Romans 8:36). Will these bad things, the greatest difficulties, the worst sufferings ultimately bring us down and work for our bad? “No,” he says, “in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us” (Romans 8:37).

The Most Meaningful Moments

It is true that the good times in life are for singing, “Bless the Lord, O my soul.” God means for us to worship his holy name when life is good, when the sun comes up, when a new day dawns. He wants us to sing in gratitude and praise when all is well and when it's easy to see his kindness and love and patience and goodness. In the best of

times, yes, we should be on the lookout for some of the ten thousand reasons we have for praising him.

But the times that we truly sing like never before are when the “whatever may pass” is hardest, and the “whatever lies before me” is most difficult. It's in life's toughest seasons, as we feel life's greatest losses, that we learn to worship at new depths and with thicker, richer substance.

“The times we truly sing like never before are the days when life is most difficult.”

Life's most meaningful moments and the seasons of most soul-stirring worship typically come not when life feels at its peak, but when our strength is failing, even when our end, or the end of a loved one, is drawing near. These are the times when we discover like never before that God truly is with us and transcends the blessings of this life and really is all we need.

We may have ten thousand reasons to praise him in the best times, but this one reason can suffice in the worst times: He is God. And no matter what else we lose, nothing can separate us from him.

I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38–39)

July 12, 2015 Sermon Notes

Preacher:

Text:

Sermon Title:

Notes:

Prayer

WEEK 3

ACTS 24, PART 2

1 Peter 1:10-12

Day 2

Reviewing Jesus' trial. Read Luke 23. Describe Jesus' arrest and trial.

Questions: Acts 24:22-23

1. What is Felix's perspective on Paul and how does he treat Paul? Would you have guessed this result of the trial?
2. How do you think the Jews handled this result?
3. What does this tell us about the progress of the Way?
4. Explain the difference between knowledge, understanding, and wisdom.

“Assignment of Paul to the personal care of the centurion, rather than to a lower ranking soldier, was probably not so much a token of the higher esteem in which Paul was held by Felix as an indication that Felix wished Paul to be healthily preserved for the longer term from the predictable vagaries of military custody in the hope of exploiting him to his own political and monetary advantage. The freedom allowed probably meant that, while guarded, Paul would not be dependent upon his keepers to sanction his every activity. There would be no oppressively close guarding. But he remained in chains (26:29), probably in Herod's place, where he was removed from the possibility of attack from his accusers. This protective custody allowed the access of family and friends, which may have included his relatives, but certainly fellow Christians, to bring food and other practical comforts. Perhaps also they were able to convey letters from Paul to churches and individuals with whom he was connected. Some have suggested that Colossians, Ephesians, Philemon, Philippians, and 2 Timothy could have been written from Caesarea. Such imprisonment was not for punishment but a means of keeping people available for trial or for actual punishment.” –David Peterson.

Colossians 1:24-29

Day 3

Reviewing Jesus' trial. Read Luke 24. What happens to Jesus as a result of his trial? What was unfair about the trial?

Questions: Acts 24:24-27

1. Why do you think Luke notes that Felix's wife came with him?
 - a. What happens between them and Paul?

2. What topics does Paul address with Felix and why do you think Paul chose these?
 - a. Righteousness: 2 Corinthians 5:21

 - b. Self-Control: What does Solomon mean in his metaphor in Proverbs 25:28 to explain self-control?

 - c. Judgment: Revelation 14:6-7.

3. What does it mean that Felix was alarmed? What else do we learn about Felix's feelings toward Paul?

Acts 17:2

Note the various passages that speak of Paul “reasoning”. Acts 17:2, 17:17, 18:4, 18:19, 24:25.

What do you think it looked like for Paul to reason with people? In what ways have you, do you, or could you reason with people regarding faith-related matters?

Lindsey's Story

I grew up in a Christian home in Apple Valley, MN. My parents were very involved in our wonderful home church and worked hard to teach my sisters and me to value the Scriptures and to obey God. From an early age I was a perfectionist and a performance addict. I remember winning trophies for Scripture memory contests in Sunday school and caring a lot more about the win than the truth of the Scripture that I had memorized.

This addiction to performance and the approval of others carried on through high school where I excelled in many sports and musical activities. I quickly became addicted to the compliments I'd receive on my athleticism and success and eventually it became my only source of happiness.

Although I thought I was a good Christian (because I hadn't murdered anyone and didn't smoke cigarettes) I was actually quite miserable in my pitiful self-obsessed life. I didn't understand that this "Jesus guy" actu-

ally wanted to own my life and set me free. I just thought he wanted me to be awesome at everything (which I was, just look at all my trophies).

Through a miraculous work of God, I ended up playing soccer for the University of Minnesota. Soccer was never my plan, but it turns out God's plans always win, and so, there I was, lacing up my cleats every day out at the stadium in August of 2004. For the first time in my life I was not the best player on the team. I was, in fact, the very worst.

The shame and frustration that followed nearly sunk me. Nobody cared how fast and strong I was anymore because there were 24 other girls that were also fast and strong. No more compliments meant no more happiness for me. Then one day in September, just a few weeks in to my freshman season, a large gust of wind came out of nowhere and knocked the soccer goal down right on top of me. It is by the grace of God that I am not in a wheelchair today. It was his mercy that only my right ankle was destroyed and my fibula was broken. At this point not only was I just not the best person on the team anymore but I literally could not walk.

Welcome to rock bottom.

Right around the time school started that fall, I had met some staff members from Campus Outreach. Because I was such a “good Christian” I made sure to sign up for every Bible study I could find because that’s what “good Christians” do, right? Although I started hanging out with these staff people to make sure I was still a good person, Samm Po-teat and Lisa Reagan were so kind and patient with me, and slowly started explaining that sin is much more than just smoking and murder.

Their gracious mix of truthful and loving conversations with me started to get me thinking, and the Lord started working.

All of my joy had just been literally broken, and Samm and Lisa were telling me that I was a sinner that needed a savior. Through the study of Romans 6:23 and Ephesians 2, I realized I was a very messy sinner that was deserving of punishment for my gross thoughts and self-centered life. I was not able to do anything to change myself. I was a doomed sinner.

But the second half of that verse in Romans and the chapter from Ephesians are so glorious! Jesus saves sinners! God opened my

eyes for the first time to see him as the only source of true joy (that can't be stolen by a windy day).

Since 2004 I have been hobbling along the path of obedience to the Lord. My perspective of my role on the soccer team and as a person walking this earth has been turned upside down. This life is short. Jesus is amazing and entirely worth our trust. He has led me through some amazing places and some incredibly hard places as well. I've learned that sometimes the King keeps his best wine in the cellar. He knows what he is doing and in all circumstances is entirely worthy of our trust. He loves us very much. He sent his amazing Son Jesus here to earth to prove it, and I want my life to be wrung out for the advancement of that incredible story.

July 19, 2015 Sermon Notes

Preacher:

Text:

Sermon Title:

Notes:

Prayer

WEEK 4

ACTS 25

Day 1

Read Acts 25. Pick one verse that sticks out to you and explain how it impacted you.

Questions: Acts 25:1-12

1. Acts 25: 1-3. How far is Jerusalem from Caesarea? What are the Jewish leaders up to?

2. Acts 25:4-5. Do you like Festus and why?

3. Acts 25:6-9. What are the serious charges that they brought against Paul? What aspects of the gospel made these Jews so upset?
 - a. What aspects of the gospel do people typically dislike the most? 1 Corinthians 2:14-16.

 - b. If/when a Christian applies the gospel to your life, how would you like to respond?

4. Acts 25:10-12. When Paul seeks to get a fair trial, stay away from Jerusalem, and win his case, is this an act of trusting God or a matter of Paul controlling things, or both? Explain.

“According to Josephus, Felix was recalled to Rome in order to explain his savage suppression of a dispute between Jews and Syrians over their respective civil rights in Caesarea, and would have been severely punished but for his brother Pallas’ appeal to Nero. Not much is known about Porcius Festus, who replaced him, for he died in office only two years later. But he seems to have been more just and moderate than either his predecessor or his successors.” –John Stott.

Romans 13:1-2

Day 2

Review the Ethiopian eunuch's conversion. Read Acts 8.

Questions: Acts 25:13-22

1. Acts 25:13-15. Define condemnation. How is it used in this passage?
 - a. Romans 5:15-17. What do we learn about condemnation and righteousness in this passage?
 - b. Luke 12:4-7. Which condemnation should you fear, that from people, or that from God?
2. Acts 25:16-19. Who were the accusers and what was the real issue between them and Paul? Was Paul the issue or was Jesus the issue?
 - a. Should we take it personally if someone rejects us because of our explaining who Jesus is and why he came? Explain how this situation paralyzes us from talking about Jesus.
3. 1 Peter 2:13-17. How does Peter exhort us to live in society?

“The new procurator [Festus] lost no time in acquainting himself with Jewish affairs, including the case against Paul.” –John Stott

Romans 13:3-4

Day 3

Review Paul's conversion. Read Acts 9.

Questions: Acts 25:23-27

1. Acts 25:23. What is pomp and why do people like it?
 - a. What is one thing during your typical day that you want pomp for?
 - b. How can the gospel free you from needing that?
 - c. What would it look like if you gave that "need" to Jesus, how would your day change?

2. Acts 25:24-27. In principle, do you agree with the death penalty? Why or why not? What types of events/actions warrant the death penalty in your opinion? Did Paul qualify for the death penalty? How did the Jewish leaders justify wanting Paul dead?

"Paul asserts that he has neither acted contrary to the law of the Jews or of Caesar nor desecrated the temple. When Festus asks him whether he is willing to stand trial in Jerusalem, Paul reminds the governor that he ought to be tried in a Roman court. Defending his rights, Paul appeals to Caesar. Festus declares that Paul will go to Caesar." –Simon Kistemaker.

Romans 13:5-7

**THE
B-I-B-L-E —
YES THAT'S
THE BOOK
FOR US!**

Samm Poteat

What if we could be getting more out of our time studying the Word? What if we could benefit increasingly all week from truth that we heard preached the previous weekend?

I think that it is important to consider, that while God's Word is very clear about the value of our individual pursuit of knowing his truth (Psalm 1; Psalm 119), we can often miss the vital component of our corporate understanding and interaction over his Scriptures on a daily basis. *Our pursuit and experience of intimacy with the Lord does not terminate on us as individuals.*

In Colossians 3:16, Paul tells us to, "Let the word of Christ *dwell in you richly*, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God." It is clear that he is appealing to the Colossians to live out their understanding of the word for the benefit of the whole Body. My desire is that we would understand and battle three dangers that can keep us — his Church — from experiencing this wealth. We need to guard against a faulty value, a faulty practice, and a faulty heart.

Working against our spiritual health at points, is the faulty value of American Individualism. This is obviously more of a temptation in our present day than it was in the heavily family and community-based culture of the Old Testament. Our technology as well as the industrial revolution have allowed an independence from others that contributes to a silo effect, where we don't rely on others at all, much less evaluate our walks with God by how much we love the people around us.

For most of Christian history, one's walk with the Lord depended on other people. God's word was taken in at communal readings where it could be memorized and discussed for the rest of the week until another opportunity for a community-audible deposit. The printing press just came into existence a little over 500 years ago, and it took years and years after that before you wouldn't be burned at the stake for having a copy of it. In the United States, our great grandparents likely heard Scripture only as someone read from the Family Bible. Having individual copies of the Bible is something of a novelty.

Privacy has sadly become one of the

highest values of us Americans. One poll, revealed that we were almost twice as concerned about our privacy as we are about meeting other people's needs. Can you imagine someone asking to see your personal budget? Your hour-by-hour weekly schedule? Your text messages? In some aspects, we swim in a world that is a far cry from what God's people experienced in Acts, where they had everything in common.

As Christians today, I think that we are more influenced than we know by this faulty value system where privacy is an unquestionable right, self-reliance is a *primary* ingredient of plans for spiritual growth, and an independence that says that my walk with the Lord is entirely up to me, and my personal time in the word is my proving ground. Living as such goes against the grain of interdependence to which God calls us in the Body of Christ (Proverbs 18:1).

Deference and teamwork are in his very nature. God the Father has never worked alone without God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. He has lived in community with himself forever, and we were created in his image to do the same, for our joy and his glory.

Individualism shows up when I hear about someone else's experience or insight in God's Word, and rather than being built up by hearing it, or rejoicing in their spiritual health, an individualistic impulse can twist the moment into an opportunity for envy, competition and a move toward self reliance. How different from the picture that God holds out to us of how his Body was meant to work together. Ephesians 4:15-16 "Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ from whom the whole body joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped when each part is working properly makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love." Each part of this body has an effect on the rest, so that when we are working properly, the whole, the other parts get built up, *in love!*

Isn't this a beautiful concept?! Your joy is my joy, your success is my success, your weeping is my weeping, your growth is my growth, your insights and revelations benefit and delight me to my core. Our Bible intake

is very much a personal affair, but God did not intend for it to be private. He gives gifts through his Word that they might be shared, and not only in a teaching setting, but as we walk along the road, and sit at the table, and watch our kids play at the park, and carpool.

I think that we also battle the faulty practice of Compartmentalization. This is the idea that what I learn in my personal time with the Lord stays there. Then, I am off to work, or school, or to a party. That part of my day is done, now on to the next thing. I don't think that this temptation is unique to our culture. I think we see it in OT Israel as well.

The book of Numbers explains to the Israelites that their life needs to be centered around the fact that God's presence must be with them. The very place where they pitched their tent was always defined by their relationship to the Holy of Holies where God's presence dwelled and their sacrifices were regularly brought. God designed and urged for them to let his truth and presence infiltrate even the ordinary aspects of life. Deuteronomy 6:6 "And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes."

Life was about to get crazier for the Israelites leaving the wilderness. Per their grumbling, I doubt that they would have guessed that things could possibly get worse. Surrounded by enemies, experiencing loss. Life unsettled, in constant transition, with unfulfilled longing for home and peace. So what does God call his people to do in preparation? Talk about how to love him with all your heart and mind and strength in regular conversation throughout everyday life. Isn't the everyday life when it can be the most difficult and revealing of our need for God's truth?

You especially know this if you are parents. Deuteronomy might as well be telling me to talk about his commands as I drive. "Mommy, why are you growling at that car?" When we have met with the Lord in personal Bible study it was just the beginning of our

experiencing personal worship. If you pay attention, there will be many opportunities to speak of it as you sit in your house, and walk by the way to work, or on a morning run with a friend, when you lie down with a roommate or spouse, or on nights when your husband is gone and your kids get to sleep with mommy.

I love looking at the moon with my daughters. *God sees the moon and God sees me; God made the moon and God made me. God made everything and he said that it was good. You know what, else? God's word says that he rejoices over us with singing. What do you think that means? It's just like how daddy makes up songs about you. Go to bed thinking about that, little one (and mommy).*

Let's fight compartmentalization in our lives, so that our experience of tasting the honey of God's word would not be isolated to a 30-minute event. Throughout the day, invite others to savor it with us, and find out what has been on their tongue lately.

Our faulty hearts can offer problems, as well. In particular, insecurity presents itself, questioning whether or not one has anything to offer. Hindered by uncertainty and fear, we may doubt the benefit of entering into a conversation regarding what we or someone else has studied. From my own experience in college ministry, I have pursued conversations with women almost half my age, and I know that they can often quake at the idea of meeting with me. However, I have found that some of my sweetest and most memorable times engaging God's word have been in these conversations where I am invited to look at familiar texts with their fresh questions and young eyes that see from a different season of life. 1 Corinthians 12, "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable." Youth and lack of experience and knowledge can make one *seem* to be weaker. We are wise to understand God's word urging us that we need these weaker members. And those who feel weaker can be empowered to know that God deems them indispensable. Wow.

Now that we understand some of our enemies, how do we overcome these barriers to attaining a richer indwelling of the Word?

We can start by evaluating the culture that we are in. Think about the relationships around you. Is it normal or awkward to talk to each other about what you have been reading in the Bible? We do this with every other passion in our life. We can't stop talking about restaurants that we love, recipes we've tried, movies we've watched. Are you learning regularly from people around you from what they are studying in the Bible? Are we having conversations that contribute to our being upbuilt? Do you and your spouse talk about what God is teaching you, what you have been delighting in, and where God has been graciously pressing in on your heart and sin? Ask God right now to give you eyes to see one relationship in which you can take a step forward in letting the Word of Christ dwell richly among you. Ask a friend if you can study the Bible together. One-on-one Bible study is a great tool.

If these questions lead you to feel discouraged, take heart! God always leaves us with great hope for change, as his Spirit loves the health of his people. More than that, he has taken care of our failures to let the Word of Christ dwell richly among us. Jesus didn't just die for our lies, our lust, our lovelessness. He died for our independence, our compartmentalization, our insecurities and misplaced longings. Good news for the weak and weary sinners.

What can we look forward to, as we pursue Word-filled life in the Body of Christ? Our daily worship will be more full; thankfulness will increase. Help will be ours for the daily grind, as we become salted by God's truth in the life of others. The truths that we have encountered will be moved deeper into our hearts as we marinate in them by talking about it throughout the day, and our understanding broadened when we add to our own insights the insights of others from different life stages and walks of life. Our spiritual armor is reinforced for the day ahead, as we remember together what we have learned, and supplemented it with what others have learned.

What wealth is within arms reach! Let us disarm those things which would keep us from drinking more deeply and more often, and lean into the integrated blessing of the brothers and sisters around us. More *Us*. More joy.

July 26, 2015 Sermon Notes

Preacher:

Text:

Sermon Title:

Notes:

Prayer

WEEK 5

ACTS 21-25

Day 1

Read and review Acts 21. Why did Paul get arrested? Was this a legitimate crime and deserving of imprisonment?

Questions re: Community:

1. 2 John 1:4-6. What does it mean to walk in loving one another? See also John 14:15, 21; 15:10; 1 John 5:2-3; Matthew 22:40

“It is plain that love is expressed in obedience. If we love God or Christ, we shall show it by keeping his commands. If we love our neighbor, we shall do the same, for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. But what is the law? It is to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. So law and love are not incompatible; on the contrary, each involves the other.” –John Stott.

2. 1 Peter 1:22-25. What reasons does Peter give for loving one another?

3. James 5:7-11. What does it look like when you grumble against one another? Try to describe some differences between sharing, venting, grumbling, and complaining. Which can be ok and which can be sinful?

“The word grumble or groan is usually used absolutely; only here in biblical Greek does it have an object (against one another). The meaning may be that believers should not grumble to others about their difficulties, or that believers should not blame others for their difficulties. It is entirely possible, however, that both ideas are involved.” –Douglas Moo.

4. Hebrews 3:12-14. What does this passage tell us about community living, and what is a specific way you want to focus on this verse in your every day life?

Romans 13:8

Day 2

Read and review Acts 22. What Jesus mean when he told Saul, “I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting”? What did Jesus mean that he was being persecuted?

Read and review Acts 23. What is an “oath”? Have you ever taken an oath before?

Questions re: Community:

1. James 5:16. What does it look like to confess your sins to each other?

“As a consequence of the promise that God responds to prayer and forgives sin, believers should be committed to confessing their sins to one another and praying for one another. Mutual confession of sins, which James encourages as a habitual practice, is greatly beneficial to the spiritual vitality of a church.” –Douglas Moo.

2. 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13. What is Paul’s prayer for the community?

3. Colossians 3:5-11. In what ways has your sin impacted others in your community?

4. Colossians 3:12-17. What is one way you’d like to grow in your serving others in your community?

Ephesians 4:1-3

Day 3

Read and review Acts 24. How do you think Paul's evangelistic efforts with Felix went?

Read and review Acts 25. Do you think Paul was ever angry with God for bringing him to imprisonment since calling him to Macedonia (Acts 16:6-10)? God calls Paul to Macedonia and he ends up imprisoned. How can God be good and allow this?

Questions re: Community:

1. John 4:31-38. In what ways is this passage a good encouragement/model for community groups?
2. John 13:14. What does Jesus mean? What are the implications of this for your community group?
3. John 13:31-35. What command is Jesus giving to your community group?
4. John 15:12-17. What do we learn is a purpose of Jesus' commands? And what do we learn about love for one another?

Romans 12:3-8

Danny's Story

When I was 10 years old, I spoke at my grandfather's funeral. I spent the entire speech trying to explain how much I loved my grandfather and how confused I was that he was, all of a sudden, gone. When I was in 7th grade, I started drinking and doing drugs because I was struggling with severe depression. I couldn't find meaning or purpose, which drove me to drink more. By the time I reached high school, I had been to 4 different counselors trying to answer the same exact questions.

Why am I here?

Why was I born into this world?

I write these things not so that people feel bad for me. I write these things because God put these things on my heart from a very young age. Becoming a Christian for me was not easy. It took tears, death, and redemption.

I grew up in a culturally Jewish home, which basically meant that we celebrated the major holidays and enjoyed matzo ball soup

about once a month. I had no idea what it meant to be Jewish in the Old Testament way.

My first day of college I met a guy named Paul Poteat, who left a note on my desk wondering if I wanted to grab something to eat sometime. For the next four school years, God used Paul to answer every question I could possibly think of. Paul provided answers to the questions I had been asking since I was a kid. He told me about Jesus and sin and why and how Jesus could heal my fractured and sinful heart, mind, and soul.

God continued to surround me with Christians. In the best way possible, I couldn't get away from them. But, like Pharaoh of the Egyptians before me, my heart would not soften towards God and the gospel.

The summer going into my senior year of college, I began dating my wife, Stephanie, who was a Christian at the time — I was not a Christian at this point (note: we don't encourage this). Once again, God used another person in my life as a reflection tool to point to him. There were three different ways in which Stephanie challenged my sinful heart where no one else could. First, I was interested in her and I couldn't figure out why she actually

believed. Second, she started bringing me to church and I went (see the interested part in number one). Third, she was sure that I would become a Christian.

I cannot tell you when I actually became a Christian, but Stephanie and I both remember a point in time when we were washing dishes during our senior years of college and I turned to her and said, “You know, I might actually be starting to believe this Christianity thing.” She just looked at me, smiled, and continued drying the dishes.

From there, my heart exploded with love for God and his story of redemption in his Son. I devoured C.S. Lewis books, mourned over my family not being believers, and told many of my bewildered friends about God’s love.

Now I realize that everything in my life was and is preparing me to be more like Christ. I see my sin on a daily basis, I repent, and continue to believe that the God of the universe sent his Son into this world to die and rise again for our sins. As I grow in my faith, I continue to see my depravity and just how little I have to offer God, which drives me to be amazed by the love of Jesus.

This C.S. Lewis quote says it best:

“Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of – throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.” (Mere Christianity)

August 2, 2015 Sermon Notes

Preacher:

Text:

Sermon Title:

Notes:

Prayer

WEEK 6

ACTS 26

Day 1

Read Acts 25. What events lead Paul to have to come before Agrippa and Bernice? What is significant about Paul having to face Agrippa instead of transitioning from Festus directly to Caesar?

Questions: Acts 26:1-11

1. Acts 26:4-5. Describe Paul's manner of life before he got saved?
2. "Manner of life" – In Paul's letter to the Philippians, what do you think he means when he writes in 1:27 "only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ"?
3. Acts 26:8. How would you answer Paul's question?
4. Acts 26:9-11. Contrast Paul's life before conversion with after conversion. (Phil. 2:17)

"Paul's trial before Agrippa is the longest and most elaborate of the five. Luke sketches the scene with graphic detail, and Paul's defense speech is more polished in structure and language than the others. One wonders if Luke was present in the visitor's gallery. Otherwise Paul (or somebody else) must have rehearsed it all to him later, although Luke may also have had access to the official documentation of the case." –John Stott.

Philippians 3:2-6

Day 2

Read Acts 26. How do you think Paul did in his witness to the king and the people?

Questions: Acts 26:12-23

1. Compare Acts 26:12-18 with Acts 9:1-19. What differences do you find in the Acts 26 account and why?
 - a. John 9. What happens in this story that helps us understand the metaphor of “seeing”? What is the point of John 9?
 - b. Luke 11:33-36. How does this passage help guide you in what it means to turn from darkness to light?
2. Acts 26:17-18. What is Paul’s mission and what is the purpose?
 - a. John 9. What happens in this story that helps us understand the metaphor of “seeing”? What is the point of John 9?
 - b. Luke 11:33-36. How does this passage help guide you in what it means to turn from darkness to light?
3. Acts 26:19-23. What did the prophets and Moses say about Jesus? Can you think of one example from the OT that does this?

“Agrippa II was the grandson of Herod the Great. The son of Herod the Great was the one who had had Peter arrested and James executed. He died in AD44, and at the time of his death his son Agrippa II was only seventeen years old, and Rome did not think it appropriate to transfer to him the authority of his father. For a period of six years or so, the authority in that Jewish region was placed under a Roman procurator. Later on, when Agrippa II was twenty-three, Claudius appointed him as king over this Jewish region, although with not as much territory as his father had governed. A little later, Claudius enlarged his region, and even after Claudius was gone, the new emperor, Nero, gave even greater authority to Agrippa II, who came on the scene in AD50 and lived until almost the end of the century.” –R.C. Sproul.

Philippians 3:7-11

Day 3

Read Acts 26:24-27:44. Map out where Paul all went and who is mentioned in the story.

Questions: Acts 26:24-32

1. Acts 26:24. What is Festus' perception of Paul and why did he draw those conclusions?
2. Acts 26:25-26. How does Paul handle interacting with both Festus and Agrippa?
3. Acts 26:27-29. How would you rate Paul's witness to the people?
4. Acts 26:30-32. What's the verdict? How does this verdict help you have confidence to share Jesus with your neighbors?

“Bernice was Agrippa II's sister. Her first marriage had been to her uncle, and when he died she came to live with her brother in an incestuous relationship. That was interrupted briefly when she married another man for a short time and then left him and came back to Agrippa II. Together with her brother, she pleaded with the Jews not to be involved with a rebellion against the Romans in the year AD66, but their pleas fell on deaf ears. The Jews revolted. The Romans came in to conquer the land, which culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem under Titus in AD70. Later, Titus succeeded his father as the emperor of Rome. Bernice left her brother again later and became the mistress of Titus, the general who led the expedition against Jerusalem, but Titus finally decided not to marry her; he did not think that the marriage would go over well with his constituents back in Rome. Historians say that Herod Agrippa II was not as cruel or as violent as his father and grandfather, but he was not a paragon of virtue from a moral standpoint.” –R.C. Sproul.

Philippians 3:12-16

In, But Not Of

David Mathis

“*In, but not of*” — if you’ve spent much time in Christian circles, you’re probably familiar with this slogan. *In the world, but not of the world.* It captures a truth about Jesus’s followers. There’s a real sense in which we are “in” this world, but not “of” it.

In, but not of. Yes, yes, of course.

But might this punchy phrase be giving the wrong impression about our (co)mission in this world as Christians? The motto could seem to give the drift, *We are in this world, alas, but what we really need to do is make sure that we’re not of it.*

In this way of configuring things, the starting place is our unfortunate condition of being “in” this world. *Sigh.* And our mission, it appears, is to not be “of” it. So the force is moving away from the world. “Rats, we’re frustratingly stuck *in* this ole world, but let’s marshal our best energies to not be *of* it.” No doubt, it’s an emphasis that’s sometimes needed, but isn’t something essential being downplayed?

We do well to run stuff like this through biblical texts. And on this one in particular, we do well to turn to John 17, where Jesus uses these precise categories of “in the world” and “not of the world.” Let’s look for Jesus’s perspective on this.

Not of This World

On the eve of his crucifixion, Jesus prays to his Father in John 17:14–19,

I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.

Notice Jesus’ references to his disciples being “not of the world.” Verse 14: “The world has hated them because they are *not of the world*, just as I am *not of the world*.” And there it is again in verse 16: “They are *not of the world*, just as I am *not of the world*.”

Let’s all agree it’s clear that Jesus does

not want his followers to be “of the world.” Amen. He says that he himself is “not of the world,” and his disciples are “not of the world.” Here’s a good impulse in the slogan “*in, but not of.*”

It’s Going Somewhere

But notice that for Jesus being “not of the world” isn’t the destination in these verses but the starting place. It’s not where things are moving toward, but what they’re moving from. He is not of the world, and he begins by saying that his followers are not of the world. But it’s going somewhere. Jesus is not huddling up the team for another round of kumbaya, but so that we can run the next play and advance the ball down the field.

Enter verse 18: “As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.” And don’t miss the surprising prayer of verse 15: “I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.”

Sent into This World

Jesus is not asking his Father for his disciples to be taken out of the world, but he is praying for them as they are “sent into” the world. He begins with them being “not of the world” and prays for them as they are “sent into” the world.

So maybe it would serve us better — at least in light of John 17 — to revise the popular phrase “*in, but not of*” in this way: “*not of, but sent into.*” The beginning place is being “not of the world,” and the movement is toward being “sent into” the world. The accent falls on being sent, with a mission, to the world — not being mainly on a mission to disassociate from this world.

Crucified to the World — And Raised to It

Jesus’s assumption in John 17 is that those who have embraced him, and identified with him, are indeed not of the world. And now his summons is our sending — we are sent into the world on mission for gospel advance through discipling.

Jesus’s true followers have not only been crucified to the world, but also raised to new

life and sent back in to free others. We've been rescued from the darkness and given the Light not merely to flee the darkness, but to guide our steps as we go back in to rescue others.

So let's revise the popular phrase "in, but not of." Christians are not of this world, but sent into it. *Not of, but sent into.*

August 9, 2015 Sermon Notes

Preacher:

Text:

Sermon Title:

Notes:

Prayer

WEEK 7

ACTS 27

Day 1

Read Acts 26:1-27:20. Note the use of “boldly” in 26:26. What do you know about this term as it’s used in the book of Acts? How it is used here?

Questions: Acts 27:1-20

1. 27:1-8. Who are the people on the ship with Paul? What type of people are they? What do you think it was like for Paul on this ship?

2. 27:9-12. Why do you think Paul says there will be injuries and loss?

3. 27:13-19. What does it mean to jettison the cargo? Why were they doing this?
 - a. Have you ever been in a similar desperate situation because of some natural disaster? How did you feel? How did you handle it?

4. 27:20-21. What did it mean for these people that all hope of being saved was abandoned?
 - a. 2 Corinthians 11:24-29. Describe Paul’s experience in dealing with hard situations. See Philippians 4:11-12. How was Paul content while his ship was going down?

“The final chapters of Acts provide further reflections on Paul’s relations to both Jews and Gentiles. The problem of the Jews receives the climactic position as the final major scene. The voyage indicates that the narrator is also reflecting on Paul’s relation to the larger gentile world unaffected by Judaism. Both aspects of the narrative suggest the situation that Paul will leave behind.” –David Peterson.

Matthew 8:23-27

Day 2

Read Acts 27. How does Paul handle adversity? Is he just awesome, or does Paul have some insight or wisdom into how this all works in life? How do you handle adversity?

Questions: Acts 27:21-38

1. Acts 27:26. Describe what you see/learn from Paul's contrast as denoted with "but".
2. Acts 27:27-32. Describe the various interactions that transpire between Paul, the sailors, and the soldiers. What all takes place and why did Luke include these details?
3. Acts 27:33-34. Describe Paul's concern and care for the Gentiles. Note the contrast in Paul's character from his days as a Jewish Pharisee to this point.
4. Acts 27:35-38. Write out the gospel message Paul may have used in this scenario of breaking bread and giving thanks with this crowd of people?

"One of the most remarkable sections of the New Testament is Acts 27. Luke was not a professional mariner or a member of the royal navy, yet historians have said that Acts 27 contains a masterful presentation of what took place in tempests on the Mediterranean Sea in the ancient world of shipping. Luke's account outdoes the graphic descriptions of Homer in the Odyssey and even the book of Jonah in the Old Testament. Indeed, the trip is described from a laypersons' point of view but with amazing accuracy concerning the exact techniques that were used by sailors to guard against shipwreck." –R.C. Sproul.

Psalm 23:4

Day 3

Read Acts 27:39-28:30. Have you ever encountered a change of impression as drastic and rapid as the change of the native people of Malta toward Paul? What's your thought on how the book of Acts ends? Is this what you expected?

Questions: Acts 27:39-44

1. Describe the scene. What transpires for Paul?

2. Describe how God is at work to get Paul to Rome.

3. Describe an event in the past few days where God intervened with someone that changed up your plans. What do you think God was up to?

4. James 4:13-17. How does this passage help shape the way we ought to think about daily life and our plans?
 - a. In what ways can you connect this passage to Paul's situation on the ship?

“The centurion’s trust in Paul and his admiration for him seem to have developed during the journey... Indeed, all the prisoners were preserved because the centurion wished to save Paul, and so he ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and get to land. The rest were to get there on planks or on pieces of the ship. This part of Luke’s travel narrative finishes with a further reference to salvation: In this way everyone reached land safely. The theme is immediately picked up again in the following section (28:1,4). As noted previously, with this word usage (vv. 20,31,34) Luke wants to convey the idea that God saved Paul and all who were with him from perishing, in fulfillment of the promise given in v.24. In various ways, the whole narrative (27:1-28:16) points to God as Creator and Savior, and to Paul as his prophet or representative.” –David Peterson.

Proverbs 19:20-23

A Storyline for the Battle Lines

Jonathan Parnell

Fight your sin with a storyline. I mean *right now*. Life is war, *everyday*. Submerged temptations lie waiting for you just out of sight. Insidious sirens are faintly wooing your way, beckoning you to cruise their waters. You will hear their calls soon enough. And this is a plea to steer clear of them from the helm of a story — your story.

I say “your story,” but I mean God’s *doing*, as we see it in *his* Book.

All About Action

The Bible is no mere moral code or a set of principles (though it does include these). It’s neither a textbook, nor mainly a philosophy for life. Instead, the Bible is a “transcript” of God’s action in the world, all centered on Jesus Christ, who is the apex of his glory.

The Bible is the dramatic script of *God’s doing*. It tells God’s authoritative story, which we read as audience, and in which we participate as characters. God has been at work from the beginning, and *he is* at work today, in our day.

When we have this kind of vision — when we know what God is doing in Scripture and in the pages of our lives — it exposes the turmoil of temptation and the sinking-ship mess of sin. When we see what has really happened, and what is really happening, the storyline of our identity is put to work on the battle lines of our holiness. That is the tactic Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 6.

See It Clear

The church in Corinth hadn’t been seeing things rightly. That’s the occasion of Paul’s writing. What we read in the sixth chapter is an inspired address to their problem, and oftentimes, our own. Paul hammers out one truth after another in the form of chiding questions — “Do you not know... Do you not know... Do you not know?” — all leading up to verse 9 where he gets very basic: “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?”

That’s not rocket-science. Anyone with the smallest measure of biblical acumen knows this. Whether their background is corroded with paganism or saturated with the Hebrew Scriptures, they should know

that unrighteous creatures are not awarded the nearness of a righteous God.

But Paul continues. He wants the Corinthian Christians to get this sure, to see through the fog. “Do not be deceived,” he tells them. In other words, *let me spell this out*. “Neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Corinthians 6:9–10).

Then he reminds them: “And such were some of you.”

Here’s Your Story

Paul has detailed what unrighteousness looks like. He has been explicit on who will be left out of the kingdom. And then he tells them: *This is who you used to be*. But not anymore. *You were washed*, he says — “You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Corinthians 6:11).

Do you see what Paul is doing?

He gives them a story — their story. *Their story, but God’s doing*. They hadn’t been living right. They were surrounded by temptation. They were waning in holiness. And the apostle Paul clears the clutter by appealing to their personal narrative. *These divisions among you, the boasting, the sexual immorality, the compromise, the lawsuits — that’s not your story. God has rescued you. Now, you are clean. You are set apart. You are declared righteous*.

He reminds them who they are — what God has done — and he tells them to live in this reality, which is precisely where he continues in verses 12–20 with three more “do you not know” statements (1 Corinthians 6:15, 16, 17).

Drawn into the Doing

God has acted in this world. In the fullness of time, he sent his Son to save a people for himself — a people he chose in the Son before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless. But they were a people lost and fallen, a people in need of redemption. And so Jesus came to walk the way they

couldn't. He persevered in faithfulness at every angle. He lived as the perfect, better Adam, to become a slaughtered, atoning Lamb. On the cross, Jesus took all the sins of his people upon himself. He absorbed the wrath his people deserved. He was dead and buried. And then on the third day, God raised him, conquering sin and the grave. God exalted him to his right hand where he reigns over all. And in his reign, by his Spirit whom he sent, the good news of his victory advances.

And as this news spread, it came to Corinth. And there, in that city, God acted to show the Corinthians how he had acted in the ultimate display of his love and grace. They heard the gospel and the Spirit gave them eyes to see. They believed. They turned from their sins and were united to Jesus by faith. They were washed, they were sanctified, they were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

God acted to draw them into his action. Their story became God's doing. And the same is true for you, if your faith is in Jesus. God has been at work in the history of the world and he has made you part of it. So on the battle lines, when sin brings its tumult of temptations, when its force feels like an unassailable wind, remember: *that's not your story.*

This is. God has rescued you. That's his doing, your story. Now fight your sin.

August 16, 2015 Sermon Notes

Preacher:

Text:

Sermon Title:

Notes:

Prayer

WEEK 8

ACTS 28

Day 1

Read Acts 1. What's a new or developed thought/perspective on this chapter now that you've studied the whole book of Acts?

Questions: Acts 28:1-15

1. Acts 28:1-6. Why do you think Luke included this story in Acts?
2. Acts 28:7-10. What do you like about how Paul treated the locals and why?
3. Acts 28:11-15. Describe how "community" looks and acts now that we are further from the first stories of the early church in Acts.
4. Read 1 Corinthians 13 and note a few areas where you'd like to love those in your community better.
5. How does the gospel apply to these and fuel growth in these areas?

"In this final chapter, Paul is presented in a series of encounters with pagans (vv.1-10), Christians (vv.14-15), and Jews (vv.17-28). To some extent these encounters are reminiscent of previous ones, thus forming a summary conclusion to Luke's portrait of Paul." –David Peterson.

Romans 1:11-16

(When did Paul write his letter to the Romans? What was Paul's relationship to the church in Rome? Under what circumstances does Paul now enter Rome in Acts 28? What do we learn about Paul's relationship to the Romans from this passage Romans 1:11-16?)

Romans 10:14-17

Day 3

Read Acts 6-7. What's a new or developed thought/perspective on this chapter now that you've studied the whole book of Acts?

Questions: Acts 28:23-31

1. Acts 28:23. Define "convince". Who was Paul trying to convince?
 - a. Write out what Paul may have said to the people.

2. Acts 28:24. What was the result of Paul's efforts?

3. Acts 28:25-28. What did Paul say to his listeners and why did they leave?
 - a. Read Isaiah 6. Compare Isaiah's attitude towards God versus the people Paul is speaking to.

 - b. What's the "therefore" there for in v. 28?

4. Acts 28:30-31. What is significant about how Luke ends his book called Acts?

Matthew 13:10-17

Where Is Heaven on Earth?

Jonathan Parnell

Once in college I went to a prayer meeting put on by a small evangelical denomination in the rural South. It was the kind of denomination that has a string of adjectives before the word “Baptist” — the kind that you might expect to handle snakes or something.

This particular prayer meeting was at a church member’s home, and I was attending because the objective was to pray for a relative who had recently been diagnosed with a life-threatening illness. For most of the evening, the whole thing was a sweet display of the church being the church — we were believing God, loving one another, and begging for a miracle. But then the prayer time ended, and as we looked up at one another, huddled together in this living room, we all felt the awkwardness of trying to transition into regular conversation.

Apparently, though, some felt the awkwardness more than others. Before the little conversations could begin that would subtly dismiss us, a woman, somewhat nervously, addressed the residing pastor with a question. She spoke loudly enough that it sort of required everyone to stay put and listen in. That’s when things changed.

This sister told a story about her daughter seeing an angel sitting in the top of a tree. The encounter had just happened a few days before. They were driving home from school; the little girl was staring outside the car window; the mom asked what she was looking at; the little girl said she saw an angel in a tree — which all crescendoed with the question: Pastor, why do children see angels in trees?

Do you know why? How would you have responded? The pastor wasn’t sure what to say. I certainly didn’t know the answer.

Our Real Question

Before you dismiss the whole question as backwater, let me remind you, first, that this is not an impossible scene. We are talking about angels here, not leprechauns. Angels are real, and they can, I suppose, if they want, sit in treetops.

Secondly, the real question behind the angel-in-tree question wasn’t born in the boondocks, but is actually as pop-culture as it gets — primetime television popular. It’s a

topic that, if you claim to have insider knowledge, creates a surge of fascination. The real question, one that we’ve all wondered, is about how heaven relates to this earth.

We all want to know, from here, what is that place like? Can we get glimpses of it? Is there more going on around us than crusty, world-enthralled adults can see? How spiritual is everyday reality?

We all have our angel-in-the-tree questions, all of them proxies for the deeper pondering of our hearts. If there is a heaven, what does it have to do with me here?

Yes, Heaven Matters

Let’s get two things clear. Heaven is real, and it’s as relevant to people now as ever. In fact, we might say that it’s actually more relevant now. We’re all looking for a heaven somewhere, and perhaps we’re looking harder today than at any other time.

The very fact that we humans have an incredible capacity for joy, and a simultaneous passion to lasso it, beckons us to dig deep for what it all means. We all want to be happy, but we’re not all sure why. As C.S. Lewis would tell us, which I think bears out after serious investigation, it’s because we were made for another world. We were made for a better world, and we would like to get back there.

But there’s more to our hunt for heaven. We’re all looking for it, but we’ve been told over and over again it’s a myth. The sociological description of this is secularism. It’s that recent phenomenon, according to philosopher Charles Taylor, when Western thought decided to lop off the idea of transcendence in our popular consciousness. We have this carnivorous craving for depth, for meaning, but we’re told that we’d better find it in the things around us or nowhere at all. As one artist captures it, We are, we are, we are gonna live tonight, like there’s no tomorrow, ‘cause we’re the afterlife. Tragically, this just leaves us to climb the highest mountains, to run through some fields, to throw ourselves headfirst into everything this world has to offer, and still, we haven’t found what we’re looking for.

We might not call it heaven, but that’s what we want. To be sure, we’re a refined

people. We've got a modern culture here, full of philharmonic orchestras and wearable technology. But when it gets down to the gut of things, we are as primitive as that tribe in the Amazon who talks to the stars at night. Heaven matters to us — always has, always will.

What Is Heaven?

So heaven is real, and heaven is relevant, but before we know what it has to do with us, we should have a better idea of what it actually is.

Sunday School simplicities may have misled us. We don't actually "go to heaven" bodily — because heaven isn't like our typical "place" you can go. No spaceship can take you there. Perhaps heaven is better understood as a dimension of reality. The Hebrew imagery of heaven as the sky is a beautiful illustration of something we hardly have categories to describe, and it is just that: imagery.

"God is in the heavens" (Psalm 115:3) doesn't literally mean that God is in the sky bodily. That is how we try to wrap our words around the fact that God is real and involved, but not here visibly. He is out there, or up there, and by that, we mean that he resides in a dimension of reality outside our own, or something like that.

So much of this has to do with how we conceive of space and time. Theoretical physicists say that there are at least ten dimensions in the universe, possibly eleven. We can perceive three. And the way all these dimensions relate to one another isn't so much in miles and distance, but in space-time overlap.

We can see a clue of this in the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1–8). Recall how it works. Jesus doesn't take Peter, James, and John to a faraway galaxy light years out of sight. They just walk up on a mountain, and here on this earth, Moses and Elijah stepped in to talk to Jesus in his glorified form. For that moment, the curtain was pulled back, as it were, and the heavenly dimension that overlaps with our reality was seen.

As Tim Chester and Jonny Woodrow contend, some of us may need to flip around the way we have conceived of heaven. Rath-

er than think that heaven is the "place" — like all our places — where God stays, we should think of it this way: Wherever the risen Christ is, that is heaven. That is why John's vision in Revelation has heaven coming here, heralded as, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man" (Revelation 21:1–3). Jesus is now the one who makes "heaven" heaven. He is the one who makes it good and beautiful and desirable. He is the one we want.

Heaven Came Down

So then how does heaven relate to this earth? How does that dimension of reality in which God dwells impact our dimension of reality here? That is the question. That is what we are looking for when we see angels in trees.

Jesus is the answer, first. And then, Christian, you are the answer.

When the Word became flesh and moved into the neighborhood (John 1:14), God climatically stepped foot into our dimension of reality. He humbled himself to a body like ours and to the little three dimensions we call normal. God, in the person of Jesus, came into our world, and when he rose from the dead, he sparked the beginning of the day when our world will become his own. That resurrection morning dawned the new creation light that will overcome everything as we know. If heaven and earth overlap as dimensions, on that day, heaven reached its hand into our world and put its foot in the door. Heaven came then, and eventually it'll be clear — as clear as a big tree in a garden with birds on its branches (Matthew 13:32).

In the meantime, there is you and me.

There Is Here

After his resurrection, Jesus ascended and took his seat on the heavenly throne. Right now, those who are united to Jesus by faith are spiritually raised and seated with him (Ephesians 2:6). Spiritually speaking, because of our union with Jesus, we inhabit the dimension of reality in which he reigns. We are, in that sense, in heaven with him. And at the same time, we are here. We are breathing the air of this world, listening to

the music of this culture, eating the food of this place. So he has sent us his Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is, for the church, Jesus's own empowering presence. In a very real sense, we are there with him in heaven, and in a very real sense, he is here with us on earth.

We are physically here, and spiritually — in terms of our true destiny — there. Jesus is physically there, and presently — by his Spirit — here. There is an overlap of heaven and earth in terms of dimensions and history, and Christians are called to live right in the tension.

We are “ambassadors for Christ” — his new-creation representatives in this old-creation world (2 Corinthians 5:20). And when we pray the way he taught us, that God's kingdom come and his will be done on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:9–10), we know that it must first happen in our own lives — and then through our own lives.

And it's not as spectacular as we might think.

While so many are looking for that rare moment, for that bedazzling glimpse of the other world, the truth is that the other world, in part, is already here. The real miracle isn't angels in the tops of trees — it's the miracle of new life at work in us. Until the reality of God's new creation overwhelms this old one, the way that heaven touches this world now is through his people — by his Spirit, through his people . . . people like you and me.

August 23, 2015 Sermon Notes

Preacher:

Text:

Sermon Title:

Notes:

Prayer

WEEK 9

ACTS SUMMARY

Day 1

Read Acts 10–11. What’s a new or developed thought/perspective on this chapter now that you’ve studied the whole book of Acts?

Read Acts 12. What’s a new or developed thought/perspective on this chapter now that you’ve studied the whole book of Acts?

“If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire; the great men who built up the Middle Ages; the English evangelicals who abolished the slave trade, all left their mark on earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this.” – C.S. Lewis

Summarize Acts 1-12 in your own words.

Day 2

Read Acts 13-14. What's a new or developed thought/perspective on this chapter now that you've studied the whole book of Acts?

“Christian theists seek transforming engagement with the active word of God. To this end we not only seek to listen to the biblical text with openness and expectancy, but we also seek to understand at ever deeper levels what it is to interpret Scripture, to reflect both upon Scripture and on our own processes of engaging with it, and to be transformed by the formative impact of Scripture in thought, life, and identity.” –Anthony Thiselton

Read Acts 15-16. What's a new or developed thought/perspective on this chapter now that you've studied the whole book of Acts?

“After the conversion of both Cornelius and the Antiochene Greeks the Jerusalem leaders had been able to reassure themselves that God was in it. How would they now react to the even more audacious policy of Paul? The Gentile mission was gathering momentum. The trickle of Gentile conversions was fast becoming a torrent. The Jewish leaders had no difficulty with the general concept of believing Gentiles, for many Old Testament passages predicted their inclusion. But now a particular question was forming in their minds: what means of incorporation into the believing community did God intend for Gentiles?” –John Stott.

Read Acts 17-18. What's a new or developed thought/perspective on this chapter now that you've studied the whole book of Acts?

Read Acts 19-20. What's a new or developed thought/perspective on this chapter now that you've studied the whole book of Acts?

Summarize Acts 13-20 in your own words.

Day 3

Read Acts 21-22. What's a new or developed thought/perspective on this chapter now that you've studied the whole book of Acts?

Read Acts 23-24. What's a new or developed thought/perspective on this chapter now that you've studied the whole book of Acts?

Read Acts 25-26. What's a new or developed thought/perspective on this chapter now that you've studied the whole book of Acts?

Read Acts 27-28. What's a new or developed thought/perspective on this chapter now that you've studied the whole book of Acts?

Summarize Acts 21-28 in your own words.

Elijah's Story

DaDuring the first year of my life my father fell away from the faith and left my family.

I was born in Thailand while my parents were studying the Thai language and culture in preparation to become missionaries through Bethlehem Baptist Church. When our visas expired after that first year, my mother, sister, and I moved back to Minnesota without him. Growing up without a father was hard in many ways. The hardest part might have been that my mother didn't have the energy or willpower to both take care of us and really teach us about personal faith — something she's always regretted.

I remember growing up heavily involved in Bethlehem. We attended all the Sunday morning and Wednesday night sermons and meetings. We were in a Bible study, and we attended many other events, but I never paid attention. I believed in Jesus — that he “died for my sins”, and that I would go to heaven if I believed that — but if you had asked me any

more about it, I wouldn't have known what to say.

I didn't really understand the gospel — why it was a big deal, and why it was called “the good news.” When we read as a family, it was almost always Narnia or some other fantasy novel, and we never put much effort into understanding Scripture. We prayed before every meal, but never really stopped to consider what we were doing. Throughout primary school I chased popularity and good grades, at least externally, all the while internally struggling through low self-esteem, anger, and trust issues.

I hadn't been baptized. I rarely prayed — and if I had it was usually before meals. I never opened my Bible on my own. I had no desire to. I figured that since Jesus had already died for my sins, I didn't have to put any personal effort into following him.

After my freshman year of college, I got connected to Campus Outreach — a ministry partnered with Bethlehem — and attended their summer program. During that time I dug far deeper than I'd ever gone into the gospel and why I believed it, and especially how much I needed it. I learned that everything

God does, he does for his own glory — and how that is a wonderful and perfect thing. I learned that I can sin in my mind as well as through my actions (Matthew 5:28; 15:19), and that these internal sins are just as serious to God as external ones. I learned how God’s glory is increased by justly punishing those who do not trust him, and I also delved into the love and grace of God in sending Jesus to die in place of his chosen people. I had never before thought about the implications of that action — how the perfectly just side of God’s nature is made even more glorious by showing his mercy in saving those who deserve nothing, and just how lucky and undeserving I was that God still pursues my heart, even after all I have or haven’t done.

It is still amazing to me that after all of my failures, God is still faithfully pointing me towards himself (Ephesians 2:1–10). I am in no way “there” — I struggle constantly with prioritizing reading the Bible and prayer, among many issues. But God — the best father anyone could have — and his unwavering faithfulness to his promises (Deut. 31:6, Is. 42:16, Heb 13:5, Mal. 2:17–3:6, 1 John 1:9), is far greater than our inability to keep our own. He will never leave us or forsake us.

August 30, 2015 Sermon Notes

Preacher:

Text:

Sermon Title:

Notes:

Prayer

WEEK 10

SINGLENES, MARRIAGE,
AND HOSPITALITY

Day 1

Read Isaiah 53-56:8. In 53:10 how does Isaiah speak of “offspring” in light of the prophecy of Christ’s death on the cross? How will offspring be formed? Then in 54:1, why can the barren one sing? Then in 56:5 what do the eunuchs get?

Questions re: Singleness

1. Matthew 22:23-30. What does this passage say about the length of marriage? What familial relationships exist in the church and how long do those last?
2. What does John 3:3, Galatians 3:7,26, and 1 Peter 1:3-4 say about being born into the family of God? Through procreation or through faith? What does this teach us about singleness?
3. In your opinion, what are the challenges of being single? How does the gospel address these challenges and turn them into God-glorifying joy?
4. Write out what types of misconceptions and lies go through the mind of a single person. What new script (meaning what is played in your head) would you offer to a single person?

John Piper, Chapter 9, “This Momentary Marriage”: “God promises those who remain single in Christ blessings that are better than the blessings of marriage and children, and he calls you to display, by the Christ-exalting devotion of your singleness, the truths about Christ and his kingdom that shine more clearly through singleness than through marriage and child-rearing. What truths shine more brightly singleness?”

1. The truth that the family of God grows not by propagation through sexual intercourse, but by regeneration through faith in Christ;
2. The truth that relationships in Christ are more permanent, and more precious, than relationships in families (and, of course, it is wonderful when relationships in families are also relationships in Christ; but we know that is often not the case);
3. The truth that marriage is temporary and finally gives way to the relationship to which it was pointing all along: Christ and the church – the way a picture is no longer needed when you see face-to-face;
4. The truth that faithfulness to Christ defines the value of life; all other relationships get their final significance from this. No family relationship is ultimate; relationship to Christ is.”

1 Corinthians 7:7,32-35

See also Matthew 19:11-12

“[N]either marriage as a physical parable nor singleness as a physical parable is to be idolized or feared. Marriage is beautiful and physical. Singleness is beautiful and physical. God made them both. Both are designed, like all of nature, to display the glory of Christ. Marriage and celibacy can be idolatrous. Spouses can worship each other or worship sex or worship their children or worship double-income-no-kid buying power. Singles can worship autonomy and independence. Singles can look on marriage as a second-class Christian compromise with the sexual drive. Married people can look upon singleness as a mark of immaturity or irresponsibility or incompetence. But what I am trying to clarify is that there are Christ-exalting ways to be married, and there are Christ-exalting ways to be single. There are ways to use our bodies and our appetites in marriage and in singleness that make much of Christ.” —John Piper.

Philippians 2:3-4

Day 3

Read Romans 15-16. Define “greet”. Describe the relational teachings and examples in these chapters. What helpful dynamics can you glean that make hospitality tangible?

Questions re: Hospitality

1. Define “hospitality”. In your opinion, what does it mean to be hospitable?
2. Matthew 10:42. Why should you show a person kindness (note the “because”)? What implications does this have on hospitality?
3. 1 John 3:16-18. Do you distinguish between single and married when you meet the needs of your brothers and sisters in Christ? Why are such distinctions made? How do you fix these?
4. Romans 15:7. What does it look like in your life to welcome one another, both on the principal level and the practical level?

“If it’s true... that God’s family, which comes into being by regeneration, is more central and more lasting than the human family that comes into being by procreation, the implications for relationships are very important. How members of that family, the church, relate to each other as married and single will witness to the world that our lives are oriented on the supremacy of Christ and that our relationships are defined not just by nature, but by Christ. I long to see Christ magnified through married people folding single people into their lives and single people folding married people into their lives for the sake of Christ and the gospel.” –John Piper.

1 Peter 4:7-11

Through this devotional, think about a renewed vision for your life to be a steward of God's grace, to both married and singles.

[T]o married couples: Plan that your hospitality will include single people—small groups, Sunday dinners, picnics, holiday celebrations. You would be surprised how many younger and older singles spend Christmas, Easter, and Thanksgiving alone. Everybody assumed someone else invited them. You don't need to make a big deal out of it. Just be natural. And don't forget that there are eighteen-year-old singles and eighty-year-old singles—and seventy- and sixty- and fifty- and forty- and thirty- and twenty-year-old singles, male and female, formerly married and never married, divorced and widowed. Think like a Christian. This is your family—more deeply and more eternally than your kinfolk.

[T]o single people: Show hospitality to other single people and to married couples and families. That may feel odd. But the oddness of it in this world may make it a greater witness to a truth that goes beyond this world. Would it not be a mark of unusual maturity and stability? Would it not be a mark of God's grace in your life? Would it not witness to the truth about what the ultimate family really is? Team up with some friends and invite married people into your lives." —John Piper.

The Seven- Year Itch and the Joy of Lifelong Marriage

David Mathis

German politician Gabriele Pauli shocked her conservative party and sent waves through news outlets worldwide when she proposed in September 2007 that marriage should only last seven years.

Described at the time as “Bavaria’s most glamorous politician,” the 50-year-old, twice-divorced, motorcycle-riding Pauli campaigned for party head, in part, with the hopes of institutionalizing what some have called “the seven-year itch.” Her plan was that marriages would automatically dissolve after seven years, at which point the spouses could renew their union or go along on their own merry ways. Pauli did not win in her bid for party leadership.

Seven-Year What?

The “seven-year itch” is a widely recognized psychological term suggesting the seven-year mark as a common time when spouses sense they have drifted away from each other and desire to explore other romantic interests. It’s also the title of an iconic 1955 motion picture, which popularized the phrase in relation to marriage.

Or did the film create the idea altogether? The script, which would sound like relatively tame theater today, teetered on the edge of scandalous 60 years ago. It was about a married man who, after sending his wife and son away to Maine for the summer, discovers an attractive single lady (played by Marilyn Monroe) has moved into his building. At first he resists his desires to flirt, but soon he initiates toward her, though ultimately she rejects his overtures.

Following the movie’s success, the idea of a “seven-year itch” caught traction in a culture of no-fault divorce and became a convenient excuse for boredom with monogamy. Subsequent research claimed initially that such a seven-year itch was confirmed by the data, but more thorough investigation eventually pointed to four years, then other research to twelve years, then still more to three years. Increasingly, the studies are finding there’s no magic number at all, and the number seven, as well as any kind of typical point of “itch,” has just been a myth for decades.

As Long As We Both Shall Live

On June 29, 2007, just a few months before Pauli was announcing her idea in Germany, my wife and I stood before our pastor, our friends, and our family — and most importantly, before our God — and vowed to each other,

. . . I will be faithful to you
In plenty and in want,
In joy and in sorrow,
In sickness and in health,
To love and to cherish,
As long as we both shall live.

As long as we both shall live. No exceptions. No out-clauses. Not just in plenty, joy, and health, but also in want, sorrow, and sickness. No allowances for any seven-year itches or any other excuse. We left father and mother, covenanted to become one flesh (Genesis 2:24), and have taken Jesus’s words with utter seriousness, “What God has joined together, let not man separate” (Matthew 19:6). Neither of us would say that marriage has been easy, but here in 2014, with it being seven years this week, we can say it’s a glorious thing that there are no outs but death.

For Being Ourselves and Fighting Our Sin

The stresses, strains, tensions, and pains of marriage caught both of us off guard early on. Our dating was so peaceful — too peaceful, it turned out — and engagement only had a few speed bumps. But once we were both all in, both fully believing this was our unbending commitment till death, with no loopholes or exegetical outs, then, with the conditionality of dating and engagement aside, and the unconditionality of covenantal marriage now in place, we were finally free to be real selves. Which was such a good thing, though it soon got a little messy.

But these were good messes to make, ones we desperately needed (and still need). All along the mess had been inside us (and still is), in our selfish and sinful hearts, and the real cleaning couldn’t begin happening until it was out in the open. We both previously had Christian roommates and disciples who had pressed on our own sin and pushed

us toward Jesus. But something about this lifelong covenant — something about knowing that the gig with this one roommate is for the rest of life — forced us to speak up about the quirks, idiosyncrasies, and sins we otherwise could have ignored for a few months or a couple years.

As two rescued sinners, banking on Jesus for eternal redemption and for increasing redemption here in this life, we didn't want to keep everything at surface level. We wanted to truly know each other, and become our true selves in Christ, not just the best face we could put on before marriage. We could have tried living on and on with a façade of harmony, and never strained to go deeper, and experienced only the thin joy that comes from keeping everything at the surface. But we wanted more (we still want more). We wanted greater joy. We wanted fuller satisfaction. We wanted the greater pleasure that comes only on the other side of pain and difficulty. We wanted the better relationship that comes only after things first get worse. And marriage with no exits but death has forced the issue.

For Witnessing to the World

But not only is “as long as we both shall live” better for us and for our children (much could be said about that), but we're better able to witness to the world. The world is full of relationships with strings attached. In some of those, like employment, conditions are good and necessary. But when every relationship is fraught with conditions, it can feel like there's no rest for the weary.

The world needs to see in Christian marriages a pointer to the Savior who, without conditions, chose to set his love on his bride, the church (Ephesians 1:4–6), and through thick and thin, with all her failures and unfaithfulnesses, continues working to “sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (Ephesians 5:26–27).

When the exceptions and conditions are gone at the most fundamental level, a man must learn to “love his wife as himself”

(Ephesians 5:33) and discover the joy of Acts 20:35: “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” In the covenant, we can no more leave behind the reality of our marriage than we can abandon our own bodies. “Husbands should love their wives as their own bodies” (Ephesians 5:28).

Seven years is a relatively short time, but we're far enough in at this point to celebrate with some substance that we're in this for the long haul. Here at our seventh anniversary, we've tasted enough of the benefits, not without the difficulties, to be grateful that we're walking this path of covenantal marriage without any exceptions and outs, as long as we both shall live.

September 6, 2015 Sermon Notes

Preacher:

Text:

Sermon Title:

Notes:

Prayer

WEEK 11

CHILDREN, PARENTING, AND TEAMWORK

Day 1

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-31. In what ways do you see children being vital to our lives?

Questions re: Children

1. What is one major thing you have learned from a child in your life or in your past?

a. What do we learn from children in Mark 9:33-37, 10:13-16, Matthew 18:1-6?

2. What does the Bible expect of children and why? Eph. 6:1-3; Colossians 3:20-21.

3. In your opinion, what are the challenges associated in relating to children and why? How does the gospel address these challenges and turn a tough situation into a joyful one?

4. Define “patience”. Why is it so hard to be patient with children? How does the gospel transform you to be a patient person?

“[W]e learn from Jesus that we should not look down on children because they are not fully grown and hence are of lower social status than adults. Like Jesus, we should treat children with respect and dignity, as unique and precious creatures made by God and valuable in his sight. What is more, contrary to our natural inclination that may tell us that we can learn nothing from children and that the relationship is strictly one-way from parent or adult to child, we should look at children also from the vantage point of desirable kingdom traits they may exemplify in a more pronounced way than we do ourselves. This is one way in which God defies the wisdom of those who are wise in their own eyes, and the pride of those who think they are something in and of themselves.” –Andreas Kostenberger.

Psalm 127

Day 2

Read Matthew 5-7. Jot down various nuggets you get from the Sermon on the Mount as it pertains to children and parenting.

Questions re: Parenting

1. Define “authority”. (cf. Tedd Tripp) What is the nature of the parent’s authority over a child? Is it absolute or relative? Are we in charge because we are smarter and more experienced? Are we called to rule because we are not sinners and they are? Do we have the right to tell our kids to do anything we want them to do?

2. Describe what you think a good parent does and does not do.

3. Ephesians 6:4. Why does Paul choose this one verse when addressing parenting? What are important aspects of parenting that Paul addresses here?

4. What are the most difficult challenges parents face and what does the gospel say about them?
 - a. 1 Corinthians 13:4-7. Jot down the various ways we are to love children and note typical ways we fail at these and how the gospel can change that.

“As a parent, you have authority because God calls you to be an authority in your child’s life. You have the authority to act on behalf of God. As a father or mother, you do not exercise rule over your jurisdiction, but over God’s. You act at his command. You discharge a duty that he has given. You may not try to shape the lives of your children as pleases you, but as pleases him. All you do in your task as parents must be done from this point of view. You must undertake all your instruction, your care and nurture, your correction and discipline, because God has called you to. You act with the conviction that he has charged you to act on his behalf.”
–Tedd Tripp.

Matthew 6:25-34

Day 3

Read Ephesians 4. Jot down thoughts and principles from Ephesians 4 that can be applied to creating a culture of teamwork in the realm of children and parenting.

Questions re: Teamwork

1. What does the term “teamwork” mean to you?
 - a. If you could ask for help for something right now, what would that be?
 - b. What do you want teamwork to look like in your local church in regards to children and parenting and how can you help make that happen?
2. Luke 10:1. How do we see teamwork in action from Jesus?
3. What makes teams difficult? What makes a successful team? Why is teamwork good? When can teams be powerful and impactful?
4. How can Hebrews 10:23-25 be applied to parenting?
 - a. What challenges exist with children and parenting and in what ways could teamwork help them with these challenges?

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

**Be the
Smile of
God to Your
Children**

Joe Rigney

He's a squirmy one, he is. If I don't watch him, he'll wriggle off the bed. But he doesn't want to. He's enjoying the tickle fight too much. I can't blame him. Those giggles make this father's heart want to leap out of my chest. I wonder how long this laugh will last.

Reflect on the tickle fight with me. See the layers of reality at work.

Triune Joy in Our Little Home

On the surface: an adult male and a one-year-old of the species, smiles, laughter, darting fingers, kicking legs, squeals, deep breaths, rapid kisses on the neck, raspberries on the belly, and did I mention the laughter?

Beneath the surface: emotional bonding, fatherly affection, wide-eyed childhood delight. A contribution to the child's sense of safety and security in the world. Perhaps he'll be "well-adjusted" (or at least better adjusted). This will, no doubt, help him on his standardized tests.

Beneath and in and through it all, Trinitarian fullness is being extended. The Joy that made the mountains is concentrated in my home. Fatherly delight is at the heart of reality. "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased." It plays on a looping tape in the back of my mind. Thus sayeth the Lord to his Son. Thus sayeth the Lord to all of his sons that are in the Son.

Tickle Fights Are High Theology

This is the pitch of fatherhood. This is the melody line of motherhood. This ought to be the dominant note in the familial symphony. Delight, Pleasure, Joy. This tickle fight is high theology. This scene is a picture, a parable of a glory that existed before the world did. It's a display and an invitation. Father and son are being beckoned into the divine life and joy.

Only I will remember it distinctly. The scene will pass through my son's mind and out of his memory. And yet, in a sense, it's the most spiritual thing I can do for him. My delight and pleasure in him can leave a mark on him that will outlive the sun.

"Father," I pray, taking a breath in the war of laughter to go directly to God, "make it so."

How to Be His Smile

This is our fundamental calling as parents — to be the smile of God to our children. We are charged by God to bring our children up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. God himself has commanded us to communicate to our children what he is like. And God is fundamentally a Happy Father, a Well-Pleased Parent. And just as the Father communicates his delight in his Son through his words and deeds and demeanor and presence, so also should we. Four suggestions for starters:

1) Be thrilled about what they are thrilled about. Join them in their joy, however simple and childlike. Whether it's drawing a stick figure or building a castle out of blocks, be lavish with your "well-dones" and "good jobs." Find the good and the glory in everything they do. When they pull out the pots and pans, and turn them into drums, there is imagination and creativity to rejoice in.

2) Recognize that an atmosphere of joy and delight is the only environment in which discipline is safe and good. Sin poisons the gladness of a godly home and breaks the fellowship of the family. Wise discipline quickly sets things right — clear explanations, swift discipline (whether spanking or otherwise), sincere repentance, prayerful repentance, and then restoration of the sweet gladness of fellowship.

3) Remember that the main way they experience joy is through laughter and play. Fun is joy in kid form. There are more complex joys that come with increasing maturity. But the only way that they will grow into them is if they are well-acquainted with the simple pleasures of play. So be a good missionary and contextualize. Translate joy into their language. This doesn't mean that you should stay shallow or trivial. It does mean that family devotions ought to be marked by gladness and delight, by bright eyes, loud singing, and manifest affection. And if a tickle fight should happen to break out every now and then, count yourself blessed and see it as success.

4) *Make the most of temporary separations and reunions.* Communicate your pleasure in them as you leave and your excitement when you return. Leave with laughter and come home happy. Let the exuberance in your voice and the warmth of your smile and the brightness of your eyes reveal to them the God who joyously sings over his people, the father who runs to his son when he sees him on the horizon.

And so again, to all moms and dads, embrace the joy of your calling. Your Father is smiling on you. So be the smile of God to your children.

September 13, 2015 Sermon Notes

Preacher:

Text:

Sermon Title:

Notes:

Prayer

WEEK 12

WORK, REST, AND ALCOHOL

Day 1

Read Colossians 3.

Questions re: Work

1. How does the situation of the slave in Colossians 3 parallel to our current working environments today?
2. What are some tangible ways in your work that you are tempted to work “by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers” (v. 22)?
3. Your work is actually a service unto Jesus (v. 24). How does this truth change the way you approach your job?

Cities Church

“A job is a vocation only if someone else calls you to do it for them rather than for yourself. And so our work can be a calling only if it is reimagined as a mission of service to something beyond merely our own interests. Thinking of work mainly as a means of self-fulfillment and self-realization slowly crushes a person.” –Timothy Keller

Psalm 147

Day 2

Read Exodus 31:12–18. What was the meaning of the Sabbath for Israel? What did it signify?

Questions re: Rest

1. Evaluate your rhythms of work and rest. What areas need the most intentionality in this season of your life?
2. Oftentimes it is the people in our lives who are better equipped to answer the previous question. What do you think your closest friend (and/or spouse) would say about your rhythms for work and rest? What counsel might they give you?
3. How might our rest be a witness to our unbelieving neighbors and friends?

Cities Church

The Sabbath rest of God is the acknowledgment that God and God's people in the world are not commodities to be dispatched for endless production and so dispatched, as we used to say, as "hands" in the service of a command economy. Rather they are subjects situated in an economy of neighborliness. All of that is implicit in the reality and exhibition of divine rest
–Walter Brueggemann

Psalm 3

Day 3

Read 1 Timothy 4.

Questions re: Alcohol

1. What are the implications of verses 3–4 for how we eat and drink?
2. Why is the subject of alcohol especially relevant in our day and culture? What are some of the complexities surrounding this issue?
3. How does our calling to love our neighbor, and to not put a stumbling block before weaker siblings, impact the way we think through alcohol?

Cities Church

“The settled happiness and security which we all desire, God withholds from us by the very nature of the world: but joy, pleasure, and merriment, He has scattered broadcast. We are never safe, but we have plenty of fun, and some ecstasy. It is not hard to see why. The security we crave would teach us to rest our hearts in this world and oppose any obstacles to our return to God: a few moments of happy love, a landscape, a symphony, a merry meeting with our friends, a bathe or a football match, have no such tendency. Our Father refreshes us on the journey with some pleasant inns, but will not encourage us to mistake them for home.” – C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*

Romans 14

Rest Because You Can

Jonathan Parnell

Stop making bricks — you *can* stop.

Because of who God is, this reality rings as true today as it did in the life of ancient Israel, dating all the way back to their slave labor in Egypt just before the exodus.

The hysteria of that exodus is meant to distance us from the deplorable conditions of Israel's servitude, not distract us from their significance in the story of God's salvation. But chances are, by the time we get to Exodus 20, after walking through the plagues and crossing the Red Sea, we're prone to forget the impossible workload that was shackled to Israel's feet.

Therefore, God reminds us, as a preface to the Ten Commandments, "I am the LORD your God who brought you *out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery*" (Exodus 20:2). This deliverance reverberates throughout the entire Bible as the key moment in the Old Testament where God's faithfulness was put on display. It is the dramatic, identity-shaping act where God, through his mighty works, calls his people to himself — and away from Egypt.

Remember Egypt

So what was Egypt like, again?

It was bricks — more bricks, all day, everyday. It was work, work, work, an infatuation with the bottom line, with no restraints on how to get there (Exodus 5:4–9). It was about production, not flourishing; strict commerce, not neighborly love. It was about the commodity of idols, not the imaging of God. In other words, it was a world in opposition to humanity's purpose — and one not too unlike sectors of our society today.

Ancient Egypt, like many modern cultures, was itself enslaved to a merry-go-round economy — one whose value is measured by its size and speed, one whose passengers keep yelling "faster, faster, faster," one whose bars, once you grab hold of and start pushing, you mustn't let go. *Run and keep running. Push and keep pushing.*

And then, on the other side, simultaneous to the endless churning and mulling and doing to be bigger, better, and more popular, is the insatiable buying and earning and trading to get bigger, better, and more popular things. The result is restlessness.

Old Testament scholar Walter Bruegemann writes that this creates "a society of 24/7 multitasking in order to achieve, accomplish, perform, and possess" (*Sabbath As Resistance*). He explains that "the rat race of such predation and usurpation is a restlessness" that twists and turns throughout all of life, leaving an aftermath of inescapable anxiety that is often unmanageable. Which is to say, unbearable. It is a weight that leads people to do unthinkable things like jump off bridges and sacrifice their children, whether literal or metaphorical.

And all of it, in essence, says something about the deity under whom they live.

So Says the Deity

As Bruegemann shows, Egypt's relentless drive to produce points to the commitment of their gods. The gods of Egypt were as devoted to the aggrandizement of Pharaoh's system as anyone *because Pharaoh's glory meant their glory*. They demanded to be served by human hands because they needed the good promotion. There was a void to be filled, an ever-increasing glory quota that had to be met, and therefore, there was no time for stopping.

It is against this background that we're to understand the meaning of Sabbath. Our English word "Sabbath" is simply a transliteration of the original Hebrew which means "rest" — first appearing in verb form in Genesis 2:2, "and [God] rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done." It later became a prescribed observance to the people of Israel upon their exodus (Exodus 20:8). But far beyond a mere command to his people, the Sabbath is meant to say something powerful about God himself.

God, as we see in creation, isn't a deity wringing his sweaty hands in panic, trying to milk dry every last drop of what's there. No. He speaks and it comes to be, out of nothing, and he does it in six days, resting on the seventh just because he can. He wants us to know, right from the start and in the rhythms of our lives, that he doesn't need anything. He is the one who works, in perfect precision, neither too little nor too much, and we exist to bask in his glory, not barter for its

increase. We exist to magnify his radiance, not supplement his worth.

And because this is the case, in a world where everyone's deity says to do, do, do, the God of Israel says to stop. The air we breathe of this fallen world is anxiety: Keep busy and stay nervous. And it's into this mess, striking through the smog like flashes of lightening, the fundamental message of God's salvation resounds: *Trust me and rest.*

Then Stop

The principle of Sabbath is a glorious picture of God's self-sufficiency and unwavering ability to provide. As God's people, our rest becomes "a decisive, concrete, visible way of opting for and aligning with the God of rest" (Location 278). Perhaps as much now as in that early biblical context, one of the most head-turning, soul-stirring moves we make as a witness to God's holiness is *when we stop.*

At night when we go to bed, on a whole day when we pause our projects, in a season of vacation or Sabbatical, our stopping work is our saying Enough! to the merry-go-round. We don't have to ride this thing. There remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God (Hebrews 4:9–10). Rest, then, becomes our regular dramatization of the heart of the gospel: "To the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith will be counted as righteousness" (Romans 4:5).

We can put down our tools. We can close our computers. We can forbid those thoughts about that next meeting or those emails waiting for a reply or how the numbers aren't as high as we'd like. We can stop and trust him who justifies the ungodly. We can trust that when Jesus died in our place on the cross, he died to destroy all the anxieties of our lack, to still our ceaseless striving, to hush the winds of our self-justifying labor, to irrevocably connect us to the abundance of his grace we possess by his work, not ours.

We can trust the Lord of Rest who came to give us rest, and say, because of who he is: Stop making bricks — you *can* stop.

September 20, 2015 Sermon Notes

Preacher:

Text:

Sermon Title:

Notes:

Prayer

WEEK 13

DISCIPLESHIP, FRIENDSHIP,
AND NEIGHBORING

Philippians 2

Day 2

Read Romans 15

Questions re: Friendship:

1. According to Romans 15:1–7, what is the essential component that makes friendship uniquely Christian?
2. The foundation to our serving one another — our sacrificial edifying of others — is rooted in the example of Jesus. When is this radically other-facing love the most difficult for you?
3. Christian friendship goes beyond discussing the latest scores (though it may involve that), or the newest app (though that may be a part, too), or the best book we've read (another good one). The purpose is to build up our brother or sister. It's about their conformity to Jesus. Our little place in lives of others is to serve the goal to which God has elected them, Jesus has died, and the Spirit is working. It is our joy — and privilege — to build one another up. How does this impact some of your current friendships? What might you do differently?

“Friendship... has no survival value; rather it is one of those things which give value to survival.” – C.S. Lewis

Philemon

Day 3

Matthew 22

Questions re: Neighboring:

1. What is the connection between loving God and loving our neighbors?
2. What are some of the biggest inhibitions to neighboring in our day?
3. How can your Community Group work together to “bring back” neighboring in your community?

Cities Church

If the nature of God as Trinity models your relational calling, then the incarnation of God demonstrates your missional calling to live into time and place. When God chose to enter the world, it was not in some ethereal generic manner, but in a particular family, in a particular town, in a particular country with particular socio-religious practices. Just as Christ “became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood” (John 1:14, The Message), so also the people that comprise the local church in the neighborhood are meant to be a tangible expression of God’s love in the everyday reality of life. – Paul Sparks, Tim Soerens, Dwight Friesen.

Leviticus 25

Christian Liberty and Alcohol

Joe Rigney

The presence of alcohol in a Christian community, alongside the presence of Christians with different convictions about alcohol, is a wonderful gift from God. It is something that should not merely be tolerated, but celebrated. And not just celebrated by those who drink, but also by those who abstain. It is good for the sake of our maturity—both as individuals and as a community—and it is good for the opportunities to love each other.

I have recently spent some time reflecting on the classic passages that address Christian liberty and love in disputable matters—1 Corinthians 8-10 and Romans 14. And as I did I became aware of the challenges of applying these passages to contemporary issues. For example, the very categories of clean and unclean which show up in Romans 14 are most likely defined by Jewish categories of purity with roots in the Old Testament. Thus, those disputes were particularly acute in the generation after Jesus because of the transition brought about by Christ. Jews whose whole lives had been regulated by sharp divisions between clean and unclean foods found themselves in a world remade by the gospel. Our present differences with respect to alcohol do not stem from notions of ritual impurity.

Or again, in 1 Corinthians 8-10, the challenge comes from the fact that we don't know exactly what the situation was at Corinth, and thus we have to piece it together. What's more, the issue seems to be that the same meat that was sacrificed to idols is sold in the meat market. It's the continuity between the sacrifice and the meal that creates the problem: what's offered to Diana in false worship is then offered to the Christian at the house of an unbeliever. The question is whether the action in the temple contaminated that particular piece of meat. For the weaker brother, there's no question of moderation in eating food sacrificed to idols; one bite is enough to defile the conscience. In contrast, those who commend abstinence from alcohol do not do so because of contamination of a particular beverage, but because of the intoxicating potential of alcohol. And there are other contrasts that could be drawn, and the reason to draw attention to them is that we don't want to misapply

the Bible. Nevertheless, these passages do have bearing for how we relate to each other given our differing conditions.

Four Categories

First, Prohibitionists forbid all consumption of alcohol at all times, usually because of its intoxicating capacity.

Second, Abstentionists refrain from drinking at all, for a variety of reasons.

- Abstaining because of a weak conscience
- Abstaining because of a weakness of self-control
- Alcoholism in the family, addictive personality
- Strategic abstaining because of the prevalence of drunkenness in the wider culture
- Strategic abstaining because of the possibility of harming a weaker brother
- Abstain because it's illegal, because you don't like the taste (e.g. coffee and raw onions), because your spouse disapproves.

Third, Moderationists drink alcohol in moderation.

Fourth, Abusers drink alcohol in order to be drunk.

How should we regard each of these?

Prohibitionists ought to be resisted on the grounds that they are propounding the teaching of demons. 1 Timothy 4:1-5

Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.

Therefore, we ought not give an inch to

those who would deny the goodness of creation.

Those who abuse alcohol, who drink unto intoxication, ought to be warned that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal 5:21). Abuse of alcohol is damnable.

Abstainers from a weak conscience: we ought to accommodate their practice, but not their error. Paul is willing to abstain for their sake (Rom 14:21, but he does so while denying the legitimacy of their scruples (Rom 14:14, 20; 1 Cor 8:8, 10:25-26). Weak consciences ought to be instructed, but not violated. You do not strengthen a conscience by violating it or ignoring it. Forcing the issue wounds the conscience and defiles the conscience, and eventually sears the conscience, which is why Paul tells those who are strong to bear with the failings of the weak, lest they destroy the brother for whom Christ died (Rom 14:15).

Now when a brother with a weak conscience begins to impose his weakness on others, he ought to be resisted. This is what Paul does in Romans 14 by commanding weaker brothers not to judge those who eat meat or drink wine. We want to so live that we help weaker brothers not to stumble, but we don't want to give license for them to sin by passing judgment on those who don't share their weak conscience.

Abstainers because of a weakness of self-control: one of my colleagues has persuaded me that the one who abstains because of a lack of self-control is in a slightly different category than someone who abstains because of a weak conscience. The weak conscience is a theological weakness; A weakness of self-control is a moral weakness. This is a matter of personal wisdom, of knowing oneself, and refusing to be led into temptation. Those who are strong in conscience and strong in self-control ought to work with them for their joy and their good and avoid any kind of pressure to lead them into temptation. However, I don't think that the Bible demands abstinence on the part of stronger brothers as a blanket rule in this case, provided there is no pressure for them to join in.

Abstainers because of the possibility of causing an unknown person to stumble. This is a well-intentioned, over-application of the biblical text. When Paul calls us to forego our liberties for the sake of love, he has particular people in mind. In 1 Corinthians 10, it's when a particular person draws attention to the fact that the food was sacrificed to idols that you abstain. Absent that, we ought to eat without raising any question on the ground of conscience.

We can see the impracticality of this way of thinking as soon as we change the substance involved. To say, "I will never drink alcohol because some unknown person might stumble into violating their conscience or into drunkenness" is like saying "I will never eat food because a glutton might see me and violate their conscience or stumble into over-eating." We don't reason that way, and we ought not reason that way.

Thus, to abstain because of unknown or hypothetical weaker brothers is an over-application of the Bible. Perhaps this is the sort of thing that Ecclesiastes warns against when it says "Be not overly righteous."

Strategic abstention because of the rampant abuse of alcohol in our culture. The motivation here is to distinguish the Christian community from worldliness and sin by making a complete break with the created thing that is being abused. Some argue that drinking wine or beer might have been acceptable in the first century, but our culture is so debauched when it comes to alcohol that we ought to completely abstain as a way of distinguishing ourselves from the world. The first thing to note is that the Bible doesn't seem to reason this way. The Bible is aware that drunkenness is present in every culture, and still celebrates the goodness of alcohol. Paul knows that meat is used in idolatrous ways and still believes the meat itself is a good gift from God. Wider cultural abuse does not abolish the right use and enjoyment of a good gift.

Nevertheless, even though I'm not persuaded by that line of reasoning, I still respect those who hold it and want to gladly embrace them in Christian fellowship.

Moderationists ought to be embraced as those who are obeying biblical exhortations and descriptions rightly. "Eat your

bread with joy and drink your wine with a merry heart because God approves of what you do.” Moderationists are attempting to live within the blessing of God. He gave wine to gladden the heart of man, and wine is repeatedly used in the Law and Prophets and Writings as a symbol of God’s covenant blessing and a sign of his favor. At the same time, moderationists ought to be mindful lest their freedom become a snare to others. There ought to be a deep love for others and a concern for the welfare of true weaker brothers, so that when confronted with a true weaker brother, there’s no question but that my freedom must give way in the cause of love.

This is where I am. I drink both beer and wine regularly, both in my own home and in public. If you come to my house for dinner, I will frequently offer you a drink. At the same time, I have particular people that I know who have been deeply wounded by alcoholism and drunkenness, and I gladly abstain for their sake when love demands it.

Remarks about Christian Community

The main burden of this passage is to encourage Christians to welcome each other despite their differing convictions (15:6-7; 14:19). So I want to offer what I hope will be some practical reflections on what it means to have a community that welcomes each other in this way.

Welcoming each other is more than mere toleration.

I like to use the word “celebrate.” I’m glad that you’re here with your different convictions. I’m not grudgingly putting up with you. I want to view those who differ from me as a blessing from God.

We must recognize our own particular dangers.

If you abstain, you will have abstinence problems. If you partake, you will have partaking problems. When we abstain from one of God’s good gifts, we are putting ourselves in danger. When we partake of one of God’s good gifts, we are putting ourselves

in a different danger. And we ought not be mainly concerned with the other guy’s danger. We ought to police our own danger first before worrying about the other guy. We ought to take out our own logs before we go speck-hunting.

We ought to work to relieve the suspicions of those who have different convictions. When I hear Pastor John Piper say that God gave wine to gladden the heart of man, it relieves my anxiety. Pastor John welcomes me. I need to hear it. I need to hear him express his rejection of the prohibitionists point of view and his gladness that there are moderationists in our midst.

Because of this, I want to take the opportunity to say a word to my fellow moderationists at Cities Church and beyond. You must not get drunk on wine. Drunkenness, tipsiness, having a few too many is a sin. It’s a serious sin. It’s a damning sin. It’s not a wink-and-nod sin. It’s not piddly sin. It’s not a light issue. Drunkards will not inherit the kingdom of God. The name of God is blasphemed among the nations because of Christians who abuse alcohol. Drunkenness will wreck your reputation, ruin you for ministry, lead you into greater debauchery, destroy your family. If you’re the sort of person who finds yourself falling into drunkenness, you ought to consider whether wisdom would lead you to refrain. If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off. Just as a person who struggles with internet pornography might abstain from using the internet alone, so also mature wisdom might lead someone who is tempted to drunkenness to abstain completely.

Why Do I Partake (And Encourage Those Who Are Able to Join Me)?

Someone might argue that drinking is permissible, but still wonder if it’s beneficial. Are there any good reasons to drink in our day and age? Here are seven reasons:

1. Because God gave wine to gladden the heart of man, and it’s good to have a glad heart. The goodness of alcohol is a sufficient reason to enjoy it, other things being equal.
2. Because I want to have an experiential

frame of reference for biblical blessings and comparisons. "You put more joy in my heart than when the grain and new wine abound" (Psalm 4). "Your love is better than wine" (Songs 1:2).

3. In the Bible, wine is a sign of God's favor and blessing.
4. The removal of wine and the celebration it brings is a sign of God's curse and judgment.
5. Because drinking alcohol provides an opportunity for us to learn how to express our Christian maturity and self-control. It allows us to learn about ourselves and what the best way for us to express our maturity and self-control. Maturity and self-control might express themselves through glad-hearted participation and enjoyment without drunkenness. Or they might express themselves as glad-hearted abstinence because of personal temptation. Maturity and self-control are required in both cases.
6. I want to show other Christians and the world what moderation looks like. I've never been drunk, nor have I had the desire to be drunk. Many Christians grow up in contexts in which their only categories for thinking of alcohol are teetotaling or drunkenness. I want to show the proper way. Thus, I want to show fellow Christians and the world what wine is for. I want them to see why God gave it and commends its enjoyment. Thus, my partaking of alcohol is a part of a deliberate strategy for engaging with an unbelieving culture that abuses alcohol. Our culture abuses many of God's good gifts; therefore, we ought to show them how God intended his gifts to be used and enjoyed.
7. I want to provide an opportunity for love and honor and celebration and welcoming despite our differences.

If you are abstaining because of a weak conscience, you are welcome here. Let people know so that we don't cause you to stumble. Your conscience is crucial to your spiritual

health and we want to protect and maintain it, while also making clear that everything made by God is good. The earth is the Lord's and all of its fullness.

If you are abstaining because alcohol and drunkenness poses a particular temptation to you, know that you should feel no pressure to drink. Cultivate self-control and maturity by wisely guarding yourself from your temptation. But beware of imposing your own convictions on others or passing judgment on those with a different conviction. You ought to celebrate those who are able to receive this gift of God with joy and thanksgiving.

If you are abstaining for strategic cultural reasons, be mindful of the dangers of your position. Guard the goodness of wine. Be on the frontlines of resisting those who would forbid all uses of alcohol. Be vocal in your appreciation of wise partakers. Defend them from misunderstandings. Celebrate their presence in this community.

If you are, like me, a moderationist, remember that drunkenness is a serious sin. Be on the frontlines of warning about the dangers of intoxication, both in this life and the next. Don't be obnoxious. Don't put pressure on others to join you. Don't despise those who abstain. Be eager to give up your freedoms for the sake of the truly weak. Be vocal in your appreciation of wise teetotalers. Defend them from misunderstandings. Celebrate their presence in this community.

To all of us, welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, to the glory of God.

May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

September 27, 2015 Sermon Notes

Preacher:

Text:

Sermon Title:

Notes:

Prayer

APPENDIX

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 of 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.

